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New Types / One Type.
Complex Buildings and public space in the new rural settlements of Agro Pontino.

Abstract

Complex Buildings can be defined as such from their spatial syntax, characterised by a promiscuity of antithetical spaces – indoor/outdoor, public/private – which involves both architectural and urban dimensions. They can thus be understood as counter-spaces, where the physical dematerialisation of pre-established architectural boundaries generates actual heterotopias. The subject has recently been taken up by scholars, with particular attention to the typological aspects of Complex Buildings. In line with this approach, the present text examines the new building types implemented in the context of rural modernisation of the Pontine Plain.

Keywords

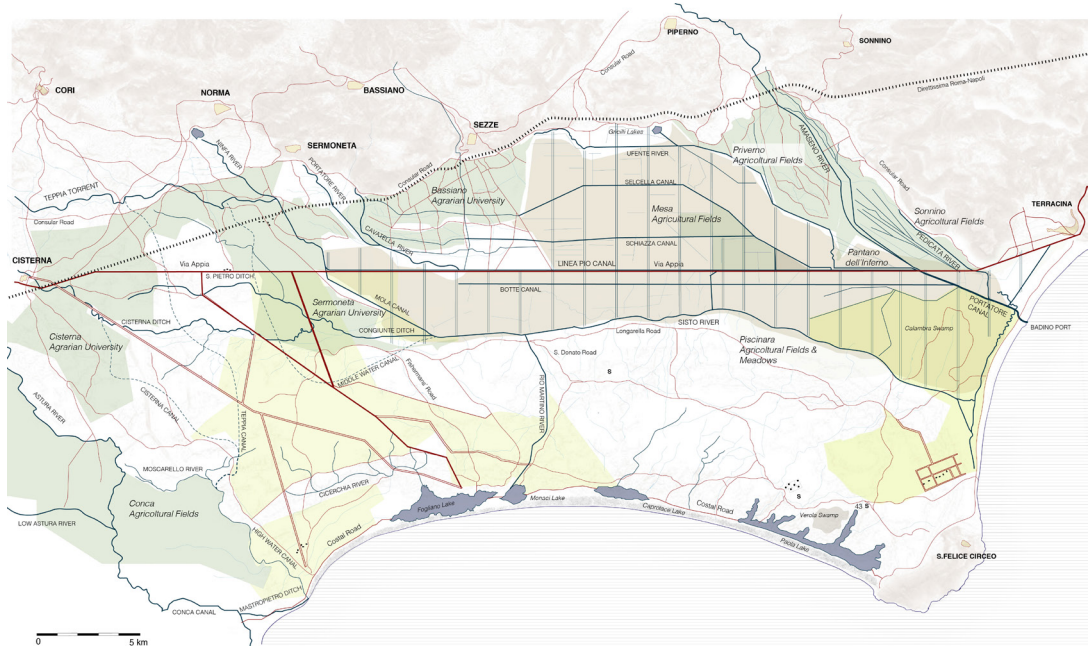
New Towns — Complex Buildings — Social Condensers

Introduction

What we know today as Agro Pontino is a man-made countryside came into being with the *bonifica integrale* of the Pontine Marshes theorised by Arrigo Serpieri in 1923. Technological innovations in mechanics, hydraulics, and agronomy, as well as new architectural, town planning and social theories – mostly emerging within the Modern Movement – were all put to the test at the same time. An area of over 1,000 square kilometres was reclaimed, equipped with road infrastructure and five new towns referring to over 3,000 *poderi* (farms) and sixteen *borghi rurali* (service villages) [Figg. 1, 2] Throughout this metamorphosis, urban design came to the fore both in town and country planning, particularly when defining the scenic character of the new settlements, building a sense of place¹ for future inhabitants, a heterogeneous community of farmers coming from different areas of Italy.

The experiments carried out within this modernisation process also concerned architectural design. In fact, Agro Pontino became an ideal testing ground also for emerging building types such as *Casa del Balilla* (headquarters of the Fascist youth organisation), *Casa del Fascio* (local branch of the Fascist party), *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro* (National Afterwork Club), *Casa della Madre e del Bambino* (Mother and Child Home) or *Casa del Contadino* (House of the Farmer).

