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Questioning the idea of difficult heritage as applied to the architecture of Fascist Italy

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Mussolini's regime sought to change the mindset of Italians by shaping their environment through architecture and urban planning. As such, Fascism had a visible impact on Italian cities in the form of large urban projects, individual buildings, monuments, inscriptions, and decorative features. As a tangible legacy within the spaces of everyday life, these remnants point to the difficulty, or impossibility, of shaking free from the past. Thus, on the surface, Fascist-era architecture presents a typical case of 'difficult heritage' in the form of sites that were tied to the dictatorship, but are also indestructible elements of Italy's patrimony.¹ This is a physical heritage that cannot be fully erased due both to its ubiquity, and its historical and artistic value. That heritage is difficult because it may elicit troubling or divisive memories, but also because it reflects an ideology that is at odds with the values of today's Republic. Nonetheless, across Italy today, Fascist-era buildings persist without markers or signage, and prompt little comment or controversy (Figure 1). Their presence within cities, towns, and villages implies that they have been quietly absorbed into the urban fabric and the collective memory. In Italy, a substantial amount of daily life takes place within Fascist buildings or sites, but few tend to notice. For instance, we may ask whether many commuters rushing to reach Brignole Station in Genoa observe the Fascist symbolism as they pass the giant Arch of Victory (Figure 2).² In short, as a number of Fascist sites appear to have been comfortably integrated into national heritage, this invites the question of how dealing with difficult heritage can be markedly *easy*.

This chapter aims to challenge the idea of difficult heritage as it is applied to the architecture and urban projects of Fascism. Thus, it first touches on how to define the concept of difficult heritage and then tests its applicability to sites of the Fascist period; and finally, it suggests how the limitations associated with any such definition might be overcome. This chapter does not contend

¹ Sharon Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and beyond*, London 2009, pp. 1–4.

² Hannah Malone, "Marcello Piacentini: A case of controversial heritage", in *Architecture as Propaganda in Twentieth-Century Totalitarian Regimes. History and Heritage*, ed. Håkan Höckerberg, Florence 2018.

that the concept of difficult heritage is invalid or inappropriate. Rather, the objective is to highlight the risks of applying that concept to architecture, and how such risks might be avoided. To this end, the chapter looks to empirical case studies, and to theory relating to architecture, meaning, and memory.

To begin with a definition, difficult heritage has emerged as a shorthand to describe sites whose historical associations are contested and problematic, but which are too important to be destroyed, ignored, or forgotten. Variants of this idea define heritage as dissonant, undesirable, ambivalent, or negative.³ In practice, difficult heritage is an approach used within an international and interdisciplinary framework, and which has been applied to buildings, monuments, artworks, and other objects by researchers working in the fields of history, art history, anthropology, and heritage studies. Although these different disciplines vary in their focus on ‘objects’, symbols, or heritage devices, there is a common tendency when dealing with architecture as difficult heritage to cast buildings as carriers of signs and memories from a difficult past.

Until recently, historians have investigated the impact of the Fascist dictatorship on Italy’s political, economic, and legal structures, but they have mostly overlooked the imprint left upon its cities. However, this is now changing with a growing body of work on the urban remnants of Fascism – work which generally adheres to the paradigm of difficult heritage.⁴ Certainly, the concept offers a useful way to talk about the ambiguities inherent in Italian attitudes to the Fascist legacy, but the term *difficult* is by no means capable of covering all responses to Fascist remains from 1945 until today. More often, the architecture of Mussolini’s regime has been neglected or re-used with few alterations; and from the 1990s there have also

³ The genealogy of this idea can be traced through: J. E Tunbridge and Gregory John Ashworth ed., *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict*, Chichester 1996; Sharon Macdonald, “Undesirable heritage: Fascist material culture and historical consciousness in Nuremberg”, in *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 12, 1 (2006), pp. 9–28; William Logan and Keir Reeves, *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with “Difficult Heritage”*, London 2008; Macdonald 2009 (note 1).

⁴ See among others: Håkan Hökerberg, “The Monument to Victory in Bolzano: desacralisation of a fascist relic”. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 23, 8 (2017), pp. 759–74; Nick Carter and Simon Martin, “The management and memory of fascist monumental art in postwar and contemporary Italy: the case of Luigi Montanarini’s Apotheosis of Fascism”, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 22, 3 (2017), pp. 338–64; Hannah Malone, “Legacies of Fascism: Architecture, Heritage and Memory in contemporary Italy”, *Modern Italy*, special issue ‘The Force of History’, 22, 4 (November 2017), pp. 445–70; Nick Carter and Simon Martin, ed., *Modern Italy*, special issue ‘The Difficult Heritage of Italian Fascism’ 24, 2 (May 2019); Kay Bea and Stephanie Pilat, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Italian Fascist Architecture* (London: 2020). For a dissenting view, see: Joshua Samuels, “Coming “To Terms” with Sicily’s Fascist Past”, in *Heritage Keywords: Rhetoric and Redescription in Cultural Heritage*, ed. Trinidad Rico and Kathryn Lafrenz Samuels, Boulder 2015, pp. 111–28, here pp. 111–4.

