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Architecture as Propaganda in Twentieth-Century Totalitarian Regimes. History and Heritage
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Abstract

As the most prominent architect and urban designer of Italy’s fascist regime, Marcello Piacentini (1881–1960) left an indelible mark on numerous cities across Italy. Nonetheless, his reception has been marred by controversy. Whereas some accounts dismiss Piacentini’s career as unredeemably tainted by associations with fascism, others acknowledge his skill, professionalism and inventiveness. Efforts to deal with the history of Piacentini’s work have prompted a range of different approaches. Some scholars have attempted to disassociate morality and aesthetics by focusing exclusively on the formal characteristics of Piacentini’s urban and architectural projects. Others have addressed the historical context in which those projects were produced, and have viewed them as vehicles of fascist propaganda. In effect, Piacentini’s legacy invites questions of how buildings that were created under the aegis of Mussolini’s dictatorship carried political meanings, and whether those meanings remain current today. Those questions are investigated with respect to Piacentini’s Arch of Victory, built in Genoa in the 1930s. More broadly, they provide insights into the ways in which the fascist past has been handled and remains relevant today.

Marcello Piacentini: A case of controversial heritage

A number of Italian cities bear the mark of Marcello Piacentini, the most prominent architect of Mussolini’s regime. Piacentini (1881–1960) designed and directed a significant quantity of projects in most major Italian cities during the twenty years of fascist rule. Yet, his legacy cannot simply be equated with fascism, as his career stretched from the early works of the 1910s until his death in 1960. Piacentini’s posthumous reputation has been marred by controversy, largely because of his involvement with the fascist regime, but also because of his traditionalism.¹ Following a conception of style as a moral choice, critics have associated his traditional aesthetics with right-wing politics. In fact, a pamphlet produced in Piacentini’s honour, shortly after his death, acknowledged that he attracted both ‘enthusiastic admirers

¹ Vidotto 2012, 22–23; Muntoni 2012, 53–58.

and fierce critics'.² That mixed reception is reflected in the literature, which, although extensive, lacks a comprehensive monograph and offers partial insight into the complexities of Piacentini's work. Historians tend to focus on specific areas; for instance, on his work in urban design, his Roman projects, or early works.³ Arguably, the fragmentary state of the literature might be taken as indicative of a reluctance on the part of scholars to engage with a heritage tainted by fascism. It might also reflect difficulties inherent in integrating Piacentini's historicism into a modernist narrative of the history of architecture, which equates progress with the abandonment of tradition.⁴

In seeking to interpret Piacentini's work, critics and historians have adopted a number of different methods, including stylistic, contextual, biographical, and psychological analysis. However, two main approaches have emerged that differ insomuch as they espouse opposing interpretations of the relationship between politics and architecture. First, scholars have examined Piacentini's work purely, or mainly, as a vehicle of fascist politics.⁵ That tendency was dominant in the post-war period, and persists today. In some cases, it has led to his architecture being condemned, or dismissed, on ethical grounds.⁶ While architecture is viewed through the lens of ethics or morality, historicism and fascism are tied together, and subjected to a process of rejection that is aimed at the political content of Piacentini's projects. The problem with that approach is that it assumes that politics can be divorced from cultural or socio-economic relations, or that politics is the primary force at work in the production of architecture. The second approach, which appeared in the 1980-90s, attempts to reconsider and re-evaluate Piacentini's work.⁷ It disassociates architecture and politics by shifting the focus either to space and form, or to the cultural context within which his architecture emerged. Some scholars concentrate on formal characteristics, style, and aesthetics. Others focus on the particular cultural conditions surrounding the creation of Piacentini's architecture, as evidenced, for example, by his architectural education, his

² *'entusiastici ammiratori e detrattori agguerriti'*, Accademia Nazionale di San Luca 1961, no page numbers (the author of the text was Vittorio Morpurgo).

³ Regni & Sennato 1983; Torresi 1995; De Rose 1993.

⁴ Benedetti 2004, 8–9; Benedetti 2010; Muntoni 2012, 56.

⁵ Zevi 1950 & 1960; Cederna 1979; Muntoni 2012, 65–68.

⁶ In particular, Zevi 1950, 237; Cederna 1979, VI.

⁷ Ciucci 1982; Ciucci 1989; Lupano 1991; Etlin 1991, 246, 324 & 500; De Rose 1993; Pisani 1994; Torresi 1995; Benedetti 2004; Pisani 2004.

professional ties, and various theoretical debates. Whereas this second tendency dominates most recent publications, its risks yielding to the assumption that architectural form can be isolated from the entirety of a determining context, or that issues associated with culture can be separated from those linked to politics.⁸ It also implies that researchers can choose to concentrate on particular aspects of culture, and especially those tied to the realm of architecture, while ignoring other allied cultural forces. In effect, scholars privilege one aspect of a determining base while ignoring others. There are also works that attempt to bridge the gap between the two different methods.⁹ Essentially, however, the two main camps diverge in the extent to which they attribute agency to politics or overlook the political content in Piacentini's projects.

This paper does not intend to put Piacentini 'on trial', or to scrutinize his commitment to fascism. It does not ask whether his architecture was political, or indeed whether it was fascist. Rather, it acknowledges the political intent in Piacentini's architecture, his proximity to the regime, and his involvement with state commissions. The question is *how*, or in what way, was Piacentini's architecture political, and the manner in which his buildings served political aims. This paper explores how Piacentini's buildings functioned as propaganda, how they carried political messages, and how certain codes, or meanings, were transmitted through architecture to the mind of the observer. It is also important to note that those meanings are not stable in time, and are dependent on the nature of a specific socio-political context. The question of the stability of political and cultural meanings in architecture has important implications for architectural heritage, and issues associated with the preservation, re-use, or destruction of buildings associated with a dictatorship.¹⁰ On a wider level, that question may come down to the issue of whether unwelcome political meanings are seen to have survived, or the way in which the meanings associated with architecture evolve once the socio-political context has changed. In short, attitudes towards the architecture of totalitarian regimes are determined by current ideologies and the nature of the existing processes that endow buildings with political significance.

⁸ Iacobone 2010; Benedetti 2010; Muratore 2012; Portoghesi 2012; Lupano 2012; Purini 2012.

⁹ A recent example is Maulsby 2014.

¹⁰ Vidotto 2004; Arthurs 2010; Kallis 2014, 259–256; for comparisons with Germany, see Macdonald 2009.

In exploring that question, the paper employs a case study based on the Arch of Victory, which was built in Genoa to Piacentini's designs between 1925 and 1931 (fig. 1). In order to address the generation of the political meanings embedded in the Arch, it draws on microhistory, visual analysis, and textual sources, including local newspapers and architectural journals dating from the time of its construction. More specifically, the paper examines the ties between architectural form and meaning; essentially, it analyses how formal characteristics, such as scale, colour, geometry, style, and texture, were used to carry political meanings that were rooted in fascist ideology – meanings that related, for instance, to war, hierarchy, nationhood, virility, and religion. At the most basic level, factors such as scale and monumentality were employed to express strength and power. Thus, the intention is to draw links between formal elements of architecture and the political messages that they were meant to convey.

The term *form* is taken to imply the categories of space and surface. With regard to space, the Arch of Victory was the centrepiece of the Piazza della Vittoria. As a major urban project, the Piazza was laid out in 1926–36 on unbuilt land facing Genoa's Brignole train station that belonged to the local council, and which was designated as part of municipal plans to organize the city (fig. 2).¹¹ Situated at the centre of the Piazza, the Arch was the result of a public competition, which Piacentini won in collaboration with the sculptor Arturo Dazzi in 1924. Built between 1925 and 1931, it functioned as a triumphal arch that celebrated Italy's victory in the Great War, and as a monument to Genoa's fallen soldiers, whose remains were accommodated in a crypt below. Thus, the Arch was part of a larger campaign of propaganda whereby the fascist authorities erected monuments across Italy in order that the memory of the dead might serve the aims of the regime.¹² By associating fascism with the Great War, it helped the fascists to appropriate its 'victorious' conclusion, and thereby to bolster their power.¹³ It also served to inculcate myths associated with sacrifice and heroism, and to promote an agenda founded on nationalism, imperialism, and militarism. To those ends, space was used to frame and to embody specific political meanings.

