

WHITE CUBISM RELOADED.

The reinterpretation of Libyan Vernacular Architecture as the Answer to how to Build in the Colony.¹

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Abstract

Which style for Libya, Italian colony during Fascism? The paper explores the theoretical debate on the colonial style, pointing out the diverse theoretical positions and the gap with the realisations in the colony at the beginning of the colonisation. From the mid of the 1930s the architecture in the colony take a particular direction and follow a certain style, which – beyond any Moorish or Arabisances – seem to consciously re-elaborate vernacular architecture. The concept of “cubism” is than explained, as probably the most interesting contribution to the architecture in the colony.

Keywords: Colonial Architecture, Mediterraneity, Libya, Fascism, New Town, Rationalism

Which style was used to build in Libya during the colonial time? The answer to this question is not univocal, and involves a wider discussion about modernity and its relation to Fascism in the Italian colony. Nevertheless, the historical theoretical debate on how to build in the colony offers a paradigmatic overview of the uncertainties surrounding the meanings of concepts such as “Fascist architecture”, “colonial architecture” and “modernity”, both in relation to the architecture in Italy and in Libya.

This paper aims at proposing an overall view of the contemporary theoretical debate on the search for an appropriate style for the colony. The various positions

¹ This article is a revised and enriched version of a previously published article Capresi, V. (2011-2012). *Il razionalismo libico. Reminiscenze e influssi nell'architettura coloniale*. In F. Canali, V. Galati (Eds.), *Bollettino della Società di studi Fiorentini "Firenze, Modernizzazione e Italianità"*. n.20-21 (pp.287-295). Firenze: emmebi.

are discussed here, illustrating the panorama of possibilities which were considered valuable to realise a "proper style" in the colony.

The conclusion remains open, there is no univocal theoretical understanding of how to build in Libya. Still, the realisations show a clear unanimity and a stylistic homogeneity, particularly in those buildings not directly related to state institutions, which show how in the praxis architects managed to find a common formal approach to the practical requirements.

In this paper I argue that through the observation of vernacular architecture Italian architects developed a style which, even if apparently inspired only by the forms of Libyan constructions, through a reuse of these forms, led to the appropriation of many functional and technical solutions. This reloading of vernacular "cubism" was probably the most original contribution to architecture in the colony.

The narration needs to start in Tripoli, the city where it is easiest to follow the various changes in architecture style because it was the most documented during the occupation and, as the capital, provided a reference point for contemporary criticism to measure the state of the art of town planning and architecture praxis in the colony. Taking Tripoli as a paradigmatic example of the situation in Libya, it can be seen that the discussion on how to build in the colony started at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, when several architects and intellectuals published articles relating to colonial architecture in the main Italian architecture magazines. This period marked a turning point for the visibility of the colony in the motherland: Mussolini's trip to Tripoli in April 1927 aimed at drawing attention to the colony in order to foster private capital investment. From the late 1920s several fairs were also held in Tripoli, making it comparable to other regional Italian capitals.²

The first general urban development plan for Tripoli was designed by Luigi Luiggi in 1912, immediately after the beginning of the colonisation process. This plan is considered by scholars to be a mature interpretation of the urban situation, and a

² Such as the first Colonial Agrarian Congress in 1926; and the first Tripoli Trade Fair in 1927.

modern answer to how to build the main city of the colony.³ The plan in fact took inspiration from the existing Ottoman infrastructures, enforcing existing pathways and development lines.⁴ The implementation of the plan through the construction of its most prominent buildings was begun after the reconquest of Libya at the end of the First World War, when the Governor's Palace, the Cathedral, the Miramare Theatre, the Municipal Hotel and the Banca d'Italia headquarters were built. The styles of those constructions reflected a certain romanticism, which alternated neo-Romanesque realisations, neo-Islamic influences and neo-Moorish buildings against which the rationalist architect Carlo Enrico Rava took a clear position in 1931 in *Domus*, one of the most important rationalist magazines:

One must admit that the problem of contemporary colonial architecture is one of the many aspects of the general problem of architectural modernity, and that, consequently, it has the right, as much as any other, to be taken into consideration from the point of view of rationalism.

and further on:

In Libya there has never been any trace of that Moorish architecture, which instead established itself in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Arab Spain. Unfortunately many still confuse "colonial" with "Moorish", and it can never be repeated enough that in Libya there is no other Moorish except that, false and monstrous beyond description, which distinguishes many buildings raised by us, which oscillate between an Orient from the "Pavilion of Wonders" and a certain "Alhambra" style that was typical of the bath-structures of 40 years ago. (Rava, 1931, p.39 and p.89)

³ Luigi Luiggi was the Superior Inspector of the Civil Corps of Engineers. For the plan see: Capresi, V. (2012). Architectural Transfer, Italian Colonial Architecture in Libya: 'Libyan Rationalism' and the Concept of 'Mediterraneity', 1926-1942. In F. Demissie (Ed.), *Colonial Architecture and Urbanism in Africa*, (pp.41-43). In Gresleri, G., et al. (2008). *Architettura italiana d'oltremare: atlante iconografico*. Bologna: Bononia University Press are several surveys and master plans for Tripoli, also that elaborated by A. Alpagò- Novello, O. Cabiati, G. Ferrazza. In general the book offers a vast repository of pictures of Tripoli, p.149-282.

⁴ Zeynep Celik demonstrated how Ottoman viability crucially shaped the Italian plan, which basically reinforced the pre-existing viability. Çelik, Z. (2008). *Empire, Architecture, and the City: French-Ottoman Encounters, 1830-1914*. Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press.

It is obviously not possible to define a clear chronological turning point, but the beginning of the 1930s marked a renewed theoretical interest in colonial architecture: in this period the first studies and articles about how to build contemporary in the colony appeared. On the side of the rationalists, Carlo Enrico Rava published in *Domus* in 1931 two articles on modern colonial architecture. Luigi Piccinato wrote the *Colonial Building* entry for the Italian Encyclopedia in 1931, and in 1933 he proposed a modern prototype of a colonial home at the *V Triennale di Milano*. Also in 1933, *Rassegna di Architettura*, a more conventional magazine, began to give space to articles about new buildings in the colony. On the other hand, in Libya buildings in Moorish, Oriental and Neo-Romanic styles were built, and the gap between the realisations and the first steps of the theoretical debate widened.

The first statement issued by a state body concerning the need to establish an Italian-Libyan style is expressed in the call for the competition for the *Piazza della Cattedrale* in Tripoli. In the call for the second competition (the first concluded without winners) announced by the Municipality of Tripoli in July 1930, we read:

[...] the architectural projects [...] should be characterised by the appropriateness of a large city and the spirit of modern art. They should not only respond to the environmental characteristics but also to the spirit of the current historical era and tangible signs of Italian domination. It is necessary for applicants to research with a sense of modernity those forms that are most effective in creating an "Italian Colonial Architecture", that should arise from the successful fusion of local architectural features with those of our artistic tradition.⁵

⁵ “[...] i progetti architettonici [...] dovranno essere improntati al decoro di una grande città ed allo spirito dell’arte moderna e rispondere oltre che alle caratteristiche edilizie ambientali a quelle che debbono esserle impresse dallo spirito dell’era Storica attuale e dal segno tangibile della dominazione italiana. Fa d’uopo ai concorrenti ricercare con senso di modernità quelle forme che valgono più efficacemente a creare una “Architettura Coloniale Italiana” che dovrebbe nascere dalla felice fusione dei caratteri architettonici locali con quelli della nostra tradizione artistica”, Archivio Centrale dello Stato ACS - Ministero dell’Africa Italiana MAI, b.95, Direzione Generale Affari Civili, fascicolo 5, Concorso Piazza della Cattedrale.

In addition to the requirement for decorum and modernity, the key theme pointed out in the call is the need to search for an "Italian Colonial Architecture", intended as a compromise between the concept of setting - "formal copying of local architectural features" - and the reuse of architectural forms from the Italian tradition. What the regime meant by modernity or "our artistic tradition" is not clear from the text. It is important to underline that this was the first time an official body had expressed the need for a new Italian colonial architecture, described as a synthesis of a certain local colour tempered and guided by a not clearly defined Italian tradition.

An alternative to the Moorish / picturesque style is not formulated, but from the early 1930s the architecture to be built in Libya was clearly required to respond both to the setting and to the political agenda of the regime.

How to build colonial?

The theoretical debate on colonial architecture began, as previously mentioned, with the articles published by Rava in *Domus* in 1931, dedicated to modern colonial architecture. As an alternative to the "Moorish" style, Rava proposed an architecture inspired by the characteristics of Libyan architecture. This was described as having signs of Roman influence, of influences almost cubistic, mixed with Mediterranean characteristics. Ultimately, building colonial meant for Rava in 1931 paying attention to the various influences of Libyan forms, knowing how to grasp and reinterpret them, and introducing the architect's skills in the process.

Rava was still against the Moorish style in 1937, when in his intervention in the chapter dedicated to colonial architecture at the first National Congress of Urban Planning affirmed the need to interpret the requirements of building in the colony:

Architects need to understand the "problem" of building in a colony. It is an issue of Italianness, and, at the same time, of environment, actuality and culture, dignity and power: colonial architecture in fact must represent imperial affirmation, but also make material the research of a setting, the

fusion of an elaborate modernity with an acute and careful understanding of the needs of climate, latitude, colour.

And:

The task is therefore largely new, original; it is a matter of creating, on the basis of colonial needs, an Italian and modern architecture, and not being inspired by foreign examples.⁶

It is interesting that, in addition to the necessity of affirming a vague *Italianness* (Italianità, intended as "Imperial affirmation"), Rava spoke of "colonial needs", inviting architects to take into account the practical issues dictated by the local climate, latitude and local colour.

The first "Manifesto of Colonial Architecture" was written in 1936 by Giovanni Pellegrini, a Milanese architect active in Tripoli from the early 1930s. Pellegrini's text cannot be considered a canonical manifesto, in the sense of a universal theoretical programmatic text. His is rather a set of practical rules to be followed. In the text are illustrated precise solutions which should be followed in order to build in the colony, and which are based on the observation of vernacular architecture:

The walls are free of openings, but when there are some they are very small, and in this case they are protected by barriers, or, if bigger, they are protected by fences, grates, musciarabie [...] The entrance is enhanced by height and sober decoration [...]. (Pellegrini, 1936, p.350)

Like Rava, Pellegrini invited a precise observation of the vernacular Libyan architecture, because it was considered to contain effective responses to the particular climatic situation.

⁶ Rava, C.E. (1937). Alcuni appunti di urbanistica coloniale. In *Atti del primo congresso nazionale di urbanistica*, Roma 5-7 Aprile, vol. I, p.90-92. Fuller, M. (1994-95). Carlo Enrico Rava. The radical first formulations of colonial rationalism. In *Environmental Design: Journal of the Islamic Environmental Design Research Centre | Environmental Design: European Houses in the Islamic Countries*, Rome: Dell'oca Editori (pp.150-59).

All the solutions that the practice of indigenous constructions prove to be effective (houses with central courtyards, closed walls, narrow streets) will have to be resolutely used, merging them with what modern technology teaches us.

And, at the end of the manifesto:

Let us summarise what from the vernacular architecture must be applied in modern architecture. Practical solutions for protection against climatic factors: a) for the city: streets shaded by porticos and vegetation [...] b) For the home: inner courtyards with loggias, curtains, hanging gardens [...]. The aesthetic values resulting from the use of these are: a) for the city: a plastic configuration, non-metallic cubist effect of masses and polychrome. b) for the house: exaltation of the doorway, hiding of the interior of the house, sense of austerity of family life, terraces with loggias on the façade and above the ceilings as a double roof.⁷

Ultimately, to build in Libya, it was necessary to take inspiration from the architectural forms in the colony, seizing and reworking the solutions spontaneously adopted by the vernacular architecture, which was recognised to have the merit of having solved most of the problems of adaptation – as a result of successive continuous adjustments to climatic, distributive and social needs.

The reuse of formal solutions in fact implied the reuse of experience acquired over time by the local population.

Vernacular Cubism (*Is this Modern?*)

To illustrate his Manifesto on colonial architecture, Giovanni Pellegrini published a rich photographic apparatus, in which he used the term *cubism* to describe the organisation of volumes of Libyan vernacular architecture. He broke down the

⁷ Pellegrini, G. (1936). Manifesto dell'architettura coloniale. In *Rassegna di Architettura*, 8, p.349-350. About the reaction on the manifesto by Alpago Novello see: D'Amia, G. (2011). L'Urbanistica coloniale di Giovanni Pellegrini e la pianificazione dei villaggi libici. In *Territorio. Rivista del Dipartimento di Architettura e Pianificazione del Politecnico di Milano*, n.57, June (pp.125-135).

term into: *elementary cubism*, to describe a house in Tripoli; *classic cubism*, to describe the base of a minaret, suggesting the transition from a squared section into a cylinder; and finally, and not without irony, *intransigent cubism*, to describe the apparently disordered volumes of the old city of Tripoli. The concept of cubism was used as a stylistically-formal characteristic linked to the exterior appearance of the buildings.⁸

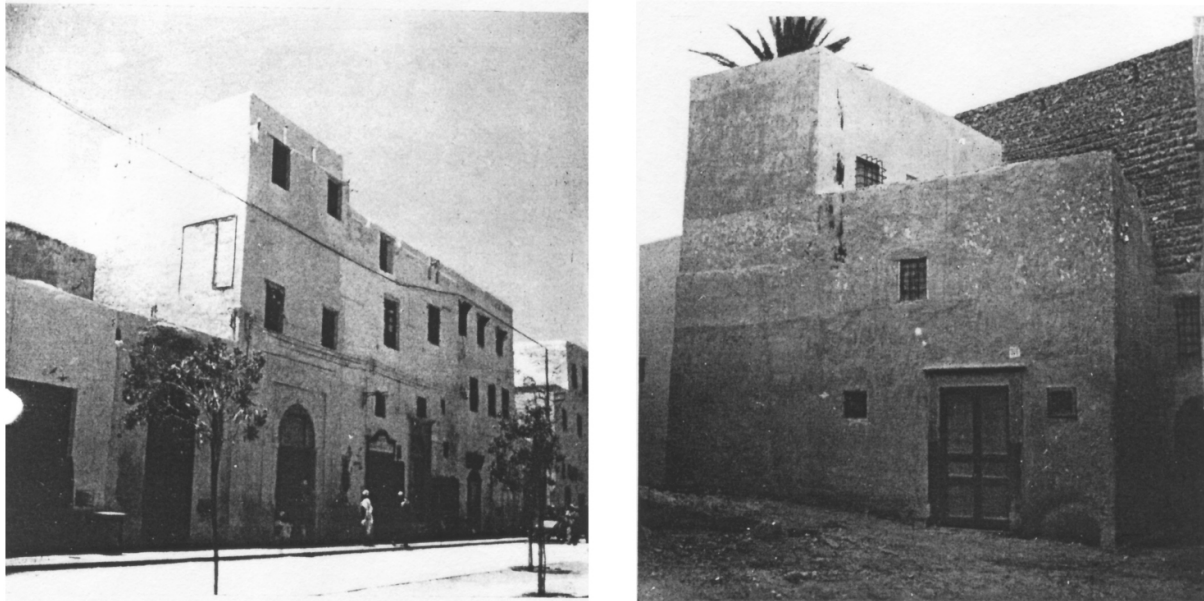


Figure 1. Two of the four pictures illustrating the article by Pellegrini. Original caption left: "Palazzo sul lungomare di Tripoli; proporzioni fortemente cubiche": Palace on the seafront in Tripoli; proportions highly cubic. Right "Casetta privata nella Hara di Tripoli; completa e indipendente. Esempio di cubismo elementare. All'interno il piccolo patio.": Little private house in the Hara in Tripoli; complete and independent. Example of elementary cubism. Inside a little patio. (*Rassegna*, 8, 1936, p.360)

This *cubism* could be recognised in the architecture of the new rural centres as well as in constructions in the main cities, as a combination of geometrically elementary volumes, assembled to achieve a compositional equilibrium that is not necessarily symmetrical or regulated by exact geometries, but rather governed by aesthetic factors that do not exclude dramatic contrasts, such as deep shadows

⁸ In *Rassegna*, 8, 1936, the captions of pictures 1, 2 and 3 p.360, and 1 and 4 p.361. Most of the pictures of Tripoli are by the architect himself.

opposing large empty walls, or the monotonous repetition of single elements - a window, an arch, a pillar.

This formal cubism was clearly recognisable in buildings constructed for entertainment purposes and in privately-commissioned villas where the spectacular component of power necessary for public buildings linked to the regime was not requested.

Di Fausto's buildings in Tripoli followed this compositional arrangement; they seemed to be designed with primary, basic forms directly borrowed from Tripoli's vernacular architecture. In the Hotel Uaddan, or Mehari, as well as in the San Francesco Church, in the cylinders of the towers, as well as in the conical or pyramidal roof, we can recognise the domes of the marabouts and mosques, or the minarets. The single volumes were separated and stripped of their initial role, and reassembled following the goal of an aesthetically balanced composition.



Figure 2. Hotel Uaddan in Tripoli, Florestano di Fausto (1934-35). An example of cubism? (Postcard)



Figure 3. Hotel Uaddan in 2009, after a neo-moorish restoration: wooden musharabias and pergolas have been added. (Picture by the author, 2009)

In the villas he built in the early 1930s in Tripoli, Pellegrini himself showed a particular sensitivity to the definition of a language that, while responding to the functional needs of private clients, was able to fit into the local architectural panorama.⁹

He created a certain cubism by stacking volumes, often grouped around a central core. The resulting facades were fringed towards the outside and caused effects of intense shadow and light, also highlighted by the frequent use of pergolas and canopies. There were no main axes or symmetries, and the apparent randomness of the openings was undoubtedly linked to the vernacular architecture. Similar treatment of volumes was also used by Pellegrini in his projects for rural centres, where cubism was produced by the use of arches, as single elements or as a

⁹ Zard House, Salvi House and the entrance of Villa Burei repeat the idea of a central empty volume to define the distribution of the spaces. In *Rassegna*, 9, 1933, p.392-393 are several pictures of the buildings by Pellegrini in Tripoli; also *Rassegna*, XIV-XV, 1936 "Nuove costruzioni a Tripoli. Arch. Giovanni Pellegrini", 6-10. See also: D'Amia, G. (2008). *The Work of Giovanni Pellegrini in Libya*. In E. Godoli, B. Gravagnuolo, G. Gresleri (Eds.), *Presence of Italian Architects in Mediterranean Countries*, Firenze: m&m (pp.79-89).

sequence, the composition of overlapping geometries, and windows carved into compact blocks. The similarity with the forms of Libyan vernacular architecture was also reinforced by the use of white plaster, employed partly for practical reasons: no cut stones or bricks were available for load-bearing walls, and for rapidity of construction stones and mortar were usually used and these needed to be homogenised with a layer of plaster.



Figure 4. The rural centre Breviglieri, today al-Khadra, Tripolitania, architect U. di Segni (1938). (Picture by the author, 2009)

After the publication of the Manifesto the concept of cubism was not developed further on a theoretical level. From the mid-1930s, it was the concept of *Mediterranean architecture* which was predominantly used to stylistically resume construction in the colony. The concept of *Mediterraneity* was probably the most suitable term to describe a compromise to unify a certain simplicity of form (what Pellegrini would have called *cubism*) with the required Italianity, without risking shame for taking inspiration from Libyan vernacular architecture. As Mia Fuller

pointed out, Mediterraneity was the regime's solution to legitimise the formal transfer of Libyan vernacular architecture to colonial buildings.¹⁰

The whole theoretical discussion on how to build in the colony was never really concluded, and the debate on terms and adjectives continued during the entire occupation. Still, beyond any theoretical labels, architects seemed to agree on the necessity for building that fitted local climatic challenges, reflecting the forms and technical solutions adopted in Libya. For these reasons the architecture of the newly funded rural centres, as well as the private and minor buildings, materialised a certain functional style typical for the region, which originated in climatic and functional needs, and which was probably the most original contribution to the architecture produced in Libya.

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¹⁰ Much has been written in past years about the idea of Mediterraneity. See Fuller, M. (2008). *Mediterraneanism. French and Italian Architects' designs in 1930s North African Cities*. In S.K. Jayyusi (Ed.), *The City in the Islamic World*, Vol 2, Boston: Brill (pp.978-992), and Fuller, M. (2007). *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities and Italian Imperialism*. London: Routledge, in particular chapter 5. On the work of Florestano di Fausto and his idea of Mediterranean architecture, see Anderson, S.S. (2010). The Light and the Line Florestano Di Fausto and the Politics of Mediterraneità. In *California Italian Studies*, 1. For a general introduction on the concept being a politically correct reaction to subsume all requests by the regime in terms of Italianity, local colours, Romanity, see: Capresi (2012).

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