case study - casa del fascio
Giuseppe Terragni’s Casa del Fascio was built in Como, Italy between 1936 and 1939. Commissioned by the Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF, or National Fascist Party) under the power of dictator Benito Mussolini, the building is one of many Case del Fascio erected after the party’s rise to power in 1922.

Terragni was a follower of the International Style and the Modernist school of thought, agreeing with the ideas of architects such as Le Corbusier, Gropius, and Mies van der Rohe: he became leader of the Gruppo 7, a group of young architects known as the “Italian Rationalists.”

Once completed, the Casa del Fascio was largely hailed as the successful culmination of a battle for the affirmation of modernist architecture, and “Terragni’s intention was to employ a newly elaborated notion of modern classicism to express Fascist spatial practice” (Storchi 232). However, as Eisenman argues, the Casa del Fascio resists identification as either Fascist or Rationalist, and is not easily categorized as such.
The four facades of the building appear to be composed in a simple and straightforward way, but there are layers of contextual and symbolic information at work in the formal strategies used by Terragni. Indeed, “in its role as the ‘glass house of Fascism,’ it was logical that the interior of the Casa del Fascio be expressed on the exterior. But the Casa is a building with an intricate set of interior spaces, requirements, orientations, and exterior spaces. The exterior facades could project and express numerous ideas about the building, and the problem for Terragni was how to express this diversity without losing harmonic unity” (Shumacher 167).

The entry (south-west) facade is the most simple and most monumental: “it is the official face to the city, rendered as a multi-storied colonnade, recalling the colonnades of antiquity and the Renaissance” (Schumacher167). Originally, the entry facade held a photomontage acting as a political billboard: “the panels were nostalgic and patriotic rather than radical, summoning up an interest in the past historic moments of Fascism, recalling triumphs, lives touched, and the role of the Duce above that of all others. The design explicitly projected the most salient feature of Fascism: the gigantic head of Mussolini hovered above the smaller figures in the other panels much as a marble head of Constantine on the Capitoline Hill symbolically loomed over the city of Rome” (Ghirardo 470). The rear facade recalls those facing gardens in certain Palladian villas, while the two side facades are equally subtle and complex.
context: politics and history

The Casa del Fascio functions as a state institution: it is not a place for dwelling. The open interior space and the front courtyard areas are meant to function as public gathering spaces for the people of the city. As a rule, the Case del Fascio were generally the only physical manifestations of the presence of the Fascist state within any given community, so the structures were given important symbolic significance. Terragni's Casa was meant to be restorative; “scaffolding intended to bridge a fictitious history connecting the Fascist state of Benito Mussolini to the Italian communes and the Holy Roman Empire” (Eisenman 9).

Paul Rudolph suggests one of the determinants of architectural form is the “peculiar psychological demands of the space,” and that “such necessities are met primarily through the manipulation of space and the use of symbols” (214). The spaces in the Casa del Fascio range from public to semi-private, and each is laid out in a logical manner regarding circulation and spatial sequence. The town hall configuration also symbolically gathers the “fragmented village and provincial loyalties under the umbrella of a supreme power, each small community having direct if not always immediate access to the national state through the offices of the Casa del Fascio” (Ghiraro 468-9).
The Casa del Fascio makes use of a number of typologies. Collectively, the Case del Fascio were meant to be the centers of the political and social life of the Fascist populace, and as such many of the Case utilized the typology of the town hall. Use of this model was intended to be “an identifiable and reassuring standard that held out a promise to restore a glorious past” (Storchi 235). In a sense, the building also functions as a monument to Fascism and national pride, and “the monument in the classical age is the center, it is the imago Dei, the figuration of a transcendent divinity that guarantees the consistency of time” (Morales 622-3).

In addition, Terragni drew from the typology of the Renaissance palazzo, referencing Italian architects such as Michelangelo and Alberti in a further attempt by the Fascists to connect to a glorious past. Indeed, in early drawings of the Casa del Fascio, Terragni includes a “rusticated base with rusticated pilasters around the entry, a low, hipped roof, and a secondary articulation, in the front and side facades, of the four volumetric corners typical of a Renaissance palazzo” (Eisenman 43). However, as Eisenman argues, the final scheme for the Casa “simultaneously reinforces these relationships between historical archetypes and Fascism and to disengage the work from them” (Eisenman 9). Truly, the Casa del Fascio is a unique artifact in Italian architectural history, borrowing from both classicism and modernism, but refusing to be defined by either.