Given the original plan for the Piazza della Vittoria of 1924, it is evident how clarity and symmetry were deployed to create a sense of order (fig. 3). Radial axes, determined vistas,

¹¹ Moresco & Amirfeiz 1988; Cognoro & Falcidieno 2012, 75–78.

¹² Nicoloso 2015, 9–32.

¹³ Janz & Klinkhammer 2008, 55–60 & 81–99; Gentile 2009, 39–40 & 66; Foot 2009, 37–8.

and movement in accordance with an underlying grid were in line with the traditions of nineteenth-century planning as propagated by the French *École des Beaux-Arts*, which were previously deployed by a number of ‘liberal’ governments. However, within the context of Italy’s dictatorship, the orderly arrangement of the plan might be taken to suggest the imposition of fascist power – an idea supported by Piacentini’s statement, in 1929, that architecture serves ‘to maintain the political order’.¹⁴ From the establishment of the one-party state in 1925, the fascist authorities subscribed to the totalitarian ambition to control all aspects of Italian life, and to unite the Italians within a homogeneous community.¹⁵ Urban planning reflected and reinforced that notion of an ideologically coherent society.¹⁶ In the Piazza in Genoa, the sense of spatial unity might be seen to express the idea of a united nation, or of an Italian population bound together under fascism. Like the fascist state, that the spatial structure is also hierarchical, as its major spaces are organised to reinforce the significance of the Arch, the Piazza as a central space, and the main axis.¹⁷

As with the spaces and voids, the masses of the Piazza della Vittoria follow an orderly arrangement. In terms of its size, the Arch is in scale with its surroundings, and was described as ‘well located’ by a contemporary critic.¹⁸ Piacentini designed the layout of the piazza so that the height of the Arch is the same as that of the encircling buildings, and is also equal to the distance from those buildings (fig. 4). The Arch conveys a sense of monumentality, which is enhanced by the fact that it is elevated on the podium that accommodates the crypt. At the time of its creation, the Arch was to be seen suggest triumph and ‘ascension’, and its upright stance suited the aim of celebrating the outcome of the Great War, and what was to be seen as a purposeful loss of Italian lives.¹⁹ In accordance with the brief of the competition, the design follows the typology of the triumphal arch, drawing on the historical meanings inherent in that typology. Specifically, it is quadrifrons, or four-sided, arch because it was meant to be

¹⁴ ‘*al mantenimento dell’ordine politico*’, interview by Alberto Simeoni published in *L’Impero* on 31 March 1929, and quoted in Nicoloso 2012, 55.

¹⁵ Cannistraro 1982, 539–542; Scuccimarra 2005, 692–696.

¹⁶ Ghirardo 1980, 124; Rifkind 2011, 504–6.

¹⁷ Papini 1931, 809; Mozzarelli 2002.

¹⁸ ‘*ben ambientato*’, Oppo 1931.

¹⁹ ‘*carattere ascensionale*’, Papini 1931, 808.

