

‘GHOSTS OF ROME:’ THE HAUNTING OF FASCIST EFFORTS AT REMAKING ROME AS ITALY’S CAPITAL CITY

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It is now a commonplace that at the time Rome finally became the capital of a newly united Italy in 1870, it was widely seen by the new political elite as not up to the job of representing the new state. Leading politicians looked to Paris’ recently imposed new street plan and to Vienna’s similarly draconian innovation in the form of the Ringstrasse as inspirations for a “new” Rome. Arguably, both Liberal and Fascist regimes in the years from 1870-1943 shared the desire to make over the city in their respective self-images as, respectively, a newly emergent nation-state and a resurgent Italian empire (Agnew 1998). Although some specific interventions during the years 1870-1920 have attracted interest, the building of the Vittoriano and the construction of Corso Vittorio Emanuele II to name two, the Fascist period has been the greatest focus for those investigating the redevelopment of Rome as crucial to the political-cultural changes associated with the “new” Italy. This is not hard to understand. Fascism has come to hold a fascination that the previous regime could not because of its overtly ideological cast. Its recent rehabilitation (if still incomplete) in contemporary Italian politics and self-conscious manipulation of the physical landscape of Rome and other cities to express its political intentions have deepened the interest. Ultimately, however, though “the ghosts of Italies past and especially those of the all-conquering Roman empire were welcome in the new nation” (Bosworth 2005, 13), they were not readily conjoined in a renewed city that would do credit to the ambitions of its Fascist rulers.

While the continuity across regimes perhaps can be overstated, the danger in much recent writing about Italian Fascism in general, and its impact on Rome in particular, is to take at face value the claims of its proponents that Fascism was truly effective in translating its plans into practice (for this critique see, e.g., Bosworth 2009; Cardoza 2008; Mammone 2006). Perhaps the best way of putting this in the present context is to say that Fascist manipulation of the physical fabric of Rome failed to achieve most what it intended: the reconfiguration and monumentalization of the city to singularly represent the political breach with the past that was the aim of its revolution. The question is why this was so spectacularly the case, given how successful in terms of their goals other dramatic city makeovers – such as those of Paris and Vienna -- had been. Ironically, the very totalizing hubris of Fascism now taken so seriously is probably the

main culprit. As Scott (1998) has pointed out with respect to a range of self-defined revolutionary regimes, the rhetorical claims of “high modernism” (to overcome national “backwardness” by concentrated power, to create a “new man,” etc.) become lethally self-defeating when combined with an authoritarian state without the capacity to incorporate local knowledge, and a weakened civil society that cannot provide reliable critical feedback on the dreamlike projects of authoritarian rulers.

I focus on two specific efforts that have long been associated with particular aspects of Fascist plans for Rome: the construction of the Via della Conciliazione through the rione Borgo between St. Peter’s and the River Tiber, and the clearance of a new space around the ruined mausoleum of the Emperor Augustus (Piazza Augusto Imperatore) just to the north of the previous intervention but on the opposite side of the river. If the first can be seen as an attempt at not only reconciling but somehow capturing the Vatican for the makeover of the city, the second is usually considered as a major example of the cult of *romanità*. *Romanità* celebrates the ancient Roman past as a key to making the current Italy and is closely associated with what turned out to be the later years of Fascism. I have chosen them precisely for these specific features that they exhibit rather than, say, for their persisting association with Fascism. Indeed, numerous contemporary Romans of my acquaintance seem completely unaware of the precise architectural genealogies of these two sites.

My argument is twofold: (1) that making over Paris and Vienna in a singular manner was relatively easy compared to compromising the vast storehouse of rooted memories and living contradictions, particularly the continued presence and symbolic power of the papacy in the city, that would have to be undermined for anything similar to succeed in Rome, and (2) Fascism was itself fatally divided ideologically over what it was trying to achieve in making over Rome, unlike in France and Austria where architectural and cultural goals were clearly allied and mutually reinforcing. This is because Fascism vacillated between either tying itself tightly to the past of ancient imperial Rome or eclectically building a new city on top and around the inherited one. The ideological division was further exacerbated by a political process under Fascism that was anything other than linear and efficacious. In the end, the ghosts of past Romes inhabiting the existing city haunted the actual achievement of any sort of coherent new city as a monument to the “new” Italy.

