An Italian way to modern urbanism: plan for the fascist foundation cities

Graziella Fittipaldi

Department of Civil Engineering and Architecture, Polytechnic of Bari, Italy

ABSTRACT

In the Twenties, in Italy, the fascist regime initiated a work of foundation of new urban centers. The birth of the new city was linked to the desire to create a new arrangement of the territory, from the morphological and economic perspective. It was developed a model of territorial settlement that included three scalar passages of intervention (the capital, the rural town, the rural village).The common elements to the idea of the city typical of this experience was related to the relationship with the history of Italian town planning and with the territory.

In the first case, the reference to typical elements of the Italian cities:

- the square as representative center of social and political life, but also as a center of urban design;
- the relationship between street and urban block;
- the use of archetypal elements, such as the bell and the civic tower (which recalled the image of the Renaissance city and the birth of the municipalities), the arcade (as unifying element between the buildings);
- the use of town planning schemes of classical origin, revised according to the theories of Camillo Sitte;
- the revival of the aggregative logics of the historic urban fabric.

The relationship with the territory was instead emphasized through:

- the adoption of regional routes as main paths of urban design;
- the relationship between the shape of the city and land contours;
- the relationship with the improvements carried out to reclaim wetlands.

The paper, after a historical and design common principles analysis, both urban and regional level, examines the principal urban patterns, classifying them according to the type of main routes and their relationship with the central square (linear, radial, cross-shaped, with bayonet paths schemes) and with the urban fabric, through interpretative drawings and comparative synthesis, suggesting design ideas for contemporary urban planning.

Keywords: Cities of foundation, urban design, territorial model, urban scheme, urbanism.

INTRODUCTION

Why it can be interesting to analyze the Italian experience of the new towns, built during the Fascist period? The historical importance of the models developed for the new city is given by the following factors:

First, they represent a significant example of an organic approach to urban planning; organic because the designer conceived simultaneously and synthetically both the urban design and architectonic form, defining the shape of all buildings.

Second, because they represent a rare example of ex-novo designing, on a territory still to be urbanized, devoid of historical stratification (generally swampy territories, newly reclaimed).

At the same time, however, the designers sought a relationship both with the history of Italian cities, both with the surrounding area. The relationship with history was sought through reference to some of the typical elements of the Italian cities:
-       the square, as a representative center of social and political life, but also as the center of the design of the city;
-       the close relationship between road and urban block, which is never denied, but always remains stronger (ratio between building height and width of the road, continuity of the built front, form and function of the ground floor, etc.);
-       the use of typical elements, such as the arcade, the bell tower and the tower, recalling the Renaissance city and the birth of the cities themselves;
-       the revival of the logical aggregation of layered historical urban fabric, their hierarchy of routes that structure the Forma Urbis;
-       the revival of urban design models, derived from classical urbanistic, the Roman one in particular (scheme with cardo and decumanus).

The relationship with the territory was present through:
-       the adoption of local paths, used as structuring elements of urban design;
-       the choice to lean on the local infrastructure, created to reclaim the territory (sewage systems, railway junctions and small towns for the workers);
-       finally, the relationship with the morphology of the land, from the orographic point of view, in particular for the linear system city.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The ideological premises of the work of the foundation of the new town were all contained in the Ascension speech, delivered by Mussolini on May 26, 1927, which was illustrated his idea of economic development of Italy. The situation was as follows: it was an ongoing widespread economic crisis, which would have resulted in the crisis of '29. Unemployment levels were very high, particularly among the veterans of the First World War. Agriculture was still based on large estates, with industrialization concentrated in large urban centers (Milan, Turin, Genoa), which attracted people from the countryside. This process generated degraded residential suburbs, while simultaneously encouraging unionization of the workers and the emergence of opposition movements to the fascist regime. The economic goals of the fascist regime were as follows:
-       re-boost agriculture, as the engine of the Italian economy;
-       redistribute land holdings without contradicting the great families of owners, often supporters of the regime;
-       evacuate the city, to avoid the problems of the suburbs and the emergence of trade union formations.