been an increasing number of restorations. In effect, the survival of Fascist sites across Italy can be read in different ways. Some observers claim that such buildings could be kept because they posed no threat to democracy, having lost their symbolic power following the fall of those who built them.⁵ However, the fact that, at various points during the post-war period, Fascist-era architecture has sparked intense political debates refutes this thesis.⁶ More likely, the presence of Fascist remains indicates a reluctance, or inability, to deal with painful memories that are met with a sense of amnesia or paralysis.⁷ The presence of such remains may also be taken as a sign of enduring Fascist tendencies in Italy's political culture. Therefore to some extent, the ease with which Italians have dealt with relics of the dictatorship may be symptomatic of the difficulty posed by a confrontation with the past. Yet, in itself, this narrative does not explain the variety of responses to Fascist-era buildings, nor does it account for the influence of factors beyond history.

Practicalities, aesthetics, and heritage

Fascist-era buildings survived, not only for political motives, but also for practical and economic reasons. The regime built a substantial portion of Italy's infrastructure, including ports, banks, schools, railway stations, post offices, police headquarters, and government buildings. In post-war Italy, there was little money for construction, so major institutions continued to occupy buildings that were created under the regime. For instance in Mascali, a Fascist new town in Sicily, the municipal council, primary school, kindergarten, train station, and a Fascist-era church continued to serve the functions for which they were built in the 1930s, following the removal of some, but by no means all, Fascist symbols (Figure 3). In effect, such buildings remained because they served other functions besides political propaganda.⁸

⁵ John Follain, "Italy needed fascism, says the new Duce", *The Sunday Times* (11 May 2008); Lucy Maulsby, "Drinking from the River Lethe: Case del Fascio and the Legacy of Fascism in Postwar Italy", *Future Anterior* 11, 2 (2014), pp. 18–39, 29, 32–3.

⁶ One example among many is: Simona Storchi, "The ex-Casa del Fascio in Predappio and the question of the 'difficult heritage' of Fascism in contemporary Italy", *Modern Italy*, special issue "The Force of History", 24, 1, pp. 139–57.

⁷ Joshua Arthurs, "Fascism as 'heritage' in contemporary Italy", in *Italy Today: The Sick Man of Europe*, ed. A. Mammone and G. A. Veltri, London 2010, pp. 114–28 and "'Voleva essere Cesare, morì Vespasiano': The Afterlives of Mussolini's Rome", *Civiltà Romana: Rivista pluridisciplinare di studi su Roma antica e le sue interpretazioni* I (2014), pp. 283–302; Max Page, "The Roman architecture of Mussolini, still standing", *Boston Globe* (13 July 2014); Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "Why are so many Fascist monuments still standing in Italy?", *New York Times* (5 October 2017); Massimo Baioni, "Demolire il littorio: Tragitti della simbologia fascista nell'Italia repubblicana", *Memoria e Ricerca*, 63, 1 (2020), pp. 181–94.

⁸ Tim Benton, "From the Arengario to the Lictor's Axe: Memories of Italian Fascism", in M. Kwint, C. Breward, and J. Aynsley (eds.), *Material Memories: Design and Evocation*, Oxford 1999, pp. 199–218.

At the same time, practical excuses can also hide ideological imperatives. For instance, while recent proposals to transform the former Fascist Party headquarters (Casa del Fascio) in Como into a museum or cultural centre promised economic benefits in the form of tourism, the leader of far-Right party La Lega, Matteo Salvini, adopted the proposal as part of his election campaign in 2018 on the basis of its political advantages.⁹ Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that, from the end of the Second World War until today, economic factors have often prevailed over other considerations in the handling of Fascist heritage.

There were major variations between Italian regions, which resulted in part from the absence of national guidelines for the ‘de-fascistization’ of cities, as the erasure of Fascist traces. Those variations also arose from a lack of consensus around national history and local differences in the memories of Fascism, Nazi occupation, and the Second World War.¹⁰ For instance, the Arch of Victory in Genoa remained largely unnoticed and unchanged.¹¹ By contrast, the Arch of Victory in Bolzano (1928) attracted controversy due to the specific conditions of Alto Adige/South Tyrol and because the monument’s anti-German symbolism offended a local German-speaking population.¹² In 2014, a permanent exhibition of Fascist and Nazi history was installed within the monument’s crypt. In general, there were significant disparities in the treatment of sites depending of their ownership, context, uses, and aesthetics. On the whole, Fascist architecture was more likely to survive in low-profile or inconspicuous situations, or in spaces that are relatively private or inaccessible. Despite a tendency for research to focus on flagship projects such as La Sapienza University in Rome (begun 1935) and the Palazzo di Giustizia in Milan (begun 1934), Fascist Italy built a flurry of modest and functional buildings, such as offices or apartment blocks, where Fascist symbols remained undisturbed (Figure 4).