seen from different angles due its central position within the piazza. As a monument to victory, the triumphal arch was described by one prominent critic as the only acceptable format for the commemoration of the Great War.²⁰ That intention to foreground triumph, rather than loss, is highly significant. The war was a difficult and divisive memory in Italy, and was remembered by some as a triumphant success and by others as a pointless slaughter.²¹ The fact that it was a source both of pride and of regret split and destabilized Italy's society and political institutions. In the face of that fracture, the fascist leadership sought to reconcile public opinion by imposing a glorious memory of the war, spreading a rhetoric of victory, and writing its own nationalistic version of history. In addition, the triumphal arch evoked the fascist notion of *romanità*, or 'romanness', and exploited the idea of ancient Rome as a precedent and exemplar.²² Piacentini stated that he chose the arch as a model because its meaning would be obvious and would provoke feelings of 'exaltation' – a choice which was praised by Ugo Ojetti, one of the regime's most influential art critics.²³ Indeed, contemporaries took the arch's 'classical armour' to represent the power of the Roman Empire as inherited by fascist Italy.²⁴

That notion of *romanità* points to the second characteristic of form; that is, the surface or skin of Piacentini's arch, which combines the vocabulary of ancient Rome with the classicism of the Cinquecento. Contemporary descriptions invest great importance in those historical roots, which were highlighted by Piacentini's reference in a report to the Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio.²⁵ The design of the Arch reflected efforts to create an architectural language that united antiquity and the Renaissance, as highpoints of Italian culture, and which was meant to be the foundation for a national style that would unify local traditions under the banner of *romanità*.²⁶ To that end, the Arch had to be both traditional and modern, or embedded in native traditions and adapted to suit the demands of fascist propaganda. Thus, Piacentini re-invented the muscular classicism of Imperial and Renaissance Italy to suit the

²⁰ Papini 1931, 808.

²¹ Sabbatucci 2003; Foot 2009, 32–42; Janz 2002–3.

²² Arthurs 2012; Stone 1999a, 205–220.

²³ 'esaltazione', Forno 1986, 322–323; also quoted in Nicoloso 2012, 35–36; Ojetti 1924.

²⁴ 'armatura stilistica', Maraini 1931, 34. See also Papini: 1931, 808.

²⁵ Grosso 1931, 44; Papini 1931, 809.

²⁶ Etlin 1991; Nicoloso 2012, 9–19; Nicoloso 2015, 24. See also Papini 1931, 808.

status of a modern dictatorship – a re-invention which resulted from a process of adaption and revision. Writing in an architectural journal in 1931, one observer noted that, as the design evolved, Piacentini simplified ornament in accordance with basic laws of harmony and structure, and thus managed to avoid imitation and ‘stylistic formulas’.²⁷ Comparisons between the original design of 1924 and the finished product of 1926 show a reduction in the density of the detailing; for instance, in the decoration of the attic and the roundels (figs. 5-6). Such changes might have resulted from a need to economize, and from a strategy that was typical of a regime that sought to maximize ideological returns and to limit costs by restricting labour-intensive decoration in favour of mass and impact. However, they might also signal an urge to ‘update tradition’ by limiting details, clarifying the structure, and purifying classicism.

Despite the reduction of ornament, the Arch remains explicitly classical. If compared, for example, with Piacentini’s Arch of Victory in Bolzano of 1926–8, it is much more ornate and detailed (fig. 7).²⁸ The original design of Genoa’s Arch, of 1924, preceded that of Bolzano. Moreover, at Genoa, arches and columns were kept as explicit references to the past, whereas at Bolzano they were replaced by the fascist symbol of the fasces. In that respect, it might be argued that Genoa was a step in the process whereby classical ornament gave way to fascist vocabulary and developed into a new fascist *stile littorio* – a process that was fully realized at Bolzano.²⁹ As the *stile littorio* was meant to be the national style of fascist Italy, it is significant that, whereas Genoa was a municipal project, Bolzano was intended as a national monument to the Great War. According to one critic writing in 1931, the arch at Bolzano transformed traditional aesthetic elements into a new synthesis by removing all that was the superfluous, while the arch at Genoa retained all the ‘magnificent excesses of tradition’ to convey a ‘heroic and triumphant tone’.³⁰ For that reason, the conservative critic Cipriano Efisio Oppo preferred Genoa to Bolzano.³¹ It is also interesting that, whereas one commentator saw Genoa’s arch as anti-modern, another saw it as representative of ‘modern

²⁷ ‘*formule stilistiche*’, Grosso 1931, 44; see also Papini 1931, 808.