Of course, this does not mean that the interventions of the Fascist Ventennio have had no effect on how the city is experienced today. Certainly, Fascist-era sites such as the Via dell' Impero, EUR, and the Foro Italico have become integral to the city's spatial form (e.g. Spano 2009). But they have thereby become only part of the overall pastiche of the city and not the directing elements in the urban fabric that a makeover worthy of its name would have entailed. The richness of Rome's past and the ambivalence of the regime about its objectives over the course of its rule prevented the successful translation of massive rhetorical ambition into a commensurate concrete transformation of the city as whole.

Rome and the Fascist Regime

An increasingly common view is that Benito Mussolini is on a par with the Emperor Augustus and Pope Sixtus V as one of the major makers of the fabric of the city of Rome, particularly its monumental face, (e.g. Gentile 2007; Painter 2005). This partly reflects the fact that Mussolini's Fascist regime did intervene heavily in the city in pursuit of a political program to transform Rome into a capital worthy of the "new" Italy that was under construction. In this regard Mussolini stands in for the regime as a whole. As the years wore on, however, Mussolini essentially did become the regime, aiming to monopolize power in a cult of personality. There was undoubtedly a general Fascist aestheticization of politics that aspired to use monuments and their configuration within the capital city to create a popular sense of its ambitions and ruthlessness rather than to valorize the city as it was (e.g. Benjamin 1973). But the emphasis on the remaking of Rome under Fascism also reflects a recent shifting intellectual sensibility about Fascism, in particular a notable tendency to see it as a clean break with what came before, and to evaluate all of its works in terms of the political intents of its protagonists more than the actual architectural-political outcomes (e.g. Falasca-Zamponi 1997; Gentile 2007; Giardina and Vauchez 2000; Lazzaro 2005; Painter 2005).

Undoubtedly the most influential writer in this vein is Emilio Gentile. The successor to Renzo De Felice in advocating a culturalist perspective and consensual interpretation of Fascism, Gentile (2007) views Rome as increasingly central to Fascist totalitarianism after the seizure of power. "Rome and empire," he says, "were the most frequently used words in Fascist rhetoric. They expressed myths that seduced lay people and Catholics, civilians and military, simple minds and superior ones" (Gentile 2007, v, author's translation for this and subsequent Italian language sources). While noting some of the personal

and ideological divisions among architects, artists, and regime leaders, Gentile sees Mussolini as always being the “chief agent” of the transformation of the city (p. 43); the city readily succumbs to the creation of a “continuity between the ancient Roman spirit and the Fascist one” (p. 88). Though the plan to make a “wholly and integrally new Rome” was thwarted by the onset of the Second World War, Gentile is at pains to emphasize that the monuments to the “fascism of stone” still remain as lingering and powerful effects of what Mussolini intended (p. 258). Through its manipulation of symbols and their concrete manifestations in the urban landscape, Fascism thus created a popular consensus through the built environment and thus well beyond the bounds of cultural hegemony as that concept is typically understood.

Several interpretive problems arise from this account. The first one is that institutionally -- and notwithstanding the desire of Mussolini and the Fascist regime to realize their self-defined “totalitarian” project -- the actual regime remained “polycratic” more than “monocratic” (Breschi 2006, 30). The presence of a monarchy and a formal constitution produced a dual fidelity into the governing system. On crucial occasions, not least in the denouement of 1943, members of the most intimate circle of the regime found their loyalty to the crown outweighed that to both Duce and Fascist party. Over time, in fact, the role of the party withered and the personality cult rose in significance, thereby weakening the overall association of social-cultural change with Fascism per se. The limits to the power of the regime were particularly apparent in Mussolini’s frustrating relationships with both monarchy and Church. As De Grand (1991, 521) has noted, “The Church represented a formidable obstacle to the totalitarian mobilization of society. It had succeeded in building under Fascism an alternative political class within Catholic Action, the Catholic University Federation and the Movement of Catholic Graduates.” If early Fascism was strongly and openly anticlerical, by 1929 it had become necessary to placate the Church in order to pursue Mussolini’s by then increasingly nationalist and imperialist projects.

At the same time, and as a result of the lack of Fascist total institutional control, therefore, groups and organizations other than ones directly affiliated with the regime, were able to establish their own readings of Rome (and Italy), past and present. This was partly because government, even so-called totalitarian government, was only one element in people’s lives (Bosworth 2004, 499). Italy was still a country of *compaesani* or local loyalties and sensibilities in which mobilizing the mass of the population was difficult to maintain for anything like long periods of time. As the seat of the Catholic Church, Rome

itself was a standing reminder to residents and visitors alike of alternative visions of social order, however much some elements in the Church collaborated with the regime because of their fears of liberalism and Bolshevism. Even before the Concordat between Vatican and Italian State in 1929, the papacy was keen to challenge the idea that the Italian government was alone in exercising sovereignty within the city (see, e.g., Riccardi 1979; Pollard 1985, 2008; Schlott 2008). Bosworth (2009, 128) makes the general point as follows: “Catholics, foreign admirers and visitors, nationalists (who were not always just Fascists), working-class Romans with their narrowly suburban pasts and presents, each did not entirely endorse the regime’s construction of history and most, after 1945, were able to refurbish their favoured past and, at least ostensibly, cleanse it from Fascist accretion.”

