CARLO ENRICO RAVA-
"MEDITERRANEITA" AND THE
ARCHITECTURE OF THE COLONIES IN
AFRICA

... from our Libyan coasts to Capri, from the
Amalfi coast to the Ligurian Riviera, all shows
a minor architecture, ours and typically
Latin, ageless yet very rational, made of
white, flat cubes and large terraces,
Mediterranean and solar, and this seems to
show us the path where we might again find
our most intimate essence of being "Italians."
Our race, our lineage, our ancient and new
civilization is Mediterraneo: it is in this
"Mediterranean spirit" that we should then
look for the characteristic "italianità" that is
still lacking in our new rational architecture,
as certainly this spirit guarantees the re-
conquest of a primacy.1

In an article in Domus entitled "Svolta
pericolosa: situazione dell'Italia di fronte al
razionalismo europeo," Carlo Enrico Rava
spoke of the characteristically Italian
qualities which a modern and rational
architecture should seek—qualities which he
found expressed in the indigenous architecture
of the Mediterranean region. Published in
January 1931, this article was one of eight
published by Rava in Domus under the title,
"Panorama of Rationalism," a series of
writings which re-situated his views in
relation to other Italian rationalist architects
and the modern movement in general.2 In it he
proposed that architects were at an important
turning point wherein two distinct views of
rationalism could be identified in current
European trends. The first was the view of the
"intransigents"—pure, dogmatic, and
abolishing all individualism; the second was
the view of the "independents," unified
through their formal structure, but distinct
in their affirmation of national character,
culture, and race.

Identifying the first trend with the work of
Walter Gropius, Erich Mendelsohn, Ludwig
Mies Van Der Rohe, Le Corbusier, and Russian
Constructivism, and the second with Emil
Fahrenkamp, Heinrich Tessenow, Alfred
Soulek and the work at the 1930 Exposition in
Stockholm, Rava proceeded to pose the
question of how Italian rationalism should
advance in relation to these trends. Linking
the founding manifestos of Gruppo 7 of 1926-
27 with this first line of thought—with the
"dawn of rationalism" wherein the
renunciation of individualism, the
inevitability of production standards, and the

spirit of the series were proclaimed - Rava
suggested, "Now, after five years, the most
modern rational architecture has made
gigantic progress," and "a great liberty, a
sense of independence, of personal creativity,
is lawful and desirable, on the basis of the
most sane and sound rationalist laws." In
other words, Rava was suggesting that, as he
stated in the concluding article of this series,
"today, it is no longer a question of being
'rationalists'; it is only a question of being
modern Italian architects" guided by the
most profound sincere and independent
expression ... that affirms we are men of
today."3 In the face of what he perceived to be
the dogmatism of figures like Gropius and Le
Corbusier, Rava stated that Italian architects
should work, with "the joy of the liberty of
imagination," creating "according to their
race, their culture, their personality,"
suggesting that it was the "overly uniform
rationalist architecture of Europe" that
awaited "the gift of independent intelligence"
from the Italians.4

The intention here is to investigate this
"turning point" of Rava. We will study the
relation between this series of articles and the
earlier manifestos of Gruppo 7 and discuss the
trajectory of the term "mediterraneità" within
the discourse on modernity in Italian
architecture, the historical context in which
this term was constructed, and how it first
entered the debate over the nature of an
authentically modern architecture for the
Fascist state.

A second context to be considered is the
relationship between the term "mediterraneità"
and the polemics of Rava, Luigi Piccinato, and
Giovanni Pellegrini over the Italian colonies
in Africa between 1931 and 1936, for it was
during this period that an interest in the
modernity of indigenous architecture was
eventually superseded by the imperatives of
Fascist colonial politics.5 Using the discourse
on the architecture of the Italian colonies as a
backdrop, I will discuss how indigenous
architecture was reconstructed and
transformed through its representation in
magazines and other publications, and in so
doing show the contradiction innate in any
attempt to formulate a genuinely "modern"
and "rational" architecture that is at the
same time indebted to indigenous and folkloric
forms of cultural expression.
With regard to the first context, the writings of Rava, as Fabrizio Brunetti has asserted, not only advanced "a general evaluation of rationalism, understood as a phenomenon of international scope," they also put forward a "criticism from within" this tendency, Rava himself being among the founders of Gruppo 7 that had given life to that movement. This shift is perhaps most clearly evident in the illustrations which accompany the first article in this series, in which projects like those of Tessenow and Fahrenkamp act as demonstrations of this new "independent" direction for rationalism. The use of these images and his positive commentary on this work are in stark contrast to his selective representation of the intransigence of Mendelsohn, shown by the somewhat ironic use of a turn of phrase from his earlier writings for Gruppo 7. Criticizing both the facile application of mechanical forms to architecture and what he referred to as a "snobbishness of new materials," Rava called for the Italian public to "distinguish, to discriminate, in a word to 'select' that which will be presented as ours."

This argument is further developed in the second article of the series entitled "Spirito Latino," where Rava uses the example of the mythical figure of Sant'Elia to clarify more precisely what he feels to be the necessarily "Latin" origins of modern Italian architecture. While recognizing his indubitable worth as an international figure for Italian architecture whose attention to "the laws and necessities of reinforced concrete" and "transformation of urbanistic principles" were parallel to research in other countries, he saw Sant'Elia's work as being antithetical to "a complete recovery of our intimate essence of race," suggesting that in "despising the false tradition...he did not know how to recognize the true tradition."

For Rava this tradition—this "Latin spirit"—was seen to issue forth from a harmony between technical developments, climatic demands, and the influence of Latin (that is Italian) civilization. Contradicting his own earlier writings, he stated that the true source of modern architecture was not in the early experiments of Gropius or Le Corbusier, but rather in the works of North American architects in southern California like Irving Gill and Washington Smith.

Finding in these works that "Latin spirit" which was seen to be lacking in the work of Sant'Elia, Rava suggested that the influence of ancient Spanish civilization on a technologically advanced society created the necessary conditions for an authentically modern (and Latin) architecture. This fusion of these two influences into one tendency—that a work could be simultaneously modern and vernacular—is the unique contribution of Rava's writings.

It is important to recognize, however, that the views of Rava concerning mediterraneità were not received without criticism from both traditionalist and rationalist architects. This reaction was without a doubt connected with the timing of the series of articles, as they began to appear some three months before the second Esposizione Italiana di Architettura Razonale which opened in Rome on 30 March 1931. The exhibition generated considerable controversy among the rationalist architects of the Movimento Italiano per l'Architettura Razonale (MIAR) and the traditionalists of the Sindacato Fascista degli Architetti. It is also for this reason that Rava was accused of "having done harmful rather than useful work to rationalism," which he responded to by stating: "Our precise purpose was to discern, in the rationalist tendency, the good and the useful from the bad and the harmful...to distinguish them from vain, empty formulas."

He goes on to observe that although he felt considerable satisfaction at seeing the term mediterraneità used in the conclusion of the manifesto of the second MIAR exhibition, he still maintained, "We have not unfortunately encountered many examples in that exhibition."

This debate was continued in the January 1932 issue of Domus in a short note entitled "Poemica mediterranea," which presented statements by Rava and Luigi Figini, one of his former colleagues from Gruppo 7. In response to Figini's claim to be the first to use the term mediterraneità and his criticism of Rava's interest in "folkloric Mediterranean or colonial elements," Rava stated that he used it as more than a "simple qualificative term," adding sarcastically, "If in fact he understands in one way and I in another, it is evident that we could both be first, each in his way: and is this not good enough for him?"
These specific criticisms, as interesting they might be, are simply one part of a broader debate over the direction modern architecture should take that would be suitable for the Fascist state which arose in the aftermath of the 1931 MIAR exhibition. They were repeated several years later, when Edoardo Persico, co-editor of the journal Casabella in the 1930's and a critic of many of the writings and works of the rationalists, asked, "What happened in two years to induce Rava [to move] from the Europeanism of 1928 to the mediterraneità of 1930?"24 Answering his own question he stated that Europeanism gave way to political exigencies, suggesting that Rava's conversion was induced by "a fact that has major importance in polemics: the rapport between architecture and politics."25 Far from connecting his criticism of mediterraneità to Rava's writings, however, alone, Persico suggests that there was an ambiguity that had followed rationalism through all its various manifestations from its initial manifestos to the more recent discussions of Rava, among others.26 Behind this criticism is an assertion that, for Persico, the "foundation of rationalism" could be located in "the necessity of a new force that inserts itself into a European state of affairs, not only as an aesthetic idea, but also as a cultural, economic, social and political force."27 Ultimately, in Persico's view, the specifically cultural and nationalistic dimensions of mediterraneità—dimensions which he felt were attempting to address the political realities of Fascist Italy—created a confusion about the potential modernity of Italian architecture within a European context.

Recently Silvia Danesi has suggested—given that architectural culture during the Fascist period consisted in attempts on the part of artists to find a working space for their new tendencies within official structures—that "it would not be surprising that a debate ... like that reconstructed around the term mediterraneità ... had permeated argumentative writings and programmatic declarations, giving birth to alliances, equivocations, chasms, superimpositions and interweavings."28 In its relation to Fascism, she asserts that mediterraneità "was sufficiently connected to official myths" to constitute a safe harbor which protected artists against their adversaries and supported "the conquering of a no man's land situated between tradition and modernity."29 In this discussion Danesi presents two distinct interpretations of mediterraneità. The first is a "purist rarefaction" related to the work of Le Corbusier and espoused by the group around Quadrante magazine, and the second is related to "the spontaneous minor architecture of the Mediterranean coast" in the writings of architects like Rava and Giuseppe Pagano, then Casabella's co-editor.30 In the case of Rava, his interest in minor architecture as a theme of inspiration reflects a concern for "its autochthonous origins, which were a useful source for typological models."31 As Danesi observes, this view is closely connected to that of Pagano, who published a series of photographs of rural vernacular architecture in his book, Architettura rurale italiana in 1936. Rejecting the tendency to separate aesthetic and function or high and low architecture, he offered this book as a "demonstration of the rapport between the architecture of history books and the most simple and least vain constructive necessity realized by man."32 In this spontaneous rural architecture Pagano found a bond between the abstract form and plastic imagination and the soil, the climate, the economy and the technique of rural architecture, an architecture "dictated by necessity, but saturated with artistic implications."33

For Danesi, as for Persico, despite the grounding of mediterraneità in the ordinairiness and functionality of minor architecture the specifically political dimensions of this interpretation had to be recognized. In the case of Rava's writings, mediterraneità becomes "a unifying category ... with which to reconcile nationalism and foreign culture," explicitly linking it to Fascist politics.34 In the writings of the Quadrante group the adherence of mediterraneità to the myth of sunlight in Le Corbusier's Vers un architecture "joins themes that are not extraneous to the desires of the regime," those of "hygiene, nature and health."35 In fact, in this purist strain of rationalism there is an intersection between the myth of collectivity of the regime and an interest in the limits of classicism, expressed in the revisitation of the purist canons in its
PANORAMA DEL RAZIONALISMO

ARCHI CARLO ENRICO RAVA

I

Svolta pericolosa

SITUAZIONE DELL'ITALIA DI FRONTE AL RAZIONALISMO EUROPEO

Quella universale tendenza dell'architettura europea, che si è nota così tardi (non forse completamente esatta, ma pratico come tutte le etichette, e usato ormai correntemente) di « Racionalismo », si trova da qualche tempo di fronte ad un buio di importanza e interesse singolari.

Essa si è divisa infatti in due correnti principali e differenti: da un lato, i razionalisti che chiameremo « puri », intrasgressivi e dogmati, abolitori assoluti dell'individuismo: dall'altro, diremo così gli « indipendenti », che reclamano l'atto di conservare una propria personalità pur attraverso al razionalismo unicificatore delle forme strutturali, e cercano di affermare par la base costante di così razionalismo, dei distintivi caratteri nazionali, di cultura e di razza; ora, queste due correnti, anche puri anni or sono da un'origine comune, vanno divergendo sempre di più.

Così, vediamo in Germania gli architetti del « Ring », con alla testa Gropius e Mendelsohn, il gruppo di Frankforte, capitano da May, il « Bauhaus », guidato da Mies Van der Rohe (che è quanto dire tutti i principali esponenti della corrente intrasgressiva: e vi figuremo nomi di prim'ordine, simpatizzanti sempre di più con le tendenze unificatrici, livellatrici e socialitarie dell'ultima architettura russa (sintomaticamente, in questo senso, la scomparsa del fascismo di Settembre 1918 dalla rivista « Das Neue Frankfurt », nella quale era rappresentato l'architetto tedesco, con valigia in mano e tavolozza da disegno sotto il braccio, che, con un piede sulla Germania e l'altro sulla Russia, sta esercitando dalla prima campata in nero sulla carta geografica, alla seconda, campata in rosso: simbolo grafico, rivelatore di un vero e proprio dezentramente del razionalismo estremista tedesco verso la Russia; vediamo in Olanda, dove an che il razionalismo, come tutte le precedenti manifestazioni architettoniche, aveva conservato finora una spiccata e inconfondibile carattere razionale, i più giovani, quali Mari Stam (già emigrato, del resto, a Francoforte) Brinkman e Van der Vlugt, tendere, invece, sulle orme della Germania, verso l'estetica ritenutare dell'U.R.S.S.; vediamo in Francia Le Corbusier, unica figura veramente significativa e di primo ordine nel razionalismo francese, proclamare, almeno ironicamente, la supremazia architettonica dei russi, ed aspirare a estendere la propria attività in Russia, ricettandone grandi ordinazioni edilizie (chiamano « proclamare in teoria », perché nella pratica, gran parte delle costruzioni di Le Corbusier rivestono un senso improprio dell'architettura e della proporzione classica, senza tutta latina, che ne costituisce il maggiore pregio, ed è rilevante ad ogni costruzione di dogni; vediamo la Cevedovarchea in cui, particolarmente a Praga e a Brunn, l'interessantissimo fervore edilizio dei razionalisti è davvero imponente ed eccezionale, servite, in certo qual modo, da tramite fra la Germania e la Russia, alla quale le più recenti grandi costruzioni degli architetti Tedeschi si ispirano nel modo più assoluto, sostanziose soltanto per un senso di maggiore gaiezza (raminiscenza, probabilmente, della passata vita viennese, ai tempi dell'impero) nella natura fisicità di niente lerci e recami multiformi applicate con imitata estensione; vediamo infine la Russia, punto di mira di tutte queste aspirazioni, proclamare il livellamento assoluto delle varie forme architettoniche riportate ad

[Image of a building at night with lights illuminating the facade]
golden proportions, in its Pythagorean rhythms. In both of these interpretations of mediterraneità and in the history of the use of the term in Italian architectural discourse in the 1930's, the problematic relationship between the polemical constructions of the various factions within rationalism and the political demands of the Fascist regime are exposed. In a sense, both positions—that of the "intransigents" and that of the "independents"—are determined by these exigencies. However, in the case of Rava's writings the concept of mediterraneità implies more than just the redefinition of rationalism to include the indigenous architecture of North Africa; it also leads to a theory of an architecture suitable for these same territories.

The importance of this context, however, should come as no great surprise, as, after a visit by Mussolini to Tripoli in 1926, the activities in the colonies became increasingly central to the policies of the Fascist regime. In addition to this, as Marida Talamona has observed, within architectural circles the appointment of architect Alessandro Limongelli to the municipality of Tripoli in 1928 and the offer of professional commissions to well-known architects like Armando Brasini, Marcello Piacentini, Guido Ferrazza, Alberto Alpago Novello and Ottavio Cablati increased the interest of Italian architects in the question of an architecture for the colonies. In the end, in the works carried out in the late 1920's and early 1930's, a split similar to the one that existed in Italy emerged in the colonies: it was a split between a rationalist architecture—in this case inspired by the minor architecture of the Mediterranean—and an adherence to monumental classical references often given the appearance of the architecture of the so-called Novecento. Such a split could be seen, for instance, in the competition for the Piazza Cattedrale in Tripoli from 1930, in which the first prize went to the project of the so-called Pentagono group (Morandi, Lombardi, Cosmacini, Del Corno, Cavallini, Alziati) which recalled the stylistic appearance of ancient Rome, and the second prize to the proposal of rationalist architect Adalberto Libera.

At this point, however, it is important to remember that this series of Rava's writings, in addition to relating to the more general question of a modern architecture for the Fascist state, represented one of the first theoretical formulations in the debate over an appropriate style for the architecture of the Italian colonies. In the fifth and sixth articles in the series, entitled "Di un architettura coloniale moderna," a claim was made for the central role of the architecture of the colonies in the definition of an authentic modern architecture appropriate to the Fascist state—that is, for Rava "the problem of a contemporary colonial architecture is one aspect of the general problem of architectural modernity." Using images of Ghadames and Tripoli as visual support, he argued that "the indigenous architecture of our Mediterranean colonies presents...all the necessary requisites to deduce a perfect modern colonial architecture: rationality of planimetry, heightened simplicity of forms in their exterior appearance, perfect adherence to the necessities of the African climate, perfect harmony with the Libyan environment." 22 It is also worth noting that for his colonial architecture Rava rejected both the copying of dead Roman models like Leptis Magna and the pursuit of a Moorish stylistic influence, which he associated with the architecture of the French colony of Tunisia. Rather it was the "part now alive," the survival of the traces of Roman influence filtered through its various transformations and reinterpretations and then found again in the Arab house that he espoused as the basis for a modern architecture for the colonies. 23 In his article Rava elaborated on what he regarded as the three primary characteristics of Libyan architecture — the Roman influence, a vigorous primitivism, and general Mediterranean characteristics. In the first instance, he was interested in "the practical organizing spirit of Rome, not that of the archaeology...still viable in the scheme of the Arab-Turkish house." 24 It was the rationality of this plan as a reproduction of the ancient classical house that allowed it so clearly to respond to the climate and demands of the colonial environment. Rava linked the primitivism of Libyan architecture to "the rapport with the populations of the South which left their trace in the predilection for simple forms" which he likened to the "abstract creations of the recent Russian
Nel pittore, probabilmente, si menavaglieranno di vedere compreso in un "Panorama del Razionalismo" l'argomento, forse insospettato, dell'edilizia coloniale; ma quando, nella definizione "razionalista" applicata alla parola architetura, definizione alquanto impropria, ed usata, l'abbia
debiariato in origine (cf. "Svolta periodica" a su
Domus di gennaio 1931) per sola comodità, si consi
deri implicito, come si dovrebbe, il valore più
lato della parola "moderno", si dovrà pure am
mettere che il problema dell'architettura colonia
le contemporanea sia uno degli aspetti del pro
blema generale della modernità architettonica, e
che, di conseguenza, esso abbia diritto quanto ogni
altro, a venire preso in considerazione dal punto
di vista del razionalismo.
Vorremmo anzi dire che esso vi ha oggi diritto
più di ogni altro problema, poiché, se una vera
coscienza coloniale è mancata in Italia fino a po
chi anni fa e comincia appena ora a svilupparsi,
una conoscenza dei problemi architettonici del
le nostre colonie, nelle tradizioni del loro passato,
nelle caratteristiche del loro presente, nelle neces
sità del loro avvenire, manca poi addirittura to
talmente, o quasi, ancora oggi. Così non ci dobb
iamo troppo stupire, quando apprendiamo dai
giornali che il padiglione dell'Italia alla grande
Esposizione Coloniale di Parigi, che si aprì in
questi giorni e risulterà la più importante di
quante se ne siano organizzate finora, sarà costi
tuito da una riproduzione in piccolo della cosidde
ta "Basilica di Settimio Severo" a Leptis Magna,
riproduzione con la quale l'odierna architettura
italiana darà, di fronte al mondo, una doppia
prova, d'imputenza e d'ignoranza, indegna vera
mente di un popolo civile; impotenza, perché il
padiglione italiano, ripetendo una volta di più un
modello archeologico, farà supporre, a torto, che
l'Italia d'oggi, imperiale e fascista, non sia in gra
do di trovare in sé stessa la forza per creare una
sua architettura coloniale contemporanea; igno
ranza, perché l'immaginazione che si ossa riproduc-
In referring to the Mediterranean qualities of this architecture, he described the "composing of blank rhythms of cubes and parallelepipeds, opposing the cool shade of the patio, to the sun and the large superimposed and alternating verandas and roof terraces," qualities which he found both "in the Italian minor architecture and the architecture of our Libyan colonies." However, the assertion that the concept of the Mediterranean can be found in the architecture of Libya reveals a profound shift in Rava's interpretation of rationalism from that offered during his association with the architects of Gruppo 7, when he stated, "The new architecture, the true architecture, must result from a rigid adherence to logic, to rationality." Instead, in these writings the word "rational" implies adherence to different demands, to "change with the changing conditions of nature and of climate, with the different necessities and customs." It is a rationality which found its confirmation in "the spontaneous, unquestionable resemblance that all houses located in the South present amongst themselves." Most important, it was a revisitation of Roman types that was not attained by replication, but executed on the site by the hand of local workmen. It is a rationalism inspired by the architecture of the Mediterranean region that was conditioned by functional, climactic, and cultural exigencies and expressed through the local building traditions, all of which were held to be both modern and vernacular.

To a large extent Rava's "Panorama of Rationalism," particularly as it relates to the architecture of the colonies, is simply a reformulation of rationalism that erases the dichotomy between an architecture for the colony and an Italian architecture. This is based on an assumption that a modern rational architecture already includes the influence of the indigenous architecture of the Mediterranean region and that this region, including Libya, was in fact already Italian, since its architectural influences were of Roman origin. This view underscores a more general recognition during this period of a profound and long-standing Italian cultural influence in North Africa that also extended to Italy's political and economic approach to the colonization of Libya. As Mia Fuller has recognized, Mussolini asserted that "since the Roman Empire had subjugated the entire area, it had left immanent traces" and that therefore the Mediterranean was "a container for Italy's spirit and history." It is in this respect that the concept of the Mediterranean in Italian architecture in the 1930's had political implications for Fascist colonial policy. In Rava's writings the Fascist notion of an already existing Roman empire coincided with his discussion of an already existing Roman building tradition in North Africa. Within this historical context, his concept of the Mediterranean erased the distinction between colony and colonizer using a geographically determined cultural imperialism and historically justified Fascist politics.

The political dimensions of Rava's interest in indigenous architecture already present in his early writings of 1931, became increasingly important in his later work. This further shift in Rava's position has been connected to the heightened political rhetoric regarding the architecture of the colonies that followed Italy's successful campaign in Ethiopia in 1936. The original series of articles was, in fact, only the beginning of a debate that would continue in the pages of architectural journals like Domus and Rassegna di Architettura. Rava was not alone in asserting the importance of this influence of the indigenous architecture of North and East Africa on an architecture for the colonies. Both Luigi Piccinato, who with several other rationalist architects worked on the design of the town of Sabaudia in the Agro Pontino, and Giovanni Pellegrini, an architect of lesser importance in Italy who did an extensive amount of work in Libya, produced significant polemical writings which for the most part paralleled Rava's assertions.

In 1936 both Rava and Piccinato published several articles in Domus on colonial architecture. Piccinato published a series of articles under the title "La casa in colonia," which focused primarily on the creation of a series of building types and on the refinement of building techniques appropriate for the conditions found in North and East Africa. In the first of them, published in May 1936, Piccinato pursued a discussion of the "colonial house," illustrating it with a series of photographs and drawings showing examples of the so-called casa arabe. In Piccinato's
LA CASA IN COLONIA
IL PROBLEMA CHE SI PROSPETTA AI NOSTRI ARCHITETTI

Se si pensa che i grandi imperi coloniali e le principali opere di colonizzazione sono stati creati alla fine dello scorso secolo e se si pensa che proprio quella era l'epoca del più ampiamente edificato e dimenticato architettura, non si resta più stupiti di fronte a quei disordine estetico edilizia che la civiltà bianca ha portato nella organizzazione dei paesi conquistati.

Era l'epoca degli stili: il consuetudine era inverto se ordinare all'architetto la sua villa in stile gotico, in stile pomeriggiano o in stile «svizzero» - per i grandi palazzi al-Sisigouf (o meglio all'ingegnere) era consentito valersi degli elementi del «romano», classicamente vitruviano o di quelli del primo rinascimento o di quelli del tinto barroccettico per la decorazione, per le statue, per le sculture e per la dimora di famiglie, il gotico in mattoni a strisce chiare e scure era in lizza col bianconero veneziano.

In questa lista baronna i colonizzatori hanno importato in Africa ed in Asia i loro stessi tipi edilizi europei rivestendoli per loro di una veste decorativa scoperta allora e consolidandosi a tutti gli usi: le storie arabe.

Solo chi ha viaggiato le colonie ha una idea esatta di quanto mal fu padre lo stile arabo: dal Damascense a Tangier, da Cairo fino a Città del Capo tutta l'Africa e l'Asia minore e la Persia furono costruite indistintamente in stile arabo anche se quest'ultime invase perfino l'Europa nelle nostre Esposizioni mondiali e nei nostri villini di provincie. Non c'è dubbio che i più attivi propagandisti dei l'architettura musicale araba furono proprio gli europei.

Siccome allora architettura significava solo vero architettonico, i tipi edilizi rimasero intatti tali e quali erano in uso in Europa, mentre invece si aggiunsero cornici, profili e merlate divennero senz'altra arabi.

Dalla architettura locale, dal clima, dai materiali e dai sistemi costruttivi locali, pochissimi furono i veri ingegneri utili raccolti dai colonizziatori.

Eppure era proprio di lì che si sarebbe dovuto partire: la casa avrebbe dovuto essere organizzata proprio in ragione del clima, in ragione del sistema di vita, in ragione dei materiali edilizi. Di li si sarebbe dovuto partire per creare una architettura coloniale nostra che non fosse una superficiale imitazione banale di quella del colonizzato.

L'Italia sta creando ora la sua compagnia coloniale; può dunque fare molto meglio di quanto gli altri popoli hanno...
argument, research was focused on the typological substance of the courtyard house, a tradition, following the lead of Rava’s earlier writings, that could be traced back to the Roman domus. Piccinato argued that “the modest Arab house brings us back to the concept of Latin housing, with its life collected around the courtyard, showing us a logical, economic, and Mediterranean solution for the house as a single dwelling, adapted to the climate of northern Africa.”  

The interest in the Arab house as a model for a modern architecture for the colonies was also evident in the “Manifesto dell’architettura coloniale” of Giovanni Pellegrini, which appeared in Rassegna di Architettura in October 1936. For Pellegrini, an understanding of the Arab house was grounded less in its Roman origins than in the way it functioned. He asserted that, from its blank exterior wall to its central courtyard used for both light and ventilation, it was the “best architectural expedient . . . and the best solution for the adaptation of the life of man to the geographical and climatic conditions.” He describes in some detail how this courtyard functioned, from its quality as a transitional space for the home to its use of vegetation. He also referred to the use of ornamental grilles and shutters in apertures for ventilation, and of loggias and porticoes on the upper floors to provide ventilation that the lower floors achieved through the courtyard. Throughout this discussion it is clear that Pellegrini’s interests were of a pragmatic nature, an effort to use the past as a prescription for a modern architectural expression. In the end, both Piccinato and Pellegrini followed the direction indicated by Rava, who asserted, “The rationality of the forms and of the typical architectonic solutions of Libya derive from their perfect adherence to the requirements of the climate.” These architects were less polemical, however, offering practical observations which could address the pressing need for housing, particularly in East Africa. Pellegrini’s “Manifesto” offered a series of simple guidelines for the architecture and the planning of the colonies. This pragmatic approach to the question of an architecture for the colonies was also evident in the subsequent articles that Piccinato published in Domus, where he illustrated a series of typologies that could be employed in distinct situations in the colonies, from the courtyard house, to the multistoried apartment with loggias, to the bungalow, to the “tropical villa.” These articles should be seen within the context of what Stefano Zagnoni refers to as the effort on the part of the “disciplinary culture . . . to accelerate the process of completing the definition of types of colonial houses” carried out in the aftermath of the Ethiopian campaign of 1936, an effort accompanied by research into the application of new building technologies to the various colonial situations.

This increasing interest on the part of Italian architects in developing typologies and building technologies for the colonies was accompanied by a parallel interest in organizing the building process, something which the later writings of Rava addressed quite directly. In these later articles, however (also published in Domus), Rava did not completely abandon his interest in indigenous architecture, and he still maintained that it was necessary to “deduce from the local constructions those lessons of adaptation to the climate that may then apply themselves—with the italianità of view and modernità of means—to the houses destined for the Europeans.” Yet, despite this seeming reaffirmation of earlier views, it is also evident that his assertion of the independence of an architecture inspired by the indigenous architecture of the Mediterranean region had given way to a call for a more uniform architectural expression that was the product of a new Fascist building politics. Although he recognized some of the positive attempts in Libya under the direction of Alessandro Limongelli, he suggested that the work carried out was the result of “a completely mistaken building conception” that needed to be reconsidered in light of the need for greater uniformity. These articles are almost entirely lacking in any visual imagery; they argue for the need to generate “the necessary sense of responsibility” which would “totally transform the organization of ... the entire system of distribution of building work in the colonies,” which must be under the direct control of the state. Statements like these would seem to indicate that the political exigencies that Persico had identified in 1933 had begun increasingly to determine the
LUIGI PICCINATO, TROPICAL VILLA, PLANS AND EXTERIOR VIEWS OF MODEL. (FROM PICCINATO, "LA CASA IN COLONIA," DOMUS, JUNE 1936, P. 17)
interests which Rava and other architects expressed with regard to the architecture of the colonies. In fact, Mia Fuller has asserted that around 1936 the rhetoric employed in architectural journals concerning architecture of the colonies shifted from a "nationalist stance addressing Europe, to a racist policy of impressing and governing local populations." This change in the architectural discourse helps to explain the movement away from the more general polemics connected with the question of a modern Italian architecture to the more prescriptive and less theoretically motivated writings of the mid 1930's. This apparent shift raises a number of difficult questions about the relation between theoretical concepts like mediterraneità which entered the discourse on modern Italian architecture in the 1930's and the specific political beliefs they suggest, which can be linked to Fascism's imperialist policies. For example, is the connection between political and cultural imperialism and architecture so strong as to explain all the architecture in the colonies as merely a reflection of those demands? Was Rava introducing a more independent and regionalist paradigm within modernism or merely expressing, in theoretical terms, the logical consequences of Fascism's wish to dominate the Mediterranean region? Do his later writings really reflect a change in position, a return to the intransigence he accused his fellow rationalists of, or do the earlier theoretical writings merely hide their political and ideological motives? Such questions show the crisis evident during the Fascist regime in the rapport between architecture and politics. In the end, using the writings of Rava, Pellegrini, and Piccinato as a reference point, the question is whether political and racial motives were, in fact, germane to modernism in the Italian context.

A second and perhaps more specific series of questions could be asked that are suggested by the introduction of the paradigm of the vernacular into modernism. Was Rava introducing pockets of resistance against the universalizing tendencies of modernism, or did the incorporation of the vernacular into the modern not result in destroying the very thing which was being celebrated? Vernacular architecture is the antithesis of the self-conscious process evident in these architectural polemics and in this work. In that sense, what did this striving for the vernacular indicate? Moreover, the basis for this appropriation was completely conditioned by the means of assimilation employed by modernity. In other words, it was through the process of selection of modernism itself, through the lens of the camera and through the experience of the traveler that these models were re-interpreted and redeployed. Was this a case of discovering a truly indigenous culture, or did this process not have an already determined end product, which was modernism itself?

Brian McLaren
This is a slightly longer version of the paper that was presented in the 49th Annual Meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians, St. Louis, Missouri, April 17-21, 1996. My thanks to Dennis Doordan - who chaired the session that it was presented in - for his input on its content, and Mark Jarzombeck, Leila Kinney and Akos Moravanszky for their suggestions. This work is part of a more general research in to the architecture of the colonies in Libya which began with the encouragement and supported by a travel grant from the Aga Khan program for Islamic Architecture in the summer of 1994.

1 Carlo Enrico Rava, "I-Svolta pericolosa: situazione dell'Italia di fronte al razionalismo europeo," *Domus* 37 (January 1931): 44.


3 Rava, "Svolta pericolosa," pp. 41, 43. These views were his own: the renunciation of individuality was something he felt was necessary to defeat certain excesses in architecture. Rava was one of the founding members of Gruppo 7 and a major contributor to the writing of their manifestos. The other members were Ubaldo Catagnoli (replaced by Adalberto Libera in 1927), Luigi Figini, Guido Frette, Sebastiano Larco, Gino Pollini, and Giuseppe Terragni. Their articles, "Architecture," "Architecture II. The Foreigners," "Architecture III. Unpreparedness - Incomprehension - Prejudices" and "Architecture IV. The New Archaic Era," were published in *Rassegna Italiana* in December 1926 and February, March, and May 1927.


5 Rava, "Svolta pericolosa," p. 43.

6 Fabrizio Brunetti, *Architetti e fascismo* (Florence: Alinea Editrice, 1993), p. 203; see especially chapter 15, "L'idea di mediterraneità negli scritti di Carlo Enrico Rava e del gruppo di Quadrante." Not only has it been recognized that it was Rava who originated the term...
"rationalism" (see Carlo Belli, "Origini e sviluppo del Gruppo 7," La Casa 6 [1960]: 188), it has also been asserted that the first and last of the four Gruppo 7 manifestos were written primarily by Rava; see Giorgio Ciucci, *Gli architetti e il fascismo. Architettura e città, 1922-1944* (Turin: Einaudi, 1989), p. 72.

Rava obtained the photographs of the projects of Tessenow, Fahrenkamp, Soule, and Ernst Lichtblau from a series of articles published in *Moderne Bauformen* in August and September 1928 and January, February, and August 1930.

"Rava, "Necessità di selezione, parte seconda,"

p. 86.

"Rava, "Spirito Latino,"

p. 24.

As has been well documented, the strong and polemical stand taken by Pietro Maria Bardi on behalf of the rationalist architects inspired considerable debate after the second MIAR exhibition, including censure by the Sindacato Fascista degli Architetti. Bardi's written statement, *Rapporto sull'architettura (per Mussolini)*, and design of the so-called "Tavolo degli errori," which criticized the works of architects like Marcello Piacentini and Armando Brasini, were the catalyst for this furor. See Dennis P. Doordan, *Building Modern Italy: Italian Architecture 1914-1936* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988), pp. 90-94.

"Rava, "Conclusione,"

p. 40. He goes on to state: "To those who have reproached us in print for having 'washed in public the dirty linen of rationalism,' we answer that this 'dirty linen' appears to us, despite everything, sufficiently clean not to necessitate being washed in private any more." The impact of Rava's criticism of rationalism, which was undertaken at the same time that the rationalists were under attack from architects like Marcello Piacentini, is no doubt responsible for the fact that, as Giorgio Ciucci has stated, he was considered a traitor to the movement (Ciucci, *Gli architetti e il fascismo*, p. 100.). Although Rava's position would seem fundamentally different from that of Piacentini, in "Difesa dell'architettura italiana," published in *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 2 May 1931, a similar criticism of the dogmatism of the rationalist architects slavishly following Gropius and Russian constructivism and an espousal of the work of Fahrenkamp are both advanced by Piacentini.

"Ibid., p. 40.


"Edoardo Persico, "Punto ed a capo per l'architettura," *Domus* 83 (November 1934): 3. In this article Persico refers specifically to Rava's article, "Dell'europeismo in architettura," published in *Rassegna Italiana* in February 1928. Despite Persico's assertions of a shift between this writing and those of the series published in *Domus*, it is possible to detect, even in Rava's contributions to the initial manifesto of the Gruppo 7, an attempt to see Europeanism as ultra-nationalism, as each would bring to modern architecture its own distinct national character.

"Ibid., p. 3.

Another example is a statement made by Pietro Maria Bardi apropos the second Rationalist exhibition in Rome in 1931: "We recognize for many, in advance, how more and more the tendency to exalt this character of latinità is accentuated, which allows this architecture to define itself as Mediterranean"; Bardi, "Rapporto sull'architettura (per Mussolini)" (1931), in *Materiali per l'analisi dell'architettura moderna, ed. Michele Cennamo* (Naples: Società Editrice Napoletana, 1976), p. 146.

"Persico, "Punto ed a capo,"

p. 3.


"Ibid.

The *Quadrante* group included the editors of the magazine, Pietro Maria Bardi and Massimo Bontemelli, and architects such as Piero Bottoni, Figini, Frette, Piero Lingeri, Alberto Sartoris, Terragni, and Banfi, Belgiogioso, Peresutti and Rogers (BBPR architects).

"Danesi, "Aporie dell’architettura Italiana,"

p. 21.

"Giuseppe Pagano, *Architettura rurale italiana*, (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli Editore, 1936), 11. This book, which was one of many published as part of the VI Triennale in Milan, documents an exhibition of Pagano's photographs of rural architecture, and which includes an example of the indigenous architecture in Algeria.


"Danesi, "Aporie dell’architettura Italiana,"

p. 21. Danesi goes on to say that this discourse is "a manifestation of the fortune of a word that is passed around in writings and in polemics with the frequency of others like "primacy," "hierarchy," romanità, latinità, and classicità."

"Ibid., p. 22; Fascism instituted programs that promoted the health and moral development of
young Italians under the auspices of Fascist ideology.

2Marida Talamona, "Libya: An Architectural Workshop," Rassegna 51 (September 1992): 71. This competition was crucial to an understanding of Rava's writings in Domus, as he also submitted, with Larco, a project for this competition. Talamona speculates that this series of articles, and particularly his writings on an architecture for the colonies, can in some way be seen as a response to the jury of this competition; Talamona, "Libya: An Architectural Workshop," p. 75.

3Talamona also mentions an earlier article by Maurizio Rava, father of Carlo Enrico and general secretary of Tripolitania, which was published in the newspaper, L'avvenire di Tripoli, in 1929. She also suggests that Rava followed his series of articles in response to the jury's decision in the competition for Piazza Cattedrale in Tripoli—his own project was not selected by the jury; see Talamona, "Libya: An Architectural Workshop," p. 75.


5Ibid.

6Ibid.


8Rava, "Di un architettura coloniale moderna, parte seconda," 32.

9Ibid.

10Ibid.

11In a review of a book published in 1929 entitled L'Italia musulmana which traced the recent history of Italian colonial influences in Muslim North Africa, it is asserted that the "colonial consciousness" consists in "rendering Libya a base of concentration and of diffusion of Italian interests that may be inserted into Islamic interests." See Romolo Tritonj, "L'Italia Musulmana," Rassegna Italiana, April 1929: 378. It is worth noting that Rassegna Italiana devoted an entire section to the question of the Italian colonies entitled "Rassegna Italiana del Mediterraneo," beginning in January 1921.


13These articles were "La casa in colonia: il problema che si prospetta ai nostri architetti," part I, Domus 101 (May 1936): 22-25; "La casa in colonia: il problema che si prospetta ai nostri architetti," part II, Domus 102 (June 1936): 12-17; and "Un problema per l'Italia d'oggi, costruire in colonia," Domus 105 (September 1936): 7-10.


15Rava, "Di un architettura coloniale moderna, parte seconda," pp. 33, 36. Pellegrini lays out a series of nine points for the design and development of the regulatory plan and the architecture of the colonial city. This proposal, suggesting the use of open space and the design of towers for the center of the city, repeats the precepts of Le Corbusier's proposal for Addis Ababa, also from October of 1936 (Pellegrini, "Manifesto," pp. 349-50).

16See Stelano Zagnoni, "Housing in the Overseas Territories," Rassegna 51 (September 1992): 18. Zagnoni also discusses Piccinato's development of a colonial building in ribbing as part of a more general discussion of the development of technical strategies for the housing in the colonies which emerged in the aftermath of the Italian conquest of Ethiopia; those strategies ranged from use of indigenous techniques and materials, to the partial use of imported ones, to the implementation of technological solutions using prefabrication.


19Ibid.

20Ibid.

21"Fuller, "Building Power," p. 211."