²⁸ On the arch at Bolzano, see for example: Etilin 1991, 404; Nicoloso 2012, 49–51.

²⁹ Etilin 1991, 404–448.

³⁰ ‘*magnifiche ridondanze*’, ‘*sonorità eroica e trionfale*’, Maraini 1931, 32.

³¹ Oppo 1931.

tendencies' in architecture.³² At a time when the regime's artistic sphere was dominated by debates between traditionalists and innovators, which expressed wider ideological differences, the Arch might be seen to strike an uneasy balance between modernity and tradition.³³ In any event, its style was invested with great political significance.

The hierarchical structures that were identified in the plan of Piazza della Vittoria are mirrored in the rhythms of the elevation of the Arch. The Arch's façade embodies a tripartite geometry with a dominant centre, which recalls the ancient Roman arch of Constantine (AD 315). The use of travertine and marble (the latter employed for the columns, friezes, and lunettes) is also in step with the classical tradition and its revival during the fascist period. The materials convey a sense of permanence and reflect the efforts on the part of the fascist authorities to assert legitimacy, strength, and endurance through architectural projects. The choice of materials also expresses the spirit of *romanità* and the intention to export the architecture of ancient Rome from the capital to Italy's regions.

The surface of the Arch is richly modulated.³⁴ This is a feature of the architecture, and of the sculpture; which, as noted in 1931, 'operates powerfully to endow meaning' to the Arch.³⁵ In fact, a programme of bas-reliefs and freestanding statues exhibits fundamental principles of fascist ideology. In line with the brief's demand that the arch be 'extensively decorated by sculpture', the double frieze maximizes the space for ornament and its didactic potential.³⁶ It incorporates vignettes by the sculptor Arturo Dazzi that showcase military life through a series of emblematic scenes that represent, for instance, the assaults on the Isonzo and Piave rivers (figs. 8–9). Narrative in character, the scenes present a 'summary' of the Great War and a record for future generations.³⁷ One contemporary critic likened them to the narrative scenes found in churches, in that they were meant to explain mysterious and sacred events to common people.³⁸ Much praised in contemporary accounts, the deep and rounded texture of the reliefs augments their power to express. That plasticity, and the resulting effect of

³² '*moderna tendenza*', Grosso 1931, 44.

³³ Ciucci 1982, 348–366; Etlin 1991, xxiii, 377–390; Nicoloso 2012, 59–66.

³⁴ Maraini 1931, 34.

³⁵ '*L'opera di scultura agisce potentemente a dare significazione*', Oppo 1931.

³⁶ '*ampiamente decorato da sculture*', quoted in Papini 1931, 808.

³⁷ Maraini 1931, 40; Oppo 1931.

³⁸ Papini 1931, 809.

chiaroscuro, helped to increase visibility from the ground, and enhanced the ideological impact of the narrative.³⁹ The reliefs' muscular weight also contributed to expressing the myth of war as a noble event. Contemporary descriptions use the terms *eroismo*, *fervore*, *vitalità* (heroism, fervour, vitality) and one observer noted with satisfaction the absence of representations of 'physical pain' and 'conventional pity', stating that 'the thought of death never threatens the work, even at the most terrible moment in the fight' (fig. 10).⁴⁰ In fact, pain, injury, and death, as the inevitable consequences of conflict, are depicted in a sublimated fashion. Meanwhile, the repetition of vertical and diagonal lines gives a sense of order, purpose, and forward-motion to the fighting, recalling the Futurists' exaltation of war as a dynamic, regenerative act and 'the only hygiene of the world'.⁴¹ That soldiers are shown as an undifferentiated mass represents the unity of the people and the equality of 'a war [...] where the peasant and the aristocrat died of the same machine gun'.⁴² The absence of individualization suits the representation of war as a timeless, symbolic act, but it might also be taken to suggest the annihilation of individual identities under a dictatorship.⁴³ The white monochrome surface of the reliefs underlines references to antiquity, the uniformity of the soldiers, and meanings that were intended to mythologize, idealize, and aestheticize warfare.