One of the most interesting aspects of this case study is the simultaneous experimentation carried out at different levels: while the urban-rural settlement were taking shape, the prototypes of the new multifunctional buildings were being defined. In fact, their compositional matrix allowed for the co-presence of antithetical spaces that had a close relationship with the ur-

**Fig. 1**

Map of Agro Pontino in 1920, before reclamation. Green: common land; yellow: early reclaimed areas; white: wooden area; grey: swamps; red: ancient roads and paths; blue: water system (author's elaboration, 2021).

Fig. 2

Map of Agro Pontino in 1940, after reclamation. Light green: common land; dark green: remaining wooden area, now National Park of Circeo (author's elaboration, 2021).

ban context. The following paragraphs focus on architectural experiments undertaken in Agro Pontino, arguing that they can be seen as antecedents of what we now call Complex Buildings, whose distinguishing features leave room for further investigation.

Architecture and urban scenography in the new towns

Between 1932 and 1939, five new towns were built in the Agro Pontino: Littoria, now Latina, in less than six months (1932), Sabaudia in eight months (1933-1934), Pontinia in twelve months (1934-1935), Aprilia (1936-1937) and Pomezia (1938-1939) in eighteen months. By 1936, the triad *podere, borgo e città* (farm, village, and city)² materialised in 16 service villages and over 3,000 farms, with farmhouses built along the main roads on the plot of cultivable land. Such rapid sequence shows how timing was a fundamental component of the overall scheme. Indeed, the five new towns – and the entire rural landscape with them – heralded the *anti-urbanist* model purported by the policy of *ruralizing urbanism* launched in the 1920's³. Built from scratch in few months⁴, they did not undergo any slow, spontaneous growth typical of most European cities. Moreover, to hasten the construction process, the same architects involved in the plan designed the main public buildings. For this, Littoria, Sabaudia, Pontinia, Aprilia, and Pomezia, can be considered actual *author cities* (Muntoni 2006) where urban morphology and architectural design cannot be disentangled. This relationship, however, inflects on a case-by-case basis, drawing from the planning theories then being debated at the national and international levels.

When comparing Littoria and Sabaudia, the strong relationship between architectural and urban design becomes explicit. At Littoria, Oriolo Frezzotti reinterpreted the traditional Italian rural settlement in a *theatrical* key, almost defining a scenic backdrop for the modern rural/urban life. In line with the principles of modern planning theorised by Gustavo Giovannoni, the radial pattern of existing roads was embedded in the urban form, to which architecture gave the necessary volumetric consistency. Looking at Littoria's main square – apparently one single rectangle – Oriolo Frezzotti's approach becomes evident: two different systems of hidden geometries fit the square layout in the pre-existing road junction, orchestrating the scenic effect of the public buildings along its perimeter. To obtain their footprints, Frezzotti offsets of the perimeter of the square, thereby defining a two-dimensional architectural composition consisting of meticulously designed façades reflecting the planimetric layout only in part.

Somehow, rather than featuring new spatial solutions, the public buildings along the square clearly show an intent to define what the distinguishing features of a *ruralised* townscape might be.

Three examples can be called into question: the Town Hall, the Hotel, and the Inland Revenue Office (*Palazzo dell'Intendenza di Finanza*). The first two have a very similar floor plan, symmetrically reflected along the median of the square. However, to enhance the overall urban composition, the Civic Tower is slightly offset from the centre of the façade of the City Hall. The Inland Revenue Office, instead, is set along the pre-existing roads meeting at right angles, with a central giant portico facing onto the square. [Fig. 3]

Built in 1934 to the project by Luigi Piccinato, Gino Cancellotti, Eugenio Muntuori and Alfredo Scalpelli, Sabaudia provides a different interplay between town planning and architecture, which also frames the relation-

ship between the urban structure and landscape elements.

Sabaudia has the merit of fully reflecting one of the most typical and noteworthy features of the modern architectural discipline: defining how buildings relate to the environment even before studying their actual typology. In other words, this is a process of understanding the environment, where social life finds an expression of the greatest intensity and naturalness, whereby individual buildings are an inseparable part of the whole. (Piacentini 1934)

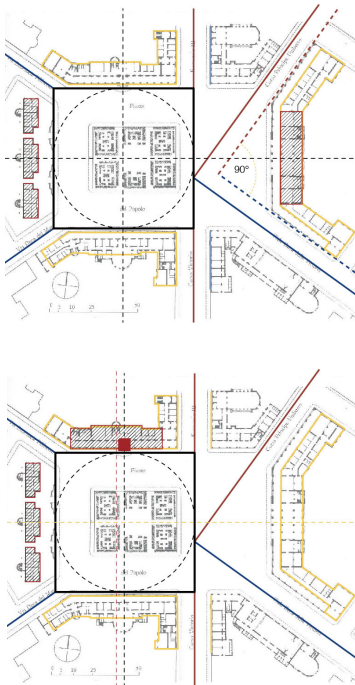


Fig. 3

Definition of the core in Littoria. Geometry and Composition of a Modern Urban Centre (author's elaboration, 2021).