Since the 1990s, there has also been a growing tendency to preserve Fascist-era buildings for their aesthetics and heritage value, or to perceive them as art rather than as politics. From this

⁹ Lucy M. Maulsby, “Material Legacies: Italian modernism and the postwar history of case del Fascio”, “Dealing with Difficult Heritage: Italy and the Material Legacies of Fascism”, special issue of *Modern Italy* pp. 159–177, 171.

¹⁰ Claudio Fogu, “Italiani brava gente: The Legacy of Fascist Historical Culture on Italian Politics of Memory”, in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, ed. R.N. Lebow, W. Kansteiner, and C. Fogu, Durham, NC 2006, pp. 147–76, here pp. 149–50; John Foot, *Italy’s Divided Memory*, New York 2009, pp. 66–124.

¹¹ Malone 2018 (note 2).

¹² Gerald Steinacher, “Fascist Legacies: The Controversy over Mussolini’s Monuments in South Tyrol”, Faculty Publications, Department of History 144 (2013), <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub/144>; Hökerberg, 2017 (note 4).

point of view, it is convenient that Fascism coincided with a one of the most fruitful and innovative periods in modern Italian architecture. Buildings in the Rationalist style were easier to salvage because of their positive associations with modernism and progress, and their use of relatively neutral, less historicist, style.¹³ At the same time, architecture with a more traditional, or classical, aesthetic could be seen to represent an Italian tradition that was much older than Fascism. It is also the case, as Flavia Marcello has shown, that designers borrowed from Catholic art and architecture in order to imbue spaces for Fascist rituals with sacred power, which facilitated their conversion after 1945.¹⁴ This appreciation for the aesthetics of Fascist-era architecture has gone hand-in-hand with the turn towards preservation and arguments based on the value of heritage. Although this trend has saved sites of inestimable historic value, heritage can sometimes function as an ‘invisibility cloak’ that conceals unwanted associations and stifles any objections. There is also the fact that, although changes in use altered the meanings and identities of sites, there have been remarkably few examples in Italy of ‘critical preservation’ – that is, conservation coupled with the instalment of signs, information panels, exhibition spaces, and other heritage devices that re-contextualize the site.¹⁵ This strategy follows a belief, stemming from psychoanalysis, that confronting the past helps to support the formation of positive identities. While its efficacy remains unproven, it is internationally regarded as the golden standard of how to deal with a difficult heritage by acknowledging the site’s origins and by establishing a sense of distance that is attuned to current values.¹⁶

For instance in Rome, the Palace of Italian Civilization (Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana) was originally created in 1938 to house an exhibition that lauded the primacy of the Italian race, but since 2013 it has accommodated the headquarters of the luxury fashion label Fendi (Figure 5).¹⁷ The Palazzo belongs to a complex of monumental buildings erected for the universal exposition (E42), which was planned for the twentieth anniversary of the Fascist

¹³ Paolo Nicoloso, *Architetture per un'identità italiana: Progetti e opere per fare gli italiani Fascisti*, Udine 2012, pp. 15–19.

¹⁴ “Between censure and celebration: the decorative plan of the Casa Madre dei Mutilati in Rome (1926-1939)”, “Dealing with Difficult Heritage: Italy and the Material Legacies of Fascism”, special issue of *Modern Italy*, pp. 179–98.

¹⁵ An exception is the Arch of Victory (1928) in Bolzano: Höckerberg 2017 (note 4). For a definition of critical preservation, see: Gavriel Rosenfeld, *Munich and Memory: Architecture, Monuments, and the Legacy of the Third Reich*, Berkeley 2000, p. 279.

¹⁶ Carter and Martin, 2017(note 4); Sharon Macdonald, “Is “Difficult Heritage” Still “Difficult”?”, *Museum International* 67, 1–4 (2015), pp. 6–22, here pp. 13–4.

¹⁷ Malone 2017 (note 4), pp. 457–8; Baioni 2020 (note 7), pp. 193–4.

regime in 1942, but later cancelled due to the war, after which the complex formed the basis for a new district of Rome under the name of EUR. As a modernist variation on a classical theme, the Palazzo is also known as the square colosseum. On one hand, observers have justified the Palazzo's 'rehabilitation' by pointing to its value as heritage and art. On the other hand, what is deemed to be beautiful is always socio-political. It is also hard to forgo all knowledge of a building's past, or to consider, in purely aesthetic terms, buildings that were designed to be profoundly political.

While it could appear to be apolitical, the preservationist 'turn' of the 1990s drew from an ideological shift that marked the end of the Cold War and of the anti-Fascist consensus that had dominated Italian politics since 1945, and which allowed for a rehabilitation of Fascism and for the emergence of a new Right. Within this evolving political landscape, revisionist and nostalgic attitudes towards Fascism, which had never entirely gone away, facilitated a revalorization of Fascist-era buildings. That political background does not detract from the need to consider aesthetics, heritage, and practical and economic issues when dealing with Fascist sites. In fact, the label 'difficult heritage' can project political or ideological problems onto sites that for locals are not necessarily problematic. While the concept presupposes a legacy that is consistently difficult, the physical remains of Fascism were rarely viewed in exclusively negative terms. Rather, they elicited a range of responses that included, for example, an appreciation of their economic value, beauty, age or usefulness.

Multiple meanings

Those who think that inherited sites lost their political influence in 1945, and those who fear that sites may continue to convey Fascist messages, disagree on a fundamental point: that is, the manner in which architecture communicates.¹⁸ Mussolini and Hitler invested heavily in building projects because they believed that architecture could express ideas that would endure for future generations.¹⁹ However, while architecture has a substantial capacity to communicate, its meanings are being constantly rewritten. This is because meaning resides, not in the buildings

¹⁸ For an overview of the literature on architecture and its meaning, see: William Whyte, "How Do Buildings Mean? Some Issues of Interpretation in the History of Architecture", *History and Theory* 45, 2 (2006), pp. 153–77; Patrick Malone, *Architecture, Mentalities and Meaning*, London 2017. For a different perspective, see: Lucy M. Malsby, "Material Legacies: Italian modernism and the postwar history of case del Fascio", "Dealing with Difficult Heritage: Italy and the Material Legacies of Fascism", special issue of *Modern Italy*, pp. 159–177, 171.

¹⁹ Sharon Macdonald, "Words in Stone?: Agency and Identity in a Nazi Landscape", *Journal of Material Culture* 11, 1–2 (July 2006), pp.105–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183506063015>.

themselves, but in the minds of the observers, which respond to current cultural, political, and economic conditions. In addition, sites mean different things to different individuals and groups and when perceived in local, national, and international contexts. Thus, while one individual might see the toxic residue of a dictatorship, another may see a convenient resting spot or parking place.

Nevertheless, today some observers still see Fascist sites as preserving meanings and identities that relate to their creators, however faded or lost to history.²⁰ However, in architecture, meanings evolve as in any language; some words or symbols fall out of use and become incomprehensible, while others retain something of their original significance. For example, Mussolini created the Piazza Augusto Imperatore in Rome as a statement of imperial power after the foundation of the Fascist Empire in 1936.²¹ The area around the ancient mausoleum of Emperor Augustus was cleared, the nearby Augustan Ara Pacis was reconstructed, and the site was framed with new buildings (Vittorio Morpurgo, 1937–41). The iconography of *romanità* (romanness), which equated Mussolini with Augustus, permeated the style and decoration of the Fascist elements of the project. Today, few observers may fully understand its meanings, although they may recognize the linear style and white stone as an example of Fascist aesthetics. Yet, when in the early 1990s Rome's centre-Left administration proposed to replace the Fascist-era pavilion that contained the Ara Pacis with a new museum designed by the American architect Richard Meier, the site became an ideological battleground as Right-wing groups opposed any rejection of the Fascist past. Thus, the site acquired new meanings that were related to the original intentions under Fascism, but which were also coloured by the political conflicts of the 1990s.²² In essence, such buildings did not cease to communicate, but they came to 'speak' a new language as people revised their meanings in the light of an immediate context.

Certainly, political meanings that are tied to a particular power structure are less durable than aesthetic meanings that are carried by factors such as form, proportion, colour and the elements of style, but which are unlike style in that they have a relatively neutral social

²⁰ Reinhart Koselleck, "War memorials: identity formations for survivors", in Reinhart Koselleck and Todd Samuel, eds., *The practice of conceptual history. Timing history, spacing concepts*, Stanford 2002, pp. 288, 294.

²¹ For full details of the site's origins and recent controversies, see: Malone 2017(note 4), pp. 455–6; Arthurs 2010 (note 7), pp. 114–5; Aristotle Kallis, "'Framing' Romanità: The Celebrations for the Bimillenario Augusteo and the Augusteo—Ara Pacis Project", *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, 4, pp. 809–31.

²² Malone 2017 (note 4), p.446.

content.²³ Arguably, the aesthetic characteristics of Fascist-era architecture, such as scale or the colour white, are more likely to constitute the lasting coinage of Fascist history than, for example, the ideology-laden shrines of Fascist martyrs. As regime change renders political symbols obsolete, aesthetics steps up to fill the gap. Equally, as politics moves on, certain signs may no longer be understood in political terms, although they remain aesthetically meaningful. Even so, this does not mean that the architecture of Fascism lost its political charge, as is obvious given the interest shown by Right-wing groups – and indeed, most Italians may continue to recognize key political insignia such as the fasces and eagle.