As with the architecture, sculpture combines tradition and modernity (fig. 11). On one hand, there is an interest in modern technology, as evidenced in the depiction of an airplane – flight being a theme that was also dear to the Futurists. On the other hand, there are the classical figures by the sculptor Edoardo De Albertis that represent poetic allegories. Moreover, a detail in the reliefs shows Piacentini holding a model of the monument, and Dazzi stretching his hands towards Piacentini, in an idealised representation of the collaboration between the architect and the artist (fig. 11, far right). Equally, the contemporary press stressed repeatedly that the Arch achieved a harmony between art and architecture, and one critic described that relationship as complimentary, rather than of competitive.⁴⁴ Whereas it seems that Piacentini

³⁹ Papini 1931, 808.

⁴⁰ 'dolore fisico', 'pietismo convenzionale', 'Il pensiero della morte non incombe mai sull'opera, nemmeno nella fase più tremenda della lotta', Grosso 1931, 47.

⁴¹ The quote derives from F.T. Marinetti's 'Manifesto of Futurism' that was published in *Le Figaro* in 1909.

⁴² 'tutto un popolo che lavora', 'una guerra [...] ove il contadino e l'aristocratico morivano della stessa mitraglia', Oppo 1931.

⁴³ Scuccimarra 2005, 694–695.

⁴⁴ Grosso 1931, 45.

was able to ensure that artists fulfilled the goals of the commission, those comments may also have been motivated by a desire to show consensus, or unity of intent.⁴⁵ Critics underlined how the project showed the ‘unanimity’ among architects and sculptors of the regime.⁴⁶ Although that uniformity of purpose was rarely achieved throughout all aspects of the regime, unification and control of the arts was important to the fascists’ grip on culture as an instrument of power.⁴⁷

In that struggle for unity, or an appearance of cohesion, religion also played a prominent part. One of the vignettes on the Arch shows soldiers at Mass, and highlights the alliances between the Catholic Church and fascist state that were formalized by the Lateran Pacts of 1929 (fig. 12). Those alliances were founded on relatively common ideological principles, and on shared interests. The use of sacred imagery reflected the status of fascism as a ‘political religion’ that appropriated instruments of propaganda from the Church.⁴⁸ In that the nation replaced God as the object of faith, fascism operated as a movement whose symbolism was partly borrowed from Catholicism. Religious resonances re-appear in a scene that depicts nurses of the Red Cross tending to an injured soldier, whose position recalls the iconography of Christ’s entombment (fig. 13). The wounded are compared to Christ in the sense that their sacrifice was thought to aid the redemption of the nation – an association which underlines the importance of martyrdom, or the idea of dying for the fatherland. In effect, the ‘cult of fallen’ was a significant element of fascism as a political religion. Thus, the religious imagery continues in the lunettes designed by Giovanni Prini, and in the crypt and its sacred rituals in the form of a crucifix by De Albertis.⁴⁹ The reliefs by Prini on the underside of the arch contrast with those of Dazzi on the exterior in that their forms are relatively ‘softer’. They represent peace through an iconography that is imbued with religious resonances; notably, in the representation of a soldier returning to his family, and an ox that might be said to recall the Nativity (fig. 14). Contemporaries described the sculpture through language that relied on references to gender, identifying Dazzi’s depiction of war with ‘virile vigour’, as opposed to

⁴⁵ On Piacentini’s relationship with artists, see: Greco 2010, 40–42. On the nature of consensus, see Santomassimo 2002.

⁴⁶ ‘*unanimità*’, Ojetti 1924.

⁴⁷ Stone 1999b.

⁴⁸ Gentile 2009, 66–74.

⁴⁹ Oppo 1931.