I do not mean to suggest that Fascism was a pluralistic system: far from it. Rather, and in line with Roberts’s (2007, 12) argument, it is much more a question of how the regime worked in practice:

Fascism included a common energizing insight and aspiration sufficiently coherent to inspire enthusiasm and indicate the general direction of practice. But it proved subject to contestation along particular axes from within that common framework. The result was a certain dynamic incoherence overall, but the meaning of that incoherence cannot be understood if we conflate it with irrationality, activism or opportunism – or if we settle for a focus on style.

There was no simple Fascist plan in 1922 that was then followed to completion over time. So, if still totalitarian in impulse, therefore, the improvisation and confusion in practice that characterized the Fascist regime, particularly towards its end, “were the wages of trying to transcend the modern framework by acting collectively in a new totalitarian mode” (Roberts 2007, 36). Yet, the regime itself and Mussolini in particular had a commitment to erratic behavior that leads beyond a charge of mere improvisation. Perhaps to keep potential internal foes off balance and to maintain a grip on power, Mussolini tended to move dramatically from one initiative to another and to behave unpredictably. He referred to this himself as engaging in a “scotch douche” or in Mack Smith’s (1976, 11) words, “blowing hot and cold, being friendly and provocative by turns, and continually changing his ground so that he could appear both democratic and authoritarian, radical and reactionary, socialist and anti-socialist.”

This “dynamic incoherence” is nowhere more apparent than in Rome where the regime’s fragmented efforts at remaking the city ended up creating a “desert dotted with ancient monuments, scraped

and isolated from their context; a frigid, dazed anthology contained in a vaguely metaphysical atmosphere: this is the image of the Rome to come, born out of the sleep of reason” (Cederna, 1979, 52). This was a city that neither conveyed a singular aesthetic sensibility nor worked together functionally. Indeed, and in counterpoint to Haussmann’s Paris (whatever you might think of the social consequences of that), “the centre of Rome would remain an uninhabited space filled by ruins and surrounded by fast moving traffic. Rather than become the site of a new urban life, the vast archeological zone would be home to tourists by day and roaming bands of bored youth at night” (Baxa 2004, 18).

The city itself was a large part of the problem. So many “different” Romes were in play: classical Rome, medieval Rome, Renaissance Rome, Baroque Rome, eighteenth-century Rome, pre-unification papal Rome, and post-unification Rome. Each of these was built on top of and often out of previous ones. Without a clean start by total demolition, the city’s very complexity of historical reference worked against a coherent reworking. Kostoff (1973, 240) puts this best when he writes: “More than any other historical city, Rome’s *aggiornamento* [updating] was haunted by its own past: the ageless monuments and great inherited public spaces that were at once a burden and a challenge to the architects and planners of the new capital.” But the regime meandered between attempts at reclaiming sites and building monuments within the existing fabric and starting over at the outskirts. Beyond the institutional and social forces noted above, which conspired against a singular rebuilding, the history of Fascist design and architecture also worked against it. As Ghirardo (1980, 114) notes in her subtle study of Italian architecture under Fascism,

The entire 20-year history of Fascism was marked by vacillation between an apparently adventurous modernism and a recalcitrant traditionalism. Fascism as a concept was advertised as something thoroughly new, the next and better step after the liberal democratic state. On the other hand, it claimed to sink its roots deep in Italian history, especially Roman history. Italian Fascists praised a building or a program for its modernity and in the next breath lauded it for its solid roots in Italian tradition. More often than not, the Italian past was used to validate a plan or action, from war to the Concordat.

It was not then, as in some accounts, that modernist and traditionalist architects battled with one another for the “soul” of Fascism and for the landscape of Rome, but that categories such as “modernist” and “traditionalist” were themselves unstable, and the same architects often ended up on different sides in

controversies over projects from those they had begun. It is undoubtedly the case that the Fascist period did see considerable innovation in architectural design and practice (see, e.g., Pagano 2008). But the regime's increasingly polemical commitment to *romanità* constrained and limited what brilliant architects could actually build (Ghirardo 1980; Kostoff 1973).