While the notion of difficult heritage suggests a reluctance to handle the relics of Fascism, or an element of shame, contemporary politics lends that task an apparent ease. A case in point is the *casa del mutilato* that was built as a club for disabled ex-servicemen in Catania in 1939, and which survives as high-quality art and architecture that is imbued with Fascist ideals of war and heroism (Figure 6). When the site was vacated in 2006, heritage and art experts called for building's preservation as a monument.²⁴ Nonetheless, after state authorities backtracked on a plan to turn the building into a public museum, whether due to financial difficulties or political risk, private developers bought the building for use as a hotel. Later, support for the preservation of the building came from a different part of the political spectrum when, in 2017–19, two neo-Fascist groups, CasaPound and Spazio Libero Cervantes, protested separately against the building's disrepair and the planned conversion.²⁵ The protestors deployed the slogan 'history must not be erased' (*'La storia non si cancella'*), which had long been used by neo-Fascists in such cases. By equating historical remains with history itself, this catchphrase allows protestors to present themselves as protecting the past; and specifically the memory of 'our Heroes of the Great War', from erasure at the hands of liberal politicians and property developers.²⁶ For such activists, the Fascist past is a source of pride, rather than of difficulty. As highlighted by Joshua Arthurs, there are parallels in the

²³ Koselleck, 2002(note 20), p. 325.

²⁴ <https://www.fondoambiente.it/luoghi/casa-del-mutilato-hall-centrale>.

²⁵ Katya Maugeri, "Casa del mutilato nel degrado. CasaPound: "La storia non si cancella"", *Sicilia Network* (25 April 2017), <https://www.sicilianetwork.info/casa-del-mutilato-nel-degrado-casapound-la-storia-non-si-cancella-catania/>; "Cervantes: "No alla svendita della Casa del Mutilato"", *Catania Today* (19 November 2019), <http://www.cataniatoday.it/cronaca/cervantes-no-svendita-casa-mutilato-13-novembre-2019.html>; "Casa del Mutilato, Comune e Regione aprono per l'acquisizione del bene", *Catania Today* (26 November 2019), <http://www.cataniatoday.it/politica/casa-del-mutilato-comune-e-regione-aprono-per-l-acquisizione-del-bene-26-novembre-2019.html>.

²⁶ *'nostri Eroi della Grande Guerra'*, "Cervantes" 2019 (note 25). For an earlier use of this slogan in 1960, see: Malone 2017 (note 4), p. 463.

USA and beyond as white supremacists and others oppose the removal of monuments associated with racism and slavery as tantamount to the censorship of history.²⁷

In response to pressures from the far Right, a councillor of the ‘post-Fascist’ party Fratelli d’Italia initiated the process for the city to purchase Catania’s *ex-casa del mutilato*. While this would enrich the architectural patrimony of the city, it shows how both extremists and politicians are highjacking heritage to promote Right-wing agendas. Evidently, the danger lies not in the survival of Fascist-era architecture but in how it is used by political forces. It is also clear that, while threats emerge more from the present than from the past, that fact may be lost as debates focus largely on questions of history.

For some, difficult heritage rests on the idea that Fascism is akin to a virus and Fascist heritage must be isolated in order to shut down channels of infection. Equally, left-wing observers view the current surge of the far Right in Italy, and elsewhere, as a return of earlier ideologies.²⁸ As such, they call for monuments to be demolished, or altered in way that hinders the power of Fascism to communicate. Crucially, though, the Fascist ‘virus’ has mutated to suit contemporary conditions. Thus, the presence of Fascist sites does not constitute a threat itself because the risks are rooted in current political forces, rather than in the past. As Fascist heritage is recycled to serve new political ends, it is essential for the protection of democracy to discuss how it is used, and how contemporary politics deploys competing visions of history.

Multiple memories

Another limitation of the difficult heritage debate is that it focuses on associations with Fascism, while buildings are rarely, if ever, associated only with the Fascist period. Many such sites are also connected with antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, or the Risorgimento. For instance, in the Piazza Augusto Imperatore in Rome, memories of Fascism mingle with those of other periods, and Fascist-era buildings are flanked by the mausoleum of Emperor Augustus, seventeenth-century churches, and the Ara Pacis museum (completed

²⁷ “The anatomy of controversy, from Charlottesville to Rome”, “Dealing with Difficult Heritage: Italy and the Material Legacies of Fascism”, special issue of *Modern Italy* 24, 2 (May 2019), pp. 123–38.

²⁸ ‘The anatomy of controversy’ 2019 (note 27). See also: Hannah Malone, “The fascist virus is back again”, *Renewal: a journal of social democracy*, 28, 3 (2020).

in 2006). Even the Fascist new towns, or *città di fondazione*, which were built on largely vacant sites, followed classical, medieval, and Renaissance models of architecture and urban planning.²⁹ In short, Fascist interventions represent only one layer in the urban landscape.

It is also worth defining more precisely the difficult heritage of Fascism in terms of architecture. Relevant definitions may include any building of Mussolini's era that was created by the Fascist state, Fascist Party, and related bodies, or for reasons of Fascist propaganda. However, such sites were rarely associated only with the Fascist regime, as opposed to another institution. For instance, the Arch of Victory in Genoa, which was built to commemorate fallen soldiers of the First World War, is also a monument of the military. Similarly, the Church of St Anthony in Predappio, which was constructed in the same year, is primarily associated with the Vatican, even though its façade is decorated with fasces (Figure 7). Significantly, many sites have other non-Fascist identities, which allowed for the meanings associated with those sites to be adjusted after 1945.

The Fascist military cemeteries of the First World War that were created in 1929–39 offer a striking example of multiple identities (Figure 8).³⁰ Known as *sacrari*, these cemeteries were built along the former frontlines in north-eastern Italy to accommodate the re-buried remains of soldiers who died in battle. Having lost their original function as arenas for the staging of Fascist rituals, the *sacrari* have been re-invented as patriotic monuments of Republican Italy. Although symbols of a difficult history, from the late 1970s they were comfortably adopted as part of the national heritage; in part, because they bear associations other than those with Fascism. As monuments of the First World War, they hold meanings relating to death, religion, and patriotism. They also have separate identities as local or regional monuments. Accordingly, public documents that promote the ossuaries as heritage sites now tend to ignore or downplay their Fascist origins, focusing instead on their 'positive' connections with the First World War. This strategy may be taken as a sign of how, in the case of monuments with 'alternative identities', a selective process of remembering can shift attention away from associations with Fascism and minimize the difficulty of the past. The paradigm of difficult

²⁹ Diane Ghirardo, *Italy*, London 2013, p. 116.

³⁰ Hannah Malone, "The Republican legacy of Italy's Fascist ossuaries of the First World War", *Modern Italy*, special issue, "Difficult heritage: Negotiating the architectural and artistic legacies of Fascism in post-war and contemporary Italy", 24, 2 (March 2019), pp. 199–217, <https://doi.org/10.1017/mit.2019.7>.

heritage rests on relationships between architecture and the collective memory or public mind.³¹ Of course, architecture is more than a vehicle for memories in that it serves many other functions. However, even in terms of memory, a Fascist-era building is never just a symbol for memories of Fascism. Generally, it bears a range of associations: some of which derive from its economic, practical, aesthetic, or heritage value, while others stem from its associations with different institutions and periods; which may include changes in the physical or symbolic status of a building that occurred after the period of its inception.

Palimpsest

A better way to think about the Fascist legacy is as a palimpsest rather than as difficult heritage. The image of the palimpsest, borrowed from literary theory, presents major advantages as it accounts for the fact that, from their creation, sites are layered with various meanings or narratives.³² Across the post-war period, those narratives reflect the periods through which a building passes, the different political and cultural contexts that influence its interpretation, and the communities and collective memories through which it gathers various associations. Like a palimpsest, those narratives are also constantly erased or re-written. With the passage of time, memories that are originally associated with a building may be lost and, in the meanwhile, new meanings may emerge. The metaphor of the palimpsest suggests a stratification of meanings and memories that evolve to suit different sets of conditions. Moreover, some of those meanings are formed, not by the buildings themselves, but by their representations in photography, film, or other media. Each generation adds a layer to the symbolic ‘sandwich’. Shifting energies may highlight or diminish different layers, and groups and individuals may privilege different associations. Through physical changes, or re-engineered associations, it is possible to obscure the Fascist layer of the palimpsest, or to downplay Fascist associations in favour of other less problematic connections. This process

³¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, Paris 1997, pp. 183–236. See also, for instance: M. Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments*, Cambridge, Mass., London 1996.

³² Christine Brooke-Rose, “Palimpsest history”, in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation, Tanner Lectures in Human Values*, ed. Stefan Collini, Cambridge, pp. 125–38; Sarah Dillon, “Reinscribing De Quincey’s Palimpsest: the Significance of the Palimpsest in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Studies”, *Textual Practice*, 19 (3), pp. 243–263, doi: 10.1080/09502360500196227; Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, 2003, p. 7; R. J. B Bosworth, *Whispering City: Modern Rome and Its Histories*, New Haven 2011, pp. 1–9; Foot 2009 (note 10), p. 4; Macdonald 2009 (note 1), pp. 191–2.

of re-coding has allowed many buildings, such as the Palace of Italian Civilization in Rome or the Fascist cemeteries of the First World War, to be re-purposed and re-imaged as cultural heritage. Such revisions may or may not be reflected in the physical form of the building. Meanwhile, the trope of the palimpsest can also account for divisions in the national memory and for the existence of competing historical narratives. Thus, preservationists might focus on the artistic value of Rationalist architecture, public authorities might emphasize the economic benefits of re-use, and far-Right groups might speak of the glories of Fascism. In any case, interpretations may involve the assimilation of the past, but they will all be shaped by current forces.