Prini's feminine, 'sweet', and 'rounded' images of peace (fig. 15).⁵⁰ As identified in a description of 1931, Dazzi's reliefs show the 'energy' and 'impetuousness' of battle, while Prini's represent 'sacrifice' and 'submission'.⁵¹ Together, they depict both sides of war, the soldier's heroism and the sacrifice endured by his widowed wife or grieving mother, but in a manner that is subservient to the militarist agenda of fascism. Moreover, whereas fascist ideology valued masculinity and its expression in war, it is also significant that war, rather than peace, is given prominence on the arch's exterior.

Formal characteristics, such as space, geometry, and colour, can carry social codes relating, for instance, to hierarchy, consensus, war, and manhood, and can be used to communicate political meanings. Those aesthetic elements can be basic or abstract, as exemplified by form, colour, scale, texture, and proportion, or they may be figurative, symbolic, or narrative. Thus, for instance, the colour white might carry subliminal suggestions of purity or cleanliness, but it might also point to the classical tradition. When run together, the abstract elements of space and surface can yield narrative or figurative meanings, as signals are woven into networks of cognitive and physical reactions.⁵² Both the abstract and the figurative can carry meanings that are relatively common and stable in time. However, whereas the universality of abstractions may, in part, be underwritten by human biology and the mechanics of perception, narrative forms are more likely to be culturally, politically, or ideologically specific. Thus, meanings drawn from architecture may be subject to context, and the codes carried by a stable physical configuration may change in space and time.

Similarly, political meanings are not fixed in time and place, and architecture must be seen, not as a generator of meanings, but rather as a carrier of codes that are generated through social processes; that is codes that may be returned through architecture into a socio-political system. The political content of buildings is also determined by language as an allied source of meaning. Language surrounds architecture as another system of signs. For example, the web of textual references that is wound around the Arch includes reports, guidebooks, journals, and newspapers. From its initiation until today, that surrounding literature expressed, and shaped, interpretations of the political symbolism that was embedded in its architecture and sculpture. It helped to convert form into meaning and influenced the

⁵⁰ '*vigoria virile*', '*dolcezza*', '*soffice*', Maraini 1931, 38; '*vigore maschio*', Papini 1931, 809.

⁵¹ '*vitalità*', '*sacrificio*', '*sottomissione*', Maraini 1931, 36–38. See also Oppo 1931 and Papini 1931, 809.

⁵² Arnheim 1954; Gombrich 1960.

processes through which architecture conveyed political messages. Those meanings also concerned uses; for example, in the form of rituals and ceremonies held by the fascist authorities that aided the translation of functions associated with the monument into propaganda. Whereas the axial plan of the piazza may be taken to suggest a sense of order, meanings associated with space and form were supported through use; particularly, through processions held, for instance, on occasion of the monument's inauguration in 1931.⁵³ A film shot by the Istituto Luce to record that event shows a cortege composed of military personnel, local dignitaries, and fascist party officials processing along the piazza's central axis and through the main opening of the arch.⁵⁴ The route of the march affirmed the hierarchical layout of the piazza, and the prescribed path may be compared with the spaces of pilgrimage and church architecture, and the choreography of a sacred space. The elevation of the monument on a podium may have conveyed a sense of ascension, as the ceremony of inauguration maintained and reinforced political messages that were embedded in the piazza. Whereas use strengthened the political meanings inherent in the object, language contributed to the translation of both use and architectural form into a network of intended signs. Again, the roles played by language and use may be tied to the question of how the political functions of architecture might be recognised, and whether they are specific to a context and its time. The form of a building might be largely preserved, but its use and the surrounding language are likely to change over time. This suggests that the construction of political meanings in architecture is determined by the politics of the present, even when form remains largely unchanged. Thus, in time, architecture loses its original political meanings and takes on new layers of significance – a fact which has implications for the heritage of Piacentini's architecture. After the Second World War, and like many other buildings throughout Italy, the Arch was 'de-fascistized' and stripped of some, but not all, of its fascist symbolism.⁵⁵ Whereas the most obvious symbols, the fasces, were removed (see fig. 16), the rest of the monument was left intact despite its explicit political symbolism. However, although physically the arch has remained mostly as it was, its use and interpretation have evolved. Changes in politics and culture mean that the propaganda that was once embedded in the architecture is now largely forgotten, while not entirely lost from view. On the other hand, the

⁵³ Connerton 1989, 47.