Nevertheless, it is important not to overplay the importance of the cult of *romanità* in both constructing Fascist "identity" and in understanding what happened in Rome (Atkinson 1998; Stone 1999; Nelis 2007). If regime-sponsored exhibitions made much of this historic connection, the city itself never did become an "imperial theme park" (Stone 1999, 218). The overemphasis on exhibitions as guides to what actually happened to the city is a particularly unfortunate aspect of recent thinking about Fascist Rome. In fact, as Baxa (2004, 17) persuasively argues, "While Fascism's Master Plan [of 1931] shared Haussmann's destructiveness, it failed to build anything in its place except the roads." It was, however, "originally planned to transform the centre of Rome into a new imperial city glorifying the Fascist state and the Third Rome so desired by nineteenth century nationalists," but "the centre became a vast zone of ruins which resembled more a lunar landscape than the rationally ordered and monumental centres of Paris and Vienna. Unlike these two cities, Rome had not been as compliant with the rationalist and monumental plans of Fascism, and the result was a collage of juxtapositions and disembodied ruins which could only be admired from the mobile platform of a motor car" (Baxa 2004, 16). So much for successfully monumentalizing the return of *romanità*.

Ghostly Rome

More than two thousand years of history is concentrated in the historic center of Rome. The various signs of its historic complexity are everywhere visible in the excavations and in the compaction of materials from different epochs present in more recent buildings. In local vernacular this is the *Roma che sparisce* or Vanishing Rome which appears and disappears into the landscape while directly impinging on the very structure of the city in numerous ways. This is the Rome that Freud (1994) was thinking about, although I hesitate to endorse the interpretation he gives, when he wrote of the city as a metaphor for the human unconscious in "Civilization and its Discontents." Undoubtedly, monuments and ruins in such a city do serve as "agents of memory," which when assembled into a recognizable hierarchy are "the basis for the cultural and political constitution of a city ... whose physical presence constantly remind[s] the population

of their metaphysical bonds” (Vidler 1992, 177-8). But this is a long-term project that not even the relatively long period of Fascist rule from 1922 to 1943 could hope to accomplish without even more dramatic interventions than were ever even planned. More specifically, it required both acceptance of the idea that the ruins of Rome were literally “ours” as Italians rather than just as contemporary Roman residents of the local sites in which they just happened to be located (or as citizens of the world, for that matter), and that longstanding local experience and knowledge associated with the city as it was could be simply swept away by the enthusiasms of the new regime.

As the geographical literature on place tends to emphasize, all sorts of architectural arrangements, however monumental in intent, tend to take on particularistic meanings as the people who inhabit or visit them on a regular basis invest in them and use them for their own purposes (Bell 1997). The performance of religiosity or national identity implicit in monuments can induce passive acceptance and indifference. It can also generate “counter-memories” based on the “disparities between history as it is discursively transmitted and memory as it is publicly enacted by the bodies that bear its consequences” (Roach 1996, 26). Sometimes, and in the Roman context this deserves particular emphasis, a popular understanding and practice of religious sensibilities has often worked against official attempts at reorientation. That Italian popular Catholicism, which has long merged natural and supernatural in such concrete objects as madonnine images and saintly relics, provided a particularly powerful barrier from the “bottom-up” to remaking the city in a singular official image (Carroll 1996). But the physical presence of ruins from past rounds of monumental construction could also produce indifference, derision, and cynicism. In this overall context, new clearly defined monuments always carry with them “an increased risk of subversion. Those who do not accept the official designation of spatial meaning and use are likely to find themselves defined, quite literally, as beyond the pale and, indeed, as ‘matter out of place’” (Herzfeld 2006, 130). The residents of many neighborhoods in central Rome found themselves in this situation. To monumentalize the city, their lives had to be totally upended by clearing many of them out to the periphery. As Herzfeld (2006, 142) puts it, “Spatial cleansing means the conceptual and physical clarification of boundaries, with a concomitant definition of former residents as intruders (usually called ‘squatters’ or described with similarly demeaning language).” In this understanding, the “messiness” of places such as Rome before the clearances and other monumental projects invited a clarification of architectural categories and zones upon

which the new monumental city could be built. But it had necessarily to cope with popular attempts to resist the reordering through counter expropriation, reinterpretation, and reuse that have long characterized the “urban villages” of central Rome (Herzfeld 2009). It is no mere coincidence that most of the clearances, reconstructions and new buildings under both Liberal and Fascist regimes quickly acquired derogatory nicknames that have stuck to them through the years and that many of the public spaces have long succumbed to private expropriations of one sort or another (sidewalk cafes, spontaneous markets, etc.) Rome has been a classic example of the working out of what Pierre Nora (1989, 13) has termed the conflict between, on the one hand, “places of memory,” the self-consciously national and ethnic sites where official historical memory is performed, and, on the other hand, “environments of memory,” the oral and corporeal memories associated with places in the everyday lives of those who live, visit, and move around in them.