That's why we decided to drain large areas of marshland, at the same time solving the problem of malaria. Also, starting an intense building activity, it could re-absorb unskilled unemployed. Obviously, the regime exploited this titanic work for propaganda, either through specialized magazines, with newsreels and especially with the art. Numerous art works were commissioned to decorate and furnish public buildings; art works which were required to tell the reclamation and foundation of the cities. To make

stronger the relationship to art, was also the coincidence with the artistic ideals of some avant-garde movements, particularly with Futurism. This artistic movement saw realized its ideals of victory of man over nature, the rapid progress, fast and revolutionary, as well as the machine aesthetic ideal (through airplanes and idrovore images). Another artistic movement he saw realized his aesthetic ideals was the Metaphysical painting. The image chosen for the foundation of the city (arcades, towers, rurality), directly recalls some pictures of Metaphysics, with the use of arcades, pure forms, warm colors.

THE TERRITORIAL MODEL

The management of the work of the foundation was entrusted to the O.N.C. (Fighters National Organization), which prepared a manual, which listed typological schemes for urban design, typological schemes for residences, minimum provision of services in proportion to the size of new cities.

The territorial model involves three different settlement scales:
- the capital, new or existing;
- the rural towns (sized for 50 families), arranged around the capital;
- the rural villages (sized for 20 families), arranged around rural
towns.

The idea was to disperse the facilities in the territory, with decreasing scale. In any urban center, they were attended by the town hall, school, church and House of the National Fascist Party.

The goal was to create a territorial system, based both on the division of the land into estates and on the achievement of a mesh of widespread urban centers. These urban centers, in descending scale, could help the urban facilities to be dispersed throughout the land. The scheme involved a series of scalar passages, with a progressive increase in services offered to the population: from the elementary cell formed by houses scattered on farms, to the rural village offering a first set of basic services, then to the rural town offering all services.

MODELS FOR NEW CITIES

Depending on the local context, on the orography and the design intent, for the new towns they were adopted different foundation plan. All this plans were marked by the role played by two main elements: the towers and the squares. The towers represent vertical elements with multiple functions, both at local level and urban areas. In fact, the foundation of the city were generally made in lowland areas, wetlands previously, now reclaimed. In a substantially horizontal and flat landscape, the vertical element of the tower became the visual signal of the presence of the city. At the urban level, the tower establishes relationships with pathways, indicating the position of the central square. It is the heart of social and political life. The square is in fact the place in which the religious and political powers show their social role: the representative buildings (Town Hall, the House of National Fascist Party and the church) are always arranged in the central square, with the first two in a prevailing position. In other cases, they were made two distinct squares, one for buildings with politicaladministrative function, the other one for those with religious-educational function.

The first type of urban plan that we analyze is the linear one. Obviously, the reference is not to the ideal linear city designed by rationalism (Le Corbusier, Milyutin, Soria y Mata), but to a model determined by the shape of the ground. In fact, these cities were leaning along the ridge or valley trails, thus assuming a linear shape.

Arsia (designer: Pulitzer Finali, 1936/37)

Arsia born as a village for the workers from the nearby coal mine, and is built in the Carpano river gorge. The system is based on two paths, parallel to the creek; the first one cuts the main square, placed in barycentric position regarding to the plan itself. Typologically are distinguished two zones, one for the workers, the other one for executives. The first lie to the south, with houses with 2 levels and garden; the second to the north. The central square is on two quotas; the church joins the same quotas by a retaining wall and by the staircase of the churchyard. There are already some of the themes that will characterize all the squares of the new towns:

- the arcade, as a unifying element of all the buildings that overlook the square;
- the tower, as a vertical emerging element, establishing visual relationships not only with the square but also with the urban routes.
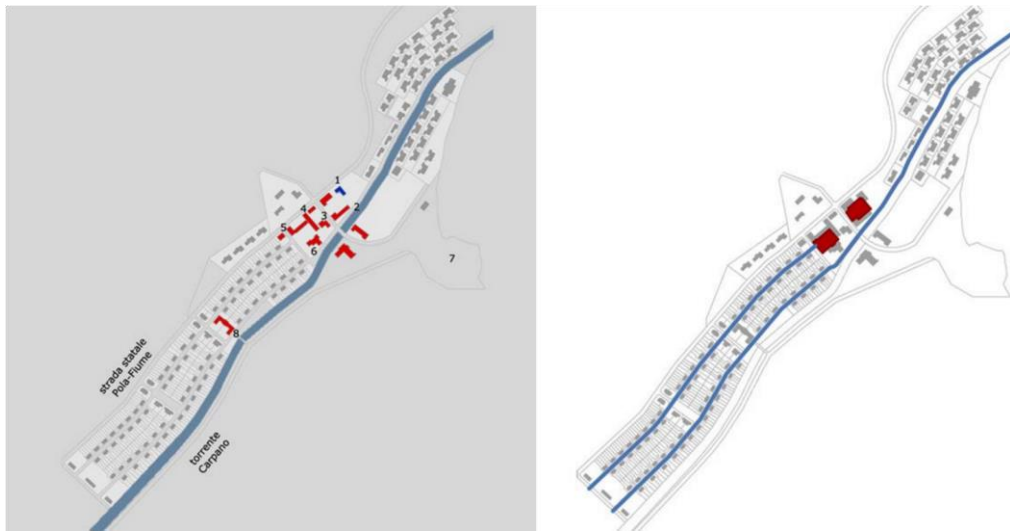
Figure 1: Arsia

Carbonia (designers: Guidi, Valle, Pulitzer Finali, 1938)

Even this city was built for the miners. Unlike the first, it is set on a pathway along the ridge, with the square that is positioned in the high altitude. The system repeats the characteristics of Arsia, with the main path that follows the ridge through the square. The residential part is spread linearly along the way, while the public specialist buildings are concentrated in the central square.

Figure 2: Carbonia

Pomezia (designers: 2PST, 1938/39)

In this city, the linear system is complicated by the introduction of a second path, orthogonal to the first one. The central square is arranged in a decentralized manner with respect to both routes: the main one runs through it, while the orthogonal one ends in a built backdrop. At the intersection of the two paths, is placed the civic tower, which is detached from the building, being joined to only by a low podium arcade.

PLAN WITH BAYONET JOINT OF THE PATHS

The second type of scheme is characterized by the bayonet joint of the paths from the central square. This fact has consequences from the architectural point of view: the entry path in the square is offset respect to its prosecution; then the road has always a solid element as backdrop, consisting of a building. Generally, at this point it was located a vertical element, or bell tower, which was the backdrop to the road axis.

Aprilia (designers: 2PST, 1936/37)

In the town of Aprilia, the central square looks with a very complex structure from this point of view: the main route has the civic tower as backdrop; it splits on the opposite front, and continues through the two arcades flanking the House of National Fascist Party, also with a small tower. The church has tangentially to the main path, with separate belfry in the more lateral position. The secondary path has an even more staggering, and it is exactly in line with the civic tower; the latter one is isolated from the rear building (the city hall). Also in this case an arcade unifies all the buildings.

Figure 3: Aprilia

Sabaudia (designers: Piccinato, Montuori, Cancellotti, Scalpelli, 1933/34)

The scheme adopted repeat the same Aprilia plan shape. In this case, the civic tower, once detached from the building, is the pivot for the offset with bayonet joint of the paths. One of two main routes closes visually against the church, whose facade is marked by a deep vertical incision.

Incoronata (designers: Calza Bini, Nicolini, 1939/43)

Even in the Apulian city, you encounter the same way of organization of urban design. The difference to the other analyzed models is made from the Town Hall: this building is the keystone of the offset of the paths, and is disposed in the middle of the square, dividing it into two parts. The City Hall is made up of a pure stereometric volume, with the basement marked by deep parabolic arcades.

Segezia (designer: Petrucci, 1939/42)

Classic example of cruciform plan with a central square and pathways with bayonet joint. The bell tower serves as backdrop to the path, while the City Hall visually closes the other one. Both buildings develop the theme of the repetition of a single architectural element:
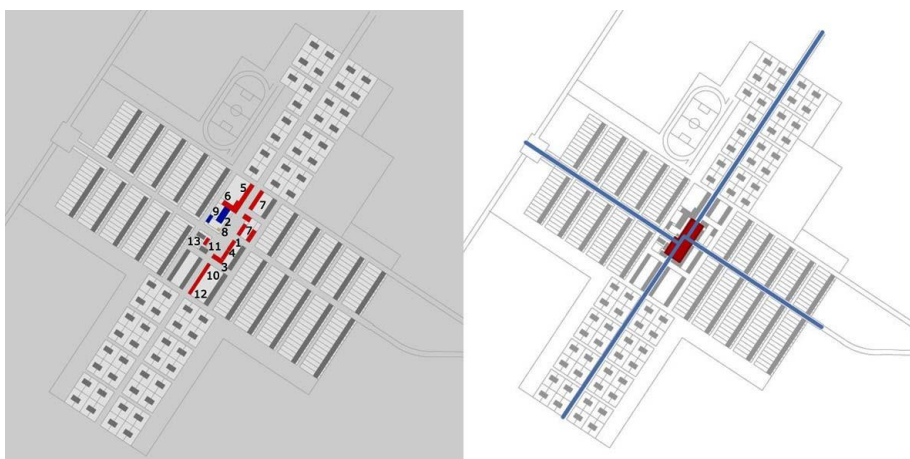the lintel trilith for the bell tower, the arch to the town hall.

Figure 4: Segezia

CRUCIFORM SCHEMES WITH AXIAL INSERTION OF THE PATHWAYS

This type is derived directly from Roman urbanism: it reminds the diagram on cardo and decumanus that characterized the Roman military camps and was also applied to the ancient Roman city.

Pontinia (designers: Pappalardo, Frezzotti, 1938/39)

The city is characterized by two distinct squares: the first one is reserved to the political power, the second one to the religious power. The common element to both squares is made by the arrangement of pathways: one is always passing, crossing the square; the other one has as, a visual backdrop, the most important building, the church and town hall, respectively.

From the aerial photo it is clear the different depth of perspective, that regulates the entire composition of the architectural volumes: to the maximum visual depth (generated by the axiality of more longer pathways) correspond the maximum vertical height (generated by the visual closure of the path, given by arrangement of the bell or the civic tower). The tower becomes the generating element of the entire urban design.
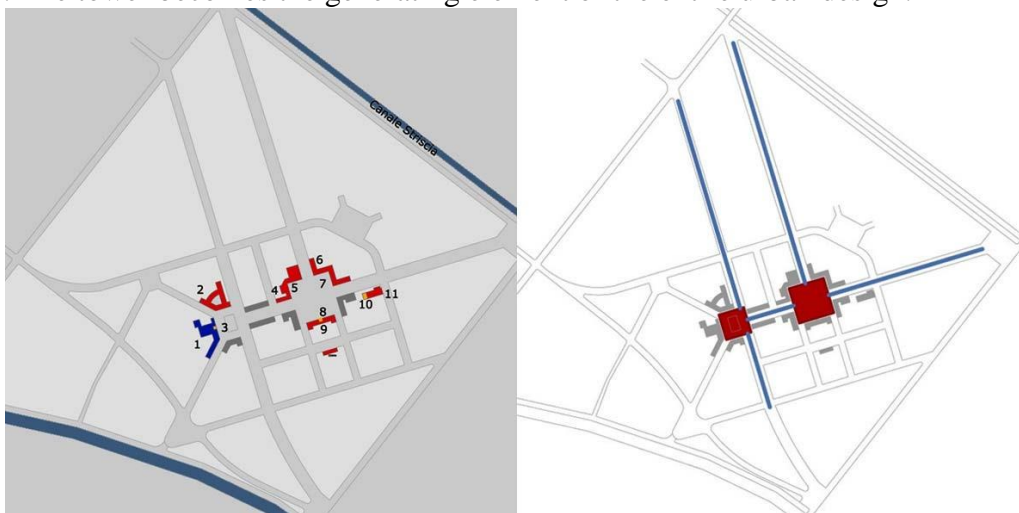