⁵⁴ <https://youtu.be/mswsISIR0CU>.

⁵⁵ Arthurs 2010, 119.

teenagers and dog-walkers that currently populate the piazza do not appear to be receptive to the militaristic and imperialistic message expressed by the monument.

That process whereby political meanings change, and ultimately fade, can be traced in the reception of Genoa's arch, as it was expressed in guidebooks and newspapers. At the time of its inauguration, the arch was hailed by the influential critic Cipriano Efisio Oppo as 'a work of very high significance' and was received by the press with a degree of interest that was remarkable, even considering the extent of the controls and censorship exercised by the regime.⁵⁶ That interest waned after the fall of fascism, as is shown by comparing successive editions of the authoritative guidebook to Liguria, which was produced by the Touring Club Italiano. The edition that was created during the dictatorship, in 1933, describes 'a triumphal Arch, by the architect Marcello Piacentini, dedicated to the Fallen and to the Italian victory'.⁵⁷ It provides an extensive description of the iconography, noting the inclusion of Mussolini in one of the scenes. Subsequent editions, published in 1952 and 1967, do not mention the relief depicting Mussolini, nor the fact that it had since been 'decapitated' and replaced by the inscription 'EXECUTED BY THE PEOPLE ON 28 APRIL 1945' (fig. 17).⁵⁸ Interestingly, while the guides omit any reference to fascism, they also omit any reference to its backlash, suggesting that the memory of anti-fascism proved to be as divisive as that of fascism.⁵⁹ In acknowledgment of ideological changes, post-war editions identify the Arch as 'of the Fallen', instead of 'triumphal', thus avoiding the nationalistic triumphalism of fascism.⁶⁰ Yet the fact that post-war editions retain the lengthy description of the sculptural programme, which first appeared in 1933, points towards an enduring interest in the monument. In any case, that description was dropped from more recent editions, of 1982 and 2007, which note the existence of a 'rhetorical' arch, but not its meaning.⁶¹ The guides show how the political significance of a building may diminish, as its context changes, and ideology and the collective memory move on. Having lost its political power, the Arch may

⁵⁶ Oppo 1931.

⁵⁷ *'un Arco trionfale, dell'arch. Marcello Piacentini, dedicato ai Caduti e alla vittoria italiana'*, Touring Club Italiano 1933, 128.

⁵⁸ Touring Club Italiano 1952, 160; Touring Club Italiano 1967, 160.

⁵⁹ Ballone 1997.

⁶⁰ *'ai Caduti'*, Touring Club Italiano 1952, 160.

⁶¹ Touring Club Italiano 1982, 255; Touring Club Italiano 2007, 255.

retain its aesthetic appeal; although, its current state of neglect and disrepair is attested by the fall of significant quantities of plaster in December 2014.⁶²

To conclude, the aim of this paper was to question the manner in which Piacentini's architecture was fascist, and whether it could have remained fascist after the fall of the dictatorship. To that end, the paper explored Piacentini's triumphal arch in Genoa in an attempt to uncover how architectural form functions as political propaganda. Dividing form under the two headings of space and surface, it sought to expose the way in which form operates on both abstract and figurative levels to express political meanings – meanings which are also determined in relation to use and language. Clearly, much of the political baggage that was carried through form was specific to the context of the fascist regime, and has been lost over time. That political meanings in architecture are not fixed is significant in terms of the controversy that surrounds Piacentini's architecture. It also has important repercussions on how we think about the architectural heritage of fascism, and about questions of whether to preserve buildings that were once associated with a dictatorial regime.

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⁶² Meoli 2014 & 2015.

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