The ghosts of Rome, therefore, are not simply the specters of people who once, even recently, inhabited the places cleared to make way for roads, exhibited ruins, and new buildings. It is more a way of speaking about the specificity of places as experienced by the very people who must come to live with the changes brought about by new monuments. So, I am definitely not using the term “ghosts” to refer to the spirits of the dead or to anxious memories associated with types of places (as in Freud’s anxiety about Rome). What I am hoping to convey by using the term is a sense of “felt presence – an anima, geist, or genius – that possesses and gives a sense of social aliveness to a place” (Bell 1997, 815, author’s emphasis). From this perspective, the ghostly represents the temporality of a specific place, how it came about, who lives in it, how it has been transformed, is confounded even as powerful external agents, a Mussolini for example, endeavor to put it to their own purposes. This confounding of past and present is what undermines or clouds in popular reception the singular messages conveyed by punching through this street or clearing this set of ruins. The piazzas and other public spaces dominated by churches and other ecclesiastical buildings, often derived from classical roots but with powerful papal adaptations, figured into everyday routines which defied cooptation into the official story. The complex palimpsest of Rome resisted incorporation into a singular myth of the new Fascist Rome.

Moreover, Italian nationhood had descended on Rome’s existing inhabitants in little more than one generation (Mack Smith 1989). The welcome was ambiguous at best (Dumont 2008). The new northern immigrants who surged into the city after 1870 might be more open to the new monumental

messages. But there was little or no sense of a common Italian-ness across both groups to undermine their more established political identities and to make them adhere to some common set of understandings about the new architectural and urban initiatives they encountered once Rome became Italy's capital (Caracciolo 1999; Martina 2000). The city then worked its own particular magic. If on one side, Rome had always been a special city, with a role as a seat of a Church with universal pretensions and, before that, an empire of massive geographical extent, and thus a symbol of cosmopolitanism -- on the other side, if without much by way of municipal self-government, it was also a profoundly provincial city which until the 1920s had remained relatively isolated from the rampant urbanization elsewhere in Western Europe (Riccardi 1979; De Nicolò 1994; Edwards 1999).

Rome's residents and those with regular business in the city, therefore, were not particularly vulnerable to the propagandizing on behalf of his plans in which Mussolini specialized. The dual reification of antiquity and construction of bits of a new city within the old, while immensely disruptive and destructive of the lives of those displaced, could not be expected to obtain a magical hold over them or others given the symbolic complexity to which they were used. The medieval and Baroque elements in the city, though outside the menu of approved forms, were not easily swept away, even when, as with the earlier clearances at the Forum, they were often ruined or diminished (Watkin 2009). The Fascist state in its efforts to combat national political indifference and build *italianità* may well have claimed a desire to overcome the multivocality or complexity of the fabric of Rome but putting this into practice was another thing entirely. As with so many of its claims, the outcome proved to be at some remove from the presumed intention. In two case studies, one relating to the attempted co-optation of the Church in the construction of the new Rome and the other relating directly to the cult of *romanità*, the city proved remarkably resilient and adaptive without ever finally succumbing ideologically to the Duce's desires.

Church and State at the Via della Conciliazione

According to Kostof (1973, 240), among the various projects for remaking Rome associated with Fascism, the construction of what was later named Via della Conciliazione has elicited both considerable mention but little detailed study. For one thing it is a relatively modest intervention; the street is only about 500 meters in length. It was also proposed in form or another long before the coming of Fascism (Vannelli 1990; Marchetti 2001). Perhaps most importantly, it is one of the most ambiguous symbolically. After all,

whatever the name it has acquired, suggesting reconciliation between Church and state, its construction draws attention to the dome of St. Peter's and the magnificent piazza in front of it designed by Bernini. It helps to frame the importance of the Church in the city rather than the role of the city as the capital of a united and/or imperial Italy. As an explicit response on Mussolini's part to the Vatican Concordat of 1929, but not under way until 1936, the project of clearing away the medieval and other structures that obscured the approach to St. Peter's Square from the city center is a good example of how much Fascist plans had in practice to cope not just generically with a complex past, but more specifically with the resiliency of the papacy in a city which it had dominated for so long.