At Sabaudia landscape, urban design, and architecture interlock to form a harmonious spatial flow where «the ensemble of buildings is integrated into the surrounding nature: the masses never imprison hermetic spaces like backdrops, they are skilfully balanced so that the landscape penetrates everywhere through wide openings» (Piacentini, 1934). The visual relationship with the elements of the surrounding landscape empowers the third dimension of architecture; public space is no longer qualified by two-dimensional facades, opening instead onto landscape sceneries from near and far. It may be recalled that Piccinato, Cancellotti, Muntuori, and Scalpelli drew many perspectives at the height for the human-eye to calibrate the rhythmic sequence of solids and voids, enhanced by the interplay between the horizontality of the plain, the vertical elements of the *in-natural* landscape, and the urban enclosures for collective activities.

When focusing on architecture as part of the broader environmental change of Agro Pontino, we should not overlook the recurring presence of self-standing buildings set apart from the blocks' continuous façades. Most often these correspond to the new multifunctional buildings exploiting the adjoining public space as an active element of the spatial syntax.

Genealogy of Complex Building in Agro Pontino

With the introduction of the 8-hour working day – in Italy mandated by the Royal decree-law of 15 March 1923 – the need for new polarities where workers could enjoy their leisure time also arose. This change brought about the development of new building types whose educational agenda was defined both by handbook prototypes and national design competitions. The new towns of Agro Pontino become an ideal testing ground to experiment with new architectural themes as activators of the public sphere. Buildings like *Casa del Balilla*, *Casa del Fascio*, or *Dopolavoro* were to provide settlers with some basic leisure facilities. The *Casa della Madre e del Bambino*, the *Casa dei Mutilati e Invalidi* (House for the Maimed and Disabled) or the *Casa del Contadino* (House of the Farmer) acted instead as social and welfare centres. A careful analysis of these building types reveals a common spatial matrix – a sort of “architectural genotype” – consisting of three primary elements: a main multi-purpose hall, medium-sized and small rooms, respectively covering $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{1}{4}$ the surface of the main hall.

The *Casa del Balilla* at Littoria conceived by Oriolo Frezzotti in 1932 under the direction of Renato Ricci⁵ may be included among the earliest examples of this common matrix. Following the *Prototype of Casa del Balilla with Gymnasium n. 8* (del Debbio 1928), [Fig. 4] Frezzotti designed a symmetrical plan with a central multi-purpose hall that could be used as a gymnasium or an assembly hall. This space dictated the maximum height and extension of the building. Two big rooms – one used as a fencing gym and the other occupied by lockers – were set on opposite sides of the cen-

tral hall, whereas the smaller rooms surrounded the semi-circular entrance atrium, accommodating ancillary spaces and the stairs reaching the gallery overlooking the main hall, a feature testifying to Frezzotti's intent to build a sort of "theatre of sport". [Fig. 5]

Alfredo Pappalardo's designs of three prototype *Casa del Fascio* for the villages of Agro Pontino (1935) are equally interesting⁶. They all comply with the outcomes of the 1932 national competition for a prototype *Casa del Fascio* for rural, inland and frontier settlements, adaptable to accommodate the basic public services for the community concerned. [Fig. 6, 7, 8] These included rooms for the local members of the Fascist party and for the labour union, the doctor's office and a small emergency room, spaces for educational and recreational activities: a library, a small playroom, a dance hall, and a gymnasium. Considering the figurative aspects, these buildings clearly recall the case of Littoria in both their layout and "scenic character" enriching the surrounding environment.

As the construction of the new towns progressed, the *rural city* model was inflecting into a series of possible alternatives, and the new types were gradually subsumed into building clusters conceived as "urban machines" which, maintaining the individual parts of the spatial matrix, also included spaces adaptable to accommodate welfare and leisure facilities. These building clusters embedded in the urban grid were to act as *social condensers*.