The palimpsest approach is particularly well suited to Fascist urban projects in that, as observed by the historian Aristotle Kallis, they were in fact designed to connect different historical periods or layers in the urban landscape.³³ As exemplified by the Piazza Augusto Imperatore, the excavation, isolation, and re-framing of earlier monuments was not intended to strip the city back to the past, but rather to bring a layered history together with a new Fascist layer. This was evident, for instance, in the opening of major avenues, such as the Via dell'Impero (now, Fori Imperiali) in 1932 and the Via della Conciliazione in 1936, which appropriated major sites of ancient and papal Rome as 'renewed' monuments.³⁴ Fascist sites drew energy by association with previous eras of Italian history, such as ancient Rome, the Renaissance, the Risorgimento, and the First World War. Thus, the aim was not to stop the clock but rather to employ time and history in support of the regime. Fascism embraced an ahistorical notion of a timeless present in line with the idea that history belongs to the now, as theorised by the philosopher Giovanni Gentile.³⁵ In the same way, previous periods of Italian history lived on in Fascist-era architecture through the adoption of historical styles, sites, and sources.

Especially in the period before 1936, artists and architects working for the regime did not seek to revive tradition, but to give it a modern spin; as evidenced by the reinvention of the ancient Roman Colosseum as the Palace of Italian Civilization. The layered nature of many Fascist projects means that it can be difficult to identify, or to scrape off, the 'Fascist' layer.

³³ Aristotle Kallis, *The Third Rome, 1922–1943: The Making of the Fascist Capital*, Basingstoke 2014, pp. 2–3, 102–3.

³⁴ Kallis 2014 (note 33), pp. 85–6; Terry Kirk, "Framing St. Peter's: Urban Planning in Fascist Rome", *The Art Bulletin* 88, 4 (December 2006), pp. 756–76.

³⁵ Claudio Fogu, *The Historic Imaginary: Politics of History in Fascist Italy*, 2003 pp., 3–4.

For example, the Ostiense station (1938) in Rome is composed of different layers of meaning, which are always undergoing processes of revision (Figure 9). The station may be associated with Fascism, the State Railways (Ferrovie dello Stato), the early twentieth-century boom of railway technology in Italy, and with Hitler for whose visit to Rome the station was built. There are also meanings that stem from the building's economic value as a centrally located site, its practical function as a transport hub, and its aesthetics as rooted in both antiquity and modernity. The notion of architecture as a palimpsest provides a viewpoint from which to perceive these different layers that have been constantly erased and rewritten. To be clear, this approach does not mean to ignore connections with Fascism, but rather to look beyond narratives that are rooted in a single historical period. While the concept of difficult heritage is particularly helpful when considering associations with Fascism, the palimpsest offers a complementary approach that can integrate the Fascist origins of a site into the broader span of history. Thus, a major advantage of the palimpsest is that it offers a platform for programmes of 'critical preservation' that acknowledge the complexities of meaning and memory in architecture.

There is also the question whether these issues regarding the framework of difficult heritage are specific to Italy; a question that can be addressed through a comparison with Germany and the architecture of National Socialism – a heritage that is perhaps more difficult than the Italian case.³⁶ As one-time allies, Italy and Germany faced similar challenges after the Second World War in terms of what to do with the architecture created under the Fascist and Nazi dictatorships. As in Italy, there has been significant variation in Germany, not only throughout the post-war period, but also between regions and especially between East and West Germany in the period of division (1949–90). National differences led to a situation in which more remains of the legacy of Italian Fascism than German Nazism; even allowing for the fact that more was built in Italy and less was destroyed by bombing. While, in Germany, the allies implemented a programme to excise signs of the dictatorship, in Italy the task fell to the Italian authorities but remained largely unfulfilled. Faced with the option to keep, alter, or destroy, authorities in Germany lent towards demolition, defacement, landscaping, or other policies that camouflaged the remains of Nazism, at least in the period up to the 1980s. In

³⁶ Rosenfeld 2000 (note 15); M. Burström and B. Gelderblom, "Dealing with Difficult Heritage: The Case of Bückeberg, Site of the Third Reich Harvest Festival", *Journal of Social Archaeology* 11 (2001) pp. 266–82, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469605311417054>; Gavriel Rosenfeld and Paul Jaskot, *Beyond Berlin: Twelve German Cities Confront the Nazi Past*, Ann Arbor, Mich. 2008; Harald Bodenschatz, "Schwieriges Erbe - in Nürnberg Und Rom", *Merkur* 69 (1 January 2015); Malone, 2017 (note 4), pp. 452–3.

contrast, Italy favoured neglect or re-use. From the late 1980s, Germany shifted towards critical preservation, becoming a world leader in strategies that transform a difficult legacy into a useful reminder.³⁷ Meanwhile, Italy also shifted towards preservation but without the addition of historicizing devices. For instance, in Berlin, the Topography of Terror exhibition was established in 1987 on a site that had previously been occupied by the offices of the SS and Gestapo, and next to which the building created for the Ministry of Aviation (now, Finance) in 1935–6 still stands. Conversely, in Rome, the Air Force Ministry (1934) has been subject to little in the way of critical preservation. Thus, while the end of the Cold War marked a turning point in both Italy and Germany, the two countries have followed divergent paths throughout the post-war era in spite of their entangled histories in the 1930–40s.