The street was constructed in the years between 1936 and 1950. So, like some other Fascist projects like the EUR complex on the southwest side of the city, it was only finished years after the regime had long gone. The plan, by architects Marcello Piacentini and Attilio Spacarelli, called for the demolition of a considerable portion of the Borgo neighborhood immediately in front of St. Peter's Square, and the introduction of a broad boulevard running from Piazza Pia on the bank of the river Tiber to the famous colonnaded piazza (Marchetti 2001). Most of the work was completed by 1938, but shortages of funds mandated that the columns lining the street could not be completed until money came available in time for the Holy Year of 1950. The project was controversial from the outset. It was strongly opposed at the time by some major architects and architectural historians, particularly Gustavo Giovannoni, because it went against Bernini's original design for St. Peter's Square in which he foresaw pilgrims emerging from the confines of the surrounding medieval streets into the awe-inspiring massive piazza (Kitao 1976). The displacement of the local population, which was moved to the periphery of the city, also proved contentious (Kirk 2006). Indeed, most scholarly opinion about the street tends for these reasons, and for the association with Fascism, to a negative view of its impact. As Kirk (2006, 756) reminds us in his detailed study of the planning and building of the street, however, this was not the first time that clearing the way for such a street had been proposed, and that for Mussolini personally this was a major project signifying "the regime's diplomatic union with the Church, using the latter's supranational authority to further its own imperialist agenda. The Via della Conciliazione is the most complete example of the strategies used to reshape the urban experience of Fascist Rome" (Kirk 2006, 756).

Figure 1

As implemented, the dome of St. Peter's was not centered. Instead the street is centered on the obelisk in the piazza, so as to mask Vatican buildings other than the Basilica. The thinking was that this would have pleased Bernini with his desire to maintain the architectural focus on the central building. Given that the buildings that remained on either side of the street did not align perfectly, the illusion of a straight connector was created by introducing traffic islands on either side with Fascist-style obelisks placed at intervals that doubled as visual directional signs and lampposts. These definitely reduce the "funnel"-like effect of the street that would be present without them, while the funneling helps to block the Vatican buildings other than the front of St. Peter's. Kirk (2006, 773) is correct in saying that the street does well architecturally what was intended.

This could therefore be interpreted as "one of Mussolini's greatest achievements, and one he took full advantage of for the prestige it brought his regime, was reconciliation with the papacy" (Painter 2005, 69). Of course, it was neither finished nor named until after he had gone from power. More importantly, however, we should not so readily separate the street from the concept after which it is named with Mussolini as the presumed victor in the exercise (Riccardi 2000). After 1929 the Church had established itself as a separate sovereignty within the city of Rome. The 1929 settlement had "'re clothed' the Holy See with territorial sovereignty over the miniscule state of Vatican City" (Pollard 1985, 80). The construction of the Via della Conciliazione was, as Pollard adds, the primary "visible sign of the new order of things." In other words, the street immediately visualized the new and, at the very least, equal status of the Church with the Fascist state within the fabric of the city.

Undoubtedly, the Church had compromised in its move from a hitherto virulent hostility to the entire notion of an Italian state, with the Pope as a self-exile within the Vatican, to acceptance of a new reality. But the cost was greater on the Fascist side. With an obvious irony of its own, by quoting from the Communist leader Togliatti, then in exile, Pollard (1985, 193) beautifully captures the historic irony of the Fascist agreement with the papacy: "As Togliatti pointed out in 1929, the whole concept of the Conciliazione, and therefore the main thrust of the Duce's religious policy, was a massive sacrifice of principle: 'As far as the State was concerned, it is undoubtedly true that this has capitulated on the ideological plane ... The process of liquidating the ideology of Nationalism and Fascism itself has begun.' As far as Fascist ideology was concerned, Togliatti was hopelessly over optimistic, but the essence of his

remarks was true enough. ... the dream of the totalitarian state was irretrievably compromised.” When you look up or down Via della Conciliazione, it is not the Fascist touches of the street (particularly the obelisks) that catch the eye but, as Bernini would have predicted, the awesome power of the Vatican as represented by the front and dome of St. Peter’s Basilica standing guard over the city ... and the world beyond. *Urbi et orbi* [to the city and the world], as the Pope would say.

Empire and State in the Piazza Augusto Imperatore

Much more closely studied because of its obvious associations with *romanità* in general and Mussolini’s admiration for Emperor Augustus in particular, the clearance around the Mausoleum of Augustus to create the Piazza del Augusto Imperatore and the reconstructed Ara Pacis (the ancient Altar of Peace originally located in Rome to the southwest of the current exhibit) on the same site was also a product of Fascism during its later, so-called “imperial” phase. By the time he had become synonymous with Fascism in the mid-1930s, Mussolini undoubtedly represented himself as a new Augustus for an Italy transforming itself into an empire. Claiming the mantle of Augustus through singling out and celebrating his tomb from the medieval maze in which it was buried became one of the main features of a presumed reinstatement of ancient Roman values (as construed by Mussolini) in the new Rome. Fortuitously, 1937 was the presumed two-thousandth anniversary of Augustus’s birth. As a combination archeological dig and reconstruction of a neighborhood with new buildings and an exhibition, the piazza was from the start a mixed use. Its message proved to be as mixed.

Launching the project for isolating the tomb in October 1934, the Duce waxed lyrical in public as follows:

The work of isolating the Augusteo, which today I initiate and must be finished within three years for the bimillennium of Augustus, has a triple utility: that of history and beauty, that of traffic, that of hygiene ... A fourth and not final use: with these works of demolition and of construction of new buildings gives work for three years to numerous workers of every sort. And now I give the word to the pickax (Mussolini, as quoted in Insolera 2001, 161).

This was the height of the Great Depression and notwithstanding his other imperatives, Mussolini had to see the project at least partly as a public works program. He also saw the project as clearance of an “unhealthy” neighborhood and as facilitating traffic flow (although this came to nought), and sending a

political message. Even Mussolini was less single-minded than many of those writing about him have been.

Figure 2

Without any competition to select the architect, the project was given in the same year to Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo, who was little known. Perhaps the selection reflected the fact that many decisions were already made as to how the project would proceed: demolitions were already planned, the main entrances to the square were established, and the Baroque churches flanking the square would be kept. Be that as it may, from the start and as it was to prove down the years, the main problem was that decisions were divided between the architect, on the one hand, and the archeologist in charge, on the other. Antonio Muñoz, Morpurgo's archeological "advisor," emphasized exposing the Mausoleum, yet Morpurgo by necessity had to frame the piazza with new buildings and later, following interventions by Mussolini to make the square open towards the river and the agreement to house the *Ara Pacis* on the Tiber side of the site, had to make a whole out of a set of contradictory parts. The politics of planning the project intervened from the outset: was the preservation and display of the tomb to take precedence over the rest of the project? How could the coherence of the piazza be maintained when Mussolini and others insisted on adding new items into the mix? The chaotic process of deciding how the project would proceed is described interestingly and in great detail in the most recent guidebook to the *Ara Pacis* (Rossini 2006, 108-20).

Much of the project was finished by September 1937 in time to celebrate the birthday of Augustus. But the new buildings on the northern and eastern sides of the piazza were not completed until 1941, and the glass structure designed to house the *Ara Pacis* (its parts brought from various places) was opened in 1938. The piazza is defined by four new Fascist buildings which frame on the north and east sides the central Augustan Mausoleum. Three churches mainly of Baroque (16th to 18th century) inspiration interrupt the Fascist façade. The reconstructed *Ara Pacis* occupies a pavilion on the west side close to the Tiber. Since 2005 this has been a new brutally modernist structure designed by Richard Meier replacing the older more muted pavilion of Morpurgo (Ouroussof 2006). At least until the addition of the new pavilion, the neutral colors and sculptural friezes of the complex combined fairly well. The Mausoleum, however, stands out as a ruin and "contrasts with the rectilinear modernity of Morpurgo's architecture and with the sculpted

marble altar [in the Ara Pacis]" (Wilkins 2005, 59). Indeed, today, the seemingly continual archeological digging around the tomb gives it a perpetually unkempt air that turns the entire piazza into a perpetual work in progress. The eye goes everywhere but to the Mausoleum. The churches also compromise the overall message of the piazza. The best that can be said is that "the presence of these buildings allows an expression of the unification of the three Romes – of Augustus, of the popes, and of Mussolini" (Wilkins 2005, 60). Perhaps this is true in theory. But the intermixing of ancient, papal, and Fascist motifs led to a peculiarly un-Fascist outcome even when the space was designed as an exercise in explicit Fascist propaganda. As Painter (2005, 74) rightly notes in this case:

Ironically, the message of peace permeated the piazza. The Emperor Augustus established the Pax Romana, and his Ara Pacis, or Altar of Peace, would be the chief attraction along with the mausoleum. The building containing the Illyrian College, Collegio degli Illirici, housed a seminary for Croats and had mosaic panels on the top storey celebrating Christ as Prince of Peace, PRINCIPIS PACIS.

The piazza's attempt at doing so much in one space left it open, therefore, to multiple interpretations that generally work against both a specifically Augustan and, more importantly, a Fascist-imperial rendition of the square.

The best verdict on the piazza, lost in the recent trend towards unilaterally endorsing the success of Mussolini's flirtation with *romanità*, is that it is what you would expect from the real politics practiced at the time. It wasn't really planned at all but made up over a series of years. Murpurgo's original design, for example, called for buildings that were only two stories high, a scale that he thought worked best with other elements in the square. He was overruled. They went to four stories. The pavilion to house the Ara Pacis was added after the piazza had been planned. The churches had to be kept. Not that they are particularly distinguished architecturally. Their presence reminds us of the continuing separate authority of the power broker in the Vatican on the other side of the river. If one interpretation is that the whole was condemned from the start to be less than the sum of its parts because of politics and untotalitarian compromise, as expressed in Seabrook's (2005, 61) words: "The piazza lost its status as prophecy and became, instead, a monumentally failed boast," others tend to see the failed hubris in Mussolini's self-comparison with Augustus. Perhaps Kostoff (1978, 322) best captures the overall failure of the project from this

perspective when he writes about the Piazza Augusto Imperatore: “Its aim as political art had been to use the relics of the Augustan age to lend authority to Fascist achievement. The contest, at least in a visual sense, was never really joined. The Fascist side of the balance is too weak: what we are conscious of is Augustan substance. Our opinion of Augustus is not affected by the association with Mussolini, and our opinion of Mussolini is not enhanced. The Duce yields to the emperor and is lost. The Piazzale in the end remains a colossal mistake.”

When ousted from office in 1943 Mussolini expressed his disappointment with Italians by saying “The Italians aren’t Romans.” They had let him down. Despite his best entreaties and claims to embody the spirit of the imperial Romans, Mussolini was disappointed. That he himself had only ever rhetorically created the analogy between modern Italians and ancient Romans never came to mind. He was a propagandist who never understood his or Italy’s limitations. One such limitation was that it was easier to conjure up the spirit of *romanità* than to make anything coherent of it.

Conclusion

The historic complexity of Rome would inevitably have set limits to what could be done with the city save for a savage reconstruction after the manner of Haussmann. From this perspective we should perhaps be grateful to Fascism. That remaking would also have involved abandoning rather than trying to expropriate selectively elements from the Roman past. Fascism was caught between the two conflicting imperatives in planning a new Rome as it was as a movement. On the one hand, as its Futurist and more fervent Syndicalist supporters argued, was to proclaim a revolutionary fresh start and ignore the past for the future. On the other hand, as became increasingly apparent as Mussolini metamorphosed into the Duce and fantasized about being a new Augustus, was that he stood on the shoulders of ancient giants in the hope that their success would rub off on him. In the end neither happened.

Much recent writing about Fascism and Fascist Rome tends to both ignore these differences and confuse often grandiloquent posturing with actual achievement. We can take too seriously what politicians say they will do, and that what they do has the effects they say it will. We should check on what they do and how it works. I have tried to show why Fascism failed to coherently make over Rome in any recognizable singular image, using two case studies in attempts at creating a new Rome that would transcend the old. The city itself proved too intransigent and resilient in the face of the best of plans.

Fascism remained divided in itself, not least in how decisions were made, and in the indeterminacy with which its totalitarianism was pursued. The 1929 accord with the Catholic Church proved fateful in several respects. Rather than licensing Mussolini to follow his own course, it reined him in and produced a city in which the Church became a larger more than a smaller presence. It also produced significant compromises in the reconstruction of the city that in the end favored “decadent” papal Rome as much as both its presumably more valued ancient Roman precursor and the Fascist present. In the end, and this has been the burden of my argument, the ghosts of Rome, the complex everyday *romanità* of the Romans and their city, overcame the best of any singular vision for the city that Fascism could ever offer.

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Figure 1: Via della Conciliazione. A. The view from St. Peter's, 1900; B. The view from St. Peter's, 2007; C. The view towards St. Peter's, 2007.



Figure 2: Piazza Augusto Imperatore. A. Oblique aerial view, early 1900s; B. Overhead view, 2008; C. In the Piazza, the view towards the northeast, 2008; D. The new pavilion for the Ara Pacis, the view towards

the north, 2008.

a.



b.



c.



d.