An example can be found at Sabaudia, where the *Dopolavoro*, the Trade Unions, the *Casa del Fascio*, the Cinema-Theater and the restaurant were aggregated in two perpendicular interlocking volumes forming a linear sequence of commercial and residential porticoed spaces,

The general layout was organized help define the urban scene, also animated by distant landscape views. At Sabaudia, long-distant views break the monolithic nature of the blocks widening the cone of vision hinged on the Civic Tower, designed as a monumental conclusion of Migliara 53⁷. [Fig. 9]

The building as carved from a solid mass whose proportions compare with the territorial scale. Voids and solids have the same compositional value and sculptural quality, defining a sort of "heterotopic citadel" on the walls of which the *Dopolavoro*, the Cinema-Theatre, and the public square, are grafted.

In fact, the square was meant as an open-air gymnasium, almost as an extension of the building. [Fig. 10, 11]

A different but equally interesting case is that of Pontinia, the third new town of the reclaimed plain⁸. Here the building cluster, still ascribable to a broader design, is set along the diagonal of the main square, a geometrically perfect square, the side of which corresponds to the Town Hall. [Fig. 12, 13] The north-western corner of the square is defined by the *Dopolavoro* and Cinema-Theatre, the two interconnected buildings providing another inflection of the original spatial matrix.

Further examples of *social condensers* are to be found in the rural service villages, such as the twin buildings implemented at Littoria Scalo and at Borgo S. Donato, and that at Borgo Hermada.

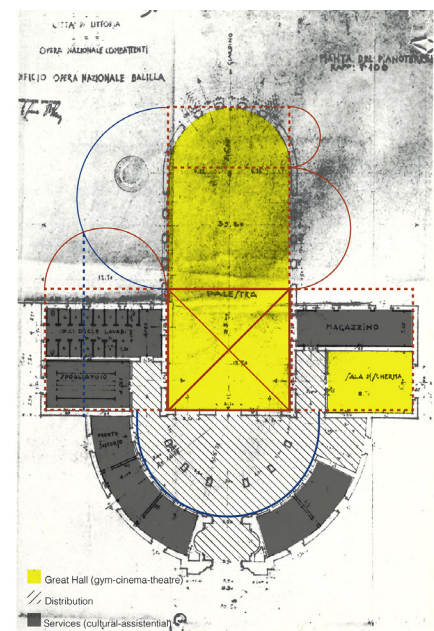
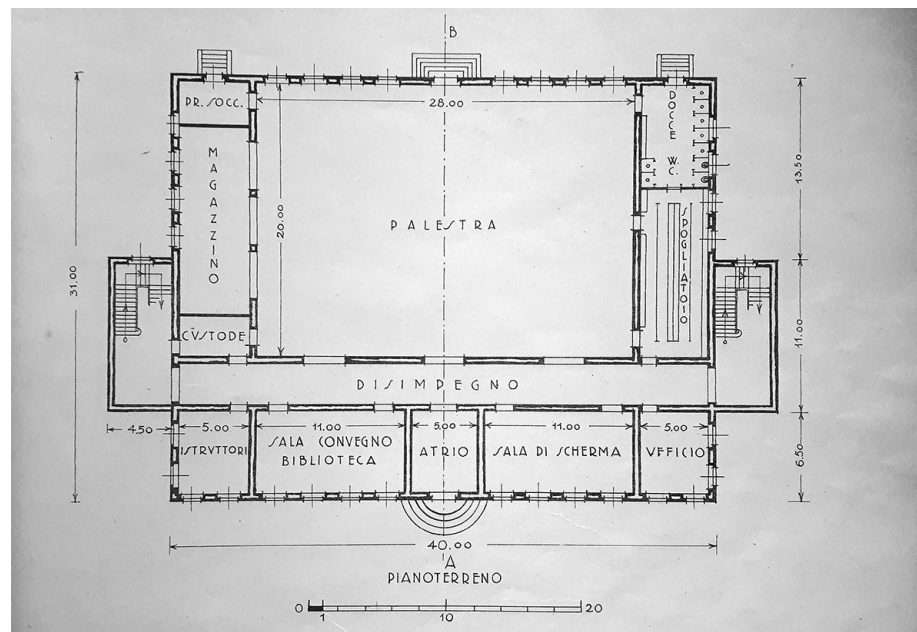
The building at Littoria Scalo and Borgo San Donato are defined by a strict symmetrical layout consisting of three autonomous sections reflecting the original matrix. The central multipurpose hall accessed by a portico hosted *Dopolavoro* related activities, such as cinema-theatre, dance hall, gymnasium, and assembly hall. The lateral volumes accommodated the big rooms housing respectively the Post Office and the *Casa del Fascio*. The smaller

Fig. 4

Enrico del Debbio, *Prototipo di Casa del Balilla con Palestra* n. VIII (del Debbio 1928, table XXXV).

