

BOOK REVIEW

Flavia Marcello, *After the Fall: The Legacy of Fascism in Rome's Architectural and Urban History*. London: Bloomsbury, 2024. 256pp. 72 b&w illustrations. £75.00 hbk. £24.99 pbk.

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How can we begin to make sense of the lingering presence of Fascist architecture in the Italian capital? In *After the Fall*, architectural historian Flavia Marcello deftly negotiates this challenge. Lucidly written and engaging throughout, Marcello's study offers something of a roadmap for those interested in understanding how Italy's capital city has accommodated physical vestiges of its Fascist past since the regime was deposed in 1943.

Recent debates over how to handle Fascism's material legacy have extended far beyond the Aurelian Walls. The discussion was famously brought into the American mainstream, for example, by way of historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat's October 2017 article in *The New Yorker*. Published just weeks after a bloody 'Unite the Right' rally near the University of Virginia prompted the removal of dozens of Confederate monuments from Annapolis to Austin, Ben-Ghiat took the opportunity to ask a popular audience why so many Fascist monuments were still standing in Italy. In the months that followed, more than 50 monumental structures across the United Kingdom, too, were either removed or renamed in an effort to create a renewed sense of distance between contemporary society and the world inhabited by long-deceased slavers or imperialists. But scholars of modern Italy, Ben-Ghiat among them, have been tracing the removal, redesign or reinterpretation of Fascist-commissioned structures for decades. Emilio Gentile (2007), Carlo Melograni (2008) and Paolo Nicoloso (2008, 2012) have already explored what Marcello calls the 'surfeit of visual markers of a dead regime' within Rome and it is not as if either of these accounts were in desperate need of an update (p. 1). The premier anglophonic studies, too, especially those authored by Borden Painter Jr (2005), Bosworth (2011) and Aristotle Kallis (2014) continue to hold sway and it is clear that these more comprehensive treatments of Rome's palimpsestic layers formed an instructive point of departure for Marcello. Yet this new contribution, as 'neither history nor guidebook', does not dislodge either from its perch or issue a targeted corrective to existing scholarship (p. 14). Instead, Marcello invites historians of the Fascist built environment to adopt new ways of seeing, or, more precisely, of ordering, the Fascist material legacy within Rome according to an original, systematic framework.


In exploring links between what she calls 'the seven nodes of Fascist Rome' and the 'eight key elements' of political rhetoric that dominated the Fascist and post-Fascist eras, Marcello reevaluates specific sections of the city. Such an approach, she argues, can help us 'identify and interpret the traces of the regime as manifest in the

contemporary city, consider what they may have meant to the people of the time and reflect on how their shifting meanings impact the twenty-first century' (p. 5). Indeed, this interpretive analysis stands as the book's main intellectual contribution. The survey of Fascist buildings, mosaics and epigraphic inscriptions offers little in the way of historical revision or source criticism.

The book is broken into seven chapters and begins with a general overview which establishes its overall scope and structure. This introductory explanation of Marcello's eight key rhetorical themes gives way to a chapter dedicated to exploration of Rome's post-war development. Chapter 3 explores the process of 'postwar cleansing' that determined the fate of a range of buildings from government offices to schools and apartments. Chapter 4 offers a narrative tour through the EUR quarter; an area of Rome Marcello describes as the 'lost fantasy of an ideal Fascist city' (p. 81). The fifth chapter considers the appropriation, deletion or abandonment of several monumental (i.e. non-functional) structures throughout Rome, while the sixth chapter focuses on extant examples of Fascist-era epigraphy and inscription. The book concludes with a reflection on the myriad ways in which Rome's urban landscape continues to narrate certain elements of its Fascist past.

This book's novel analytical frame is just one of its several strengths. Another lies in its thoughtful incorporation of *ventennio*-straddling source material. At times, Marcello brings to life specific Fascist-inflected places and spaces by incorporating a range of first-hand, contemporary accounts. The decision to give voice to both former Mayor Francesco Rutelli's concern over Rome's international image and an unidentified schoolgirl caught defacing a Fascist building with anti-Fascist graffiti, for example, reminds us that the struggle to mediate the regime-sponsored built environment spanned civic, social and even age divides. In terms of source base, Marcello relies exclusively on three series within the Archivio Centrale dello Stato, five Luce newsreels and a variety of twentieth- and twenty-first-century periodicals. Richly illustrated, Marcello's analysis is further bolstered by the inclusion of several charts and diagrams produced by the author herself.

Less a meditation on political memory or the Italian historical imaginary than it is an attempt to reorder our understanding of Fascist architectural production, *After the Fall* invites historians and architectural historians to adopt a novel mode of analysis when confronting the Fascist built environment. Marcello's kaleidoscopic treatment of Fascism's urban layer can feel disorienting at times, but despite all its complicated exploration of the node-rhetoric dynamic, its systematic approach is anchored by a desire to answer the three basic contextual 'when, what, and where' questions most students of architