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.
facade

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.

visual dominance: south-west (entry) facade

1: caged void as object
2: gridded colonnade as object
3: front cage enclosing central void
4: closed surfaces on grid as object
5: upper open void as object
6: entry void as object

exterior: facade & elevation
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 Casa 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).
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.
The architecture of the Renaissance in Italy made use of anthropomorphic abstraction of the human form, specifically the male form, which was thought to embody the perfection and harmony found in nature. Como’s cathedral or Duomo represents this use of the body in architecture, as well as the primary sphere of influence in the town before the rise of Fascism: the Catholic Church.

The erection of the Casa del Fascio in the 1930s signified a shift in the spheres of influence in Como, as in all of Italy. The building was intended to be the party seat, as well as “the physical setting of the totally new propaganda, and the locus of the diffusion of the revolutionary idea” (Ghirardo 471). However, the utilization of the International Style, influenced by the modern movement and the Rationalists, also suggested a shift in the body politic of the town. The “modern body housed by modern architecture was not a single body but a multiplicity of bodies. The body was no longer a stable point of reference around which an architecture could be built” (Colomina 235). The modern body is fragmented and disjointed, the multiplicity of bodies echoed in the multiplicity of formal influences in the Casa del Fascio.
Arguably, the mere presence of construction, be it walls, columns, beams, or planes, defines and implies a sense of space. In addition, individuals’ experience of architecture has primarily been defined by their perception through vision. In fact, the “interiority of architecture more than any other discourse [defines] a hierarchy of vision articulated by inside and outside” (Eisenman 558). Interior and exterior are clearly defined in the Casa del Fascio, but the separation and/or inversion of these concepts allows for a different perspective and analysis to become possible.
il Duce: absence & presence

In one of the conference rooms of the Casa del Fascio, the figure of Benito Mussolini presided over every meeting. He was not necessarily present in the flesh, but rather a cut-out image of il Duce was situated at the head of the conference table, allowing his figure to be present despite his absence. This figure represented the unseeing eye of the Fascist government in Italy: a constant reminder that Mussolini was capable of knowing what was happening at all times and in all places, especially in the Case del Fascio.

After the fall of the regime, and to the present day, the place where Mussolini’s figure stood and presided over all meetings is covered with a wooden board which still bears the shape of the outline of a man. This is mirrored by the continued presence of the Casa del Fascio in Como, despite the fall of the Fascist regime, which remains present and in use but in a different capacity, and falling into disrepair and ruin. This suggests the idea of the modern body, which cannot be made “healthy” or whole - “it has finally recognized itself as an object whose finitude is ever in question, and whose powers are in doubtful play, always to be tested by the infiltration of other objects” (Vidler 8).

deconstruction/decay: fragmentation of the modern body

figure/body left behind (presence in absence)

the body: space, signifiers & fragmentation