Fig. 5

Oriolo Frezzotti, *Casa del Balilla* di Littoria, 1932.



rooms connecting the two volumes hosted ancillary services. [Fig. 14] The building of Borgo Hermada [Figg. 15, 16] – now radically transformed and almost entirely unrecognisable – was defined by three autonomous contiguous volumes. The multipurpose hall formed one header of the building, while the other accommodated the *Dopolavoro* and the large rooms for the Trade Unions. The connecting linear body consisted of a series of small rooms housing the Opera Nazionale Balilla and the welfare offices for war veterans.

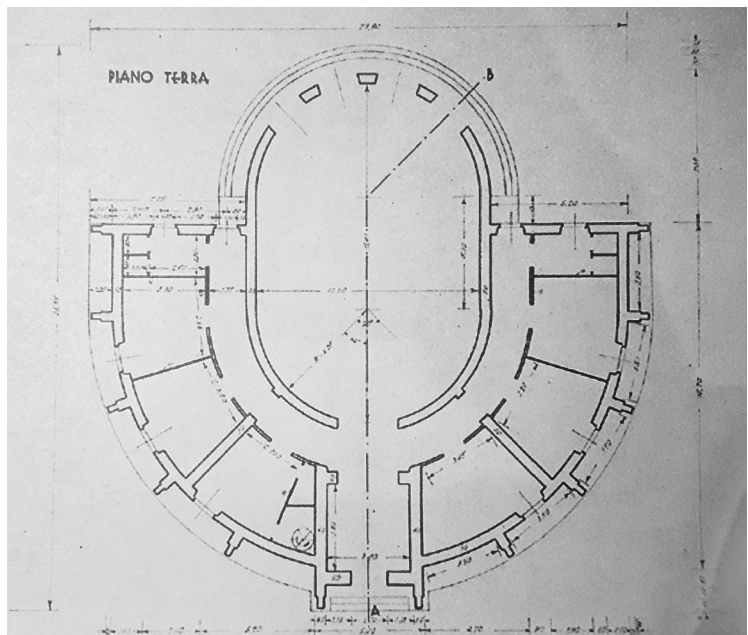
All these examples are characterised by presence of antithetical spaces – interior/exterior, public/private, served/servant – and by the overlapping, albeit temporal, of the activity program. At Sabaudia, for example, the public square was designed as an extension of the building. At Pontinia instead, the distinction between *Dopolavoro* and Cinema-Theatre was disguised.

New Types / One Type: learning from the past

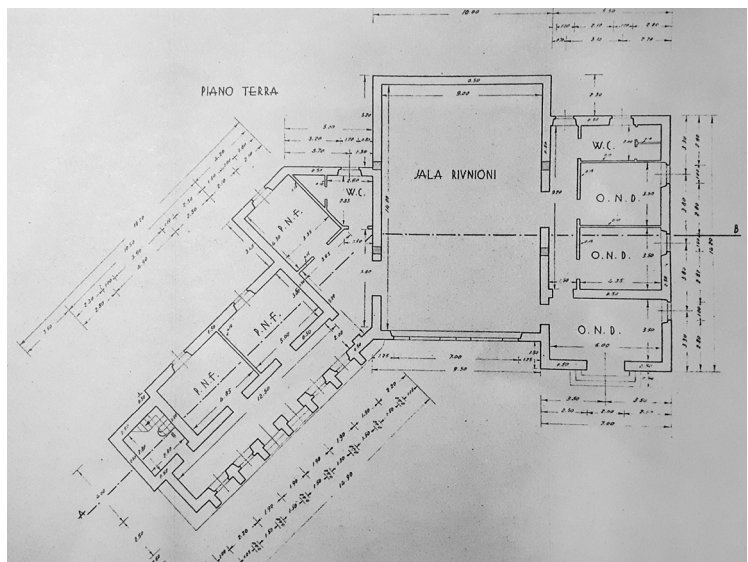
Complex Buildings have regained momentum in the scholarly debate

Fig. 6

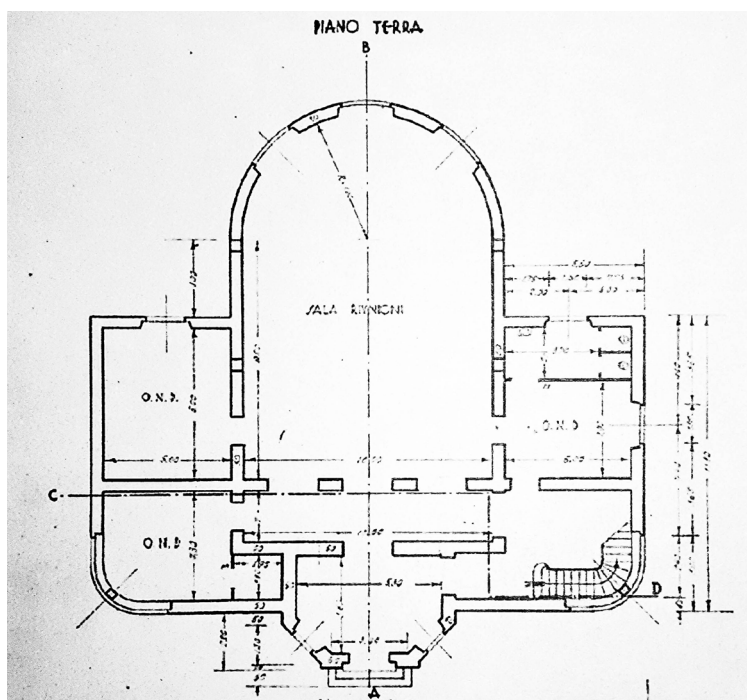
Alfredo Pappalardo, *Progetti di Tre Prototipi di Casa del Fascio per i Borghi dell'Agro Pontino* — Tipo 1, Borgo Piave, 1935 (Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Opera Nazionale Combattenti – Progetti, 54/111.1).