Figure 6: Pontinia

SQUARE ARRANGED TANGENT TO THE PATHWAYS

The last type of foundation plan examined provides the layout of the main square tangent to one of the paths. An example is the scheme used on the cities of Guidonia.

Guidonia (designers: Calza Bini, Cancellotti, Nicolosi, 1933/34)

In the Pontine city, we find the civic tower that serves as a hinge both for the buildings and the routes of the main square. But it must be underlined the rationalist style that characterizes the whole city, in particular the adoption of the pilotis instead of the arcade. The choice of this language was due to the desire to give a modern image to the city, as it was designed to accommodate the soldiers and officers of the nearby Air Force Base.

Figure 5: Guidonia

CONCLUSION

The paper shows that the experience of fascist foundation city represents a unique case in the European urban scene of the early Twentieth Century, particularly for adopted urban models. In fact, the listed characteristics represented an Italian specificity, in contrast to the models developed particularly in Northern Europe, inspired by new rationalist theories. Nevertheless, this experience may have still highly topical: in fact, its main value is due to the organic approach to urban planning. The figure of the designer was unique, both in level of urban plan that with regard to the design of the buildings and of the main squares. This ensured a close relationship between the forma urbis and the architecture of the city. A return to a more organic approach would also be desirable for contemporary urban planning.

REFERENCES

[1] Cederna, A.(1979) Mussolini urbanista. Laterza, Bari, Roma.

[2] Ciucci, G. (1989) Gli architetti e il fascismo. Architettura e città 1922-1944. Einaudi, Torino.

[3] Corvaglia, E. & Scionti, M. (1983) Il piano introvabile. Architettura ed urbanistica nella Puglia fascista. Dedalo, Bari.

[4] Cucciolla, A. (2006) Vecchie Città/Città nuove. Concezio Petrucci 1926-1946. Dedalo, Bari.

[5] Culotta, P., Gresleri, G. & Gresleri, Gl. (2007, Eds.) Città di Fondazione e Plantatio ecclesiae. Editrice Compositori, Bologna.

[6] Fittipaldi, G., Scricco, F. (2014). New models for the foundation cities in Puglia and Basilicata. In Bovati, M., Caja, M., Floridi, G. & Landsberger, M. (2014, Eds.), Cities in transformation. Research & Design. Ideas, methods, techniques, tools, case studies. Padova: Il Poligrafo, pp. 676-684.

[7] Massaro, G. (2005) Dai tentativi di bonifica alle città nuove. Novecento, Latina.

[8] Pennacchi, A. (2003) Viaggio per le città del duce. Asefi, Milano.

[9] Scricco, F. (2014). The foundation cities during fascism in Italy: the radial plan of Littoria. In 2nd ICAUD International Conference in Architecture and Urban Design. Conference proceedings. Tirana: Epoka University, pp. 121-128.

[10]   Scricco, F. (2014). The founding of a city: construction techniques between innovation and tradition in Littoria. In 2nd ICAUD International Conference in Architecture and Urban Design. Conference proceedings. Tirana: Epoka University, pp. 481-488.

[11]   Sereni, E. (1971) La politica agraria del regime fascista. Feltrinelli, Milano.

[12]   Strappa, G. (2002) Nuove Città Mediterranee. In Besana, R., Carli, C. F., Devoti, L. & Prisco, L. (Eds.), Metafisica costruita. Le Città di fondazione degli anni Trenta, dall'Italia all'Oltremare. Touring, Milano.