Arguably, in comparison to Italy, Germany has achieved a more open approach to the past.³⁸ However, due to the specificity of national conditions, one nation cannot be easily judged in relation to another. It is also reductive to interpret the German case as a success story on the basis of flagship projects, such as the Topography of Terror exhibition, which displays national history for a German and international audience. Often, lesser-known sites across Germany differ from the nation's high-profile cases. For instance, on the German island of Rügen the sea resort of Prora was built in 1936–9 as a holiday camp for the Nazi leisure organization Kraft durch Freude (Strength through Joy) and also as a potential military hospital (Figure 10). Four and a half kilometres long, the enormous resort was meant to accommodate up to 20,000 people. Two small private museums document the site's history under National Socialism and the German Democratic Republic. Recently restored, a section of the complex now offers luxury seaside accommodation within 'a world famous monument' – which shows how in Germany, as in Italy, financial interests may prove stronger than pressures exerted by history.³⁹ Similarly, in 2020, public opinion was split over a controversial suggestion to remove Nazi-era sculptures from the stadium built by Hitler for the 1936 Olympics.⁴⁰ The proposal was timely given the rising tide of far-Right extremism in Germany and the electoral successes of the AfD Party, but it was also

³⁷ Sharon Macdonald, "Is "Difficult Heritage" Still "Difficult"?", *Museum International* 67, 1–4 (2015), pp. 6–22, herep. 7, <https://doi.org/10.1111/muse.12078>.

³⁸ Bill Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past: United Germany and the Legacy of the Third Reich*, London 2003.

³⁹ <https://www.neues-prora.de/>; <https://www.ndr.de/geschichte/schauplaetze/Prora-Der-Koloss-von-Ruegen-prora113.html#ddr>;

⁴⁰ Peter Strieder, "Weg mit diesen Skulpturen!", *Die Zeit* (13 May 2020), <https://www.zeit.de/2020/21/ns-architektur-propaganda-kunst-olympiagelaende>; David Crossland, "Berlin split over calls to bulldoze Aryan statues at Hitler's stadium", *The Times* (28 May 2020), <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/row-over-nazi-sculptures-that-still-stand-at-berlin-stadium-8x8v6q0dk>.

convenient for those who wished to make way for the construction of a new stadium. Once again, practical factors have complicated efforts to ‘tame’ a difficult heritage. These are individual examples, but they show how the treatment of Nazi architecture has been uneven across Germany and dependent on local and immediate influences. Thus, while the paradigm of difficult heritage is apt, its singular focus can create problems even when applied to a textbook case such as the legacy of Nazism.

Conclusions

In using Fascist-era architecture as a testbed for the concept of difficult heritage, this investigation has identified weaknesses in terms of a lack of latitude and objectivity. As argued, the term ‘difficult’ might mean looking for difficulties where they do not exist, or favouring that which is difficult over other reactions to a site. Researchers interested in difficult heritage have focused mainly on buildings as metaphors for the past, rather than as architecture that has been subject to a broad and complex range of reactions and intentions. This approach can fail to account for the pressures stemming from practical issues, economics, aesthetics, and heritage – pressures which explain why local agents do not always view heritage as ‘difficult’. There is also the fact that the associations attached to Fascist-era buildings vary between individuals and in accordance to current conditions, which, in turn, can lead to generalizations involving regions, building types, and political and cultural contexts. In addition, for example, the architecture of Fascism was rarely associated solely with the regime, but more often held associations with other institutions and historical periods. In short, while focusing on Fascism, an approach rooted in difficult heritage can miss the influence of alternative factors, meanings, and memories

Nevertheless, these considerations do not undermine the idea of difficult heritage, which provides a useful and valid ‘window’ onto the subject, especially with regards to sites inherited from defunct dictatorships. In fact, this approach is particularly useful when sites are commonly viewed as emblems of the past. Yet, in framing the topic in terms of difficulty, that window limits perspectives and obscures alternative interpretations. Instead, it is better to think of buildings and sites as palimpsests that have been overlaid with different meanings and memories. The image of the palimpsest can be used to explain the complex ways in which Italians have concealed or amended their Fascist heritage – for instance, by shifting attention to other historical periods, less troublesome identities, or alternative narratives focused on art or

economics. As the meanings carried by architecture are inevitably transitory and dynamic, the palimpsest offers a more holistic and flexible model that can be used to expose a wide flux of events and imperatives. Rather than superimposing a single perspective, this approach may be more inclusive in that it can account for the varied reactions of different groups, including on the Right. In fact, acknowledging the role played by current politics is key to efforts to combat the misuse of Fascist sites for political ends, and to facilitate strategies of critical preservation. Moreover, while this investigation has focused on architecture, we may draw similar conclusions for other material legacies of the Fascist era, such as those related to art. Fascism left a mark upon urban space and rural landscape, upon collective memory and public consciousness, but the contours of that mark are vague and unstable and cannot be easily demarcated as difficult heritage. Overall, there is no single reading of the Fascist legacy, nor a catch-all method through which it may be understood. Yet, it may be possible to avoid some of the pitfalls of applying the model of difficult heritage by drawing on the idea of the palimpsest.