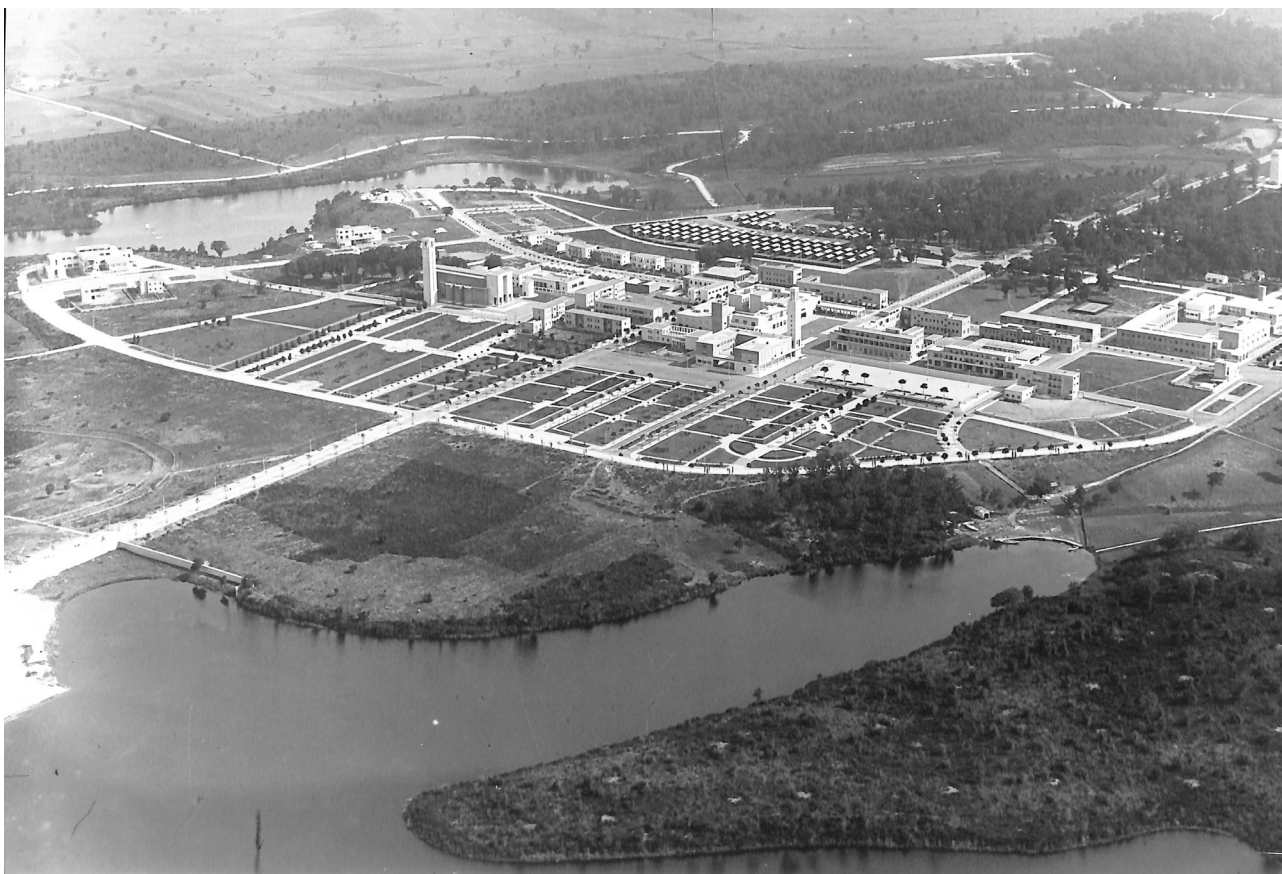
**Fig. 7**

Alfredo Pappalardo, *Progetti di Tre Prototipi di Casa del Fascio per i Borghi dell'Agro Pontino* — Tipo 2, Borgo Isonzo e Borgo Sabotino, 1935 (Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Opera Nazionale Combattenti – Progetti, 54/111.2).

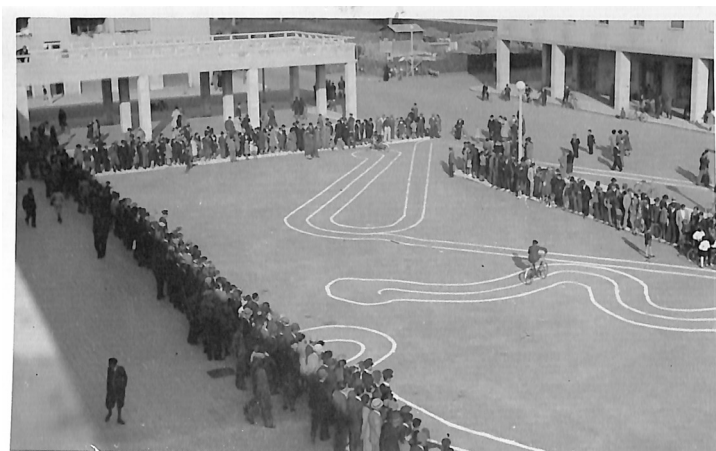
**Fig. 8**

Alfredo Pappalardo, *Progetti di Tre Prototipi di Casa del Fascio per i Borghi dell'Agro Pontino* — Tipo 3, Borgo Carso, 1935 (Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Opera Nazionale Combattenti – Progetti, 54/111.3).



**Fig. 9**

Aerial view of Sabaudia, 1934
(Catalogazione fototeca, Archivio Comunale di Sabaudia, Vol. 5.5/595b).

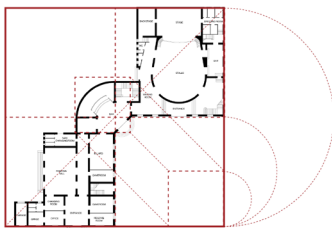
**Figg. 10-11**

Gymkhana in the central square of Sabaudia, 1934 (Catalogazione fototeca, Archivio Comunale di Sabaudia, Voll. 7/323-324).



**Fig. 12**

Compositional Scheme of Pontinia's Complex Building — Urban proportions (author's elaboration, 2021).

**Fig. 13**

Compositional Scheme of Pontinia's Complex Building — Geometrical composition of the building (author's elaboration, 2021).

thanks to three issues of «A+T» published in 2017 and 2018. Aurora Fernández Per introduced the topic starting from the definition of “social condenser”, namely the spatial response to the state’s need to organise recreational, cultural and welfare activities in controlled environments in the early 20th century. According to other authors, the genesis of Complex Buildings can be traced back to the Soviet Union of the 1920s, in parallel with the rise of Hybrid Buildings in the US. These latter, opening towards the city, encouraged a new use of public space capable of “densifying” the relationships between heterogeneous community members (Fernández Per 2017).

A comparison between the Soviet and American experiences with the case of Agro Pontino, can be attempted, focusing on the spatial and social aspects. Indeed, the new building types implemented in Agro Pontino were dictated by the state’s desire to control and organise the settlers’ leisure time. Moreover, their spatial flow involved the urban scene, transforming public squares into an open-air multi-functional halls.

More recent sources reinforce this parallelism. According to Kerstin Sailer, for example, Complex Buildings can be defined as systems where multiple activities can coexist, and where the confluence of spaces may trigger a range of new spontaneous collective behaviours. It is therefore not surprising that these aspects came into play in Agro Pontino, to activate the public sphere in newly built contexts.

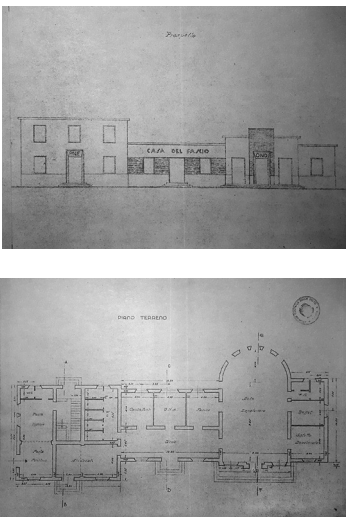
Despite these recent publications, the genealogy of Complex Buildings – so widely referred to, particularly in urban regeneration projects – has not been fully investigated. A critical reinterpretation of case studies like that of Agro Pontino could contribute to the phenomenological understanding of Complex Buildings and to the definition of their possible future applications.

Moreover, the identification of similarities between the Pontine experi-



Fig. 14
The *Dopolavoro* at Borgo S. Donato (photo by E. Margione 2018).

ments and current Complex Buildings show the modernisation of the rural landscape through a reading lens focusing on the compositional relationship between architecture and urban design, overcoming the interpretive bias that often affects a case study so loaded with political implications.



Figg. 15-16
Alfredo Pappalardo, Luigi Piccinato, Project for the Casa del Fascio of Borgo Hermada. Plan and elevation 1934. Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Opera Nazionale Combattenti – Progetti, 19/24.

Notes

¹ See Frampton 1974.

² Luigi Piccinato gave a theoretical definition of the Pontine settlement system (Piccinato 1934).

³ *Ruralizing urbanism* translated the Italian expression *urbanistica ruralizzatrice*. See Mariani 1976, and Mioni 1980.

⁴ Except for Aprilia and Pomezia, implemented when Italy was subject to the sanctions imposed due to the Ethiopian War

⁵ On 3 April 1926 Renato Ricci founded the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* a youth section of the National Fascist Party promoting physical activity as an integral part of education for schools of the first and second grade. The Fascist regime relied on sports to mould the Italians of the future, the so-called *italiano nuovo*. In 1927, Ricci entrusted Enrico del Debbio with the first project for a *Casa del Balilla* in view of establishing an Academy to train teachers of physical education. A year later, Ricci commissioned del Debbio a handbook including a series of architectural prototypes adaptable to different settlements across the nation, highlighting «[that] typological and formal identity capable of compositionally restoring the values of the *Opera Nazionale Balilla*» (Ricci 1928).

⁶ The blueprints are among the holdings of the Central State Archives, Opera Nazionale Combattenti, envelope 54 app. 111.

⁷ The *Migliare* roads perpendicular to the Appian Way were implemented in the late 18th century as part of the reclamation scheme promoted by Pope Pius VI.

⁸ The origin of the Pontinia after the success of Sabaudia is quite interesting. While the leading figures of the Italian academic and professional worlds were asking for a new

design competition, Le Corbusier also tried to get the commission, meeting influential politicians in the hope of presenting his work on the Ferme Radieuse to the Head of Government.

Nevertheless, the plan of Pontinia was “confidentially” entrusted to engineer Alfredo Pappalardo, who was bound not to reveal its location (Mariani, 1976). The publication of the plan of Pontinia with the designs of the main public buildings aroused an absolute scandal. Bontempelli and Bardi (1934) commented that Pontinia betrayed the hopes aroused by Sabaudia. On his part, Giuseppe Pagano commented that the programme of Pontinia was obvious: a rural municipality for a community of farmers, an objective that even a mediocre architect could not fail, by considering the pre-existing roads and avoiding any decorative rhetoric. «I call to witness the illustrations of the project, and believe I am doing an ungrateful yet fair work accusing those functionaries of artistic and technical incapacity. An even more serious crime after the creation of Sabaudia, alive modern and beautiful». (Pagano 1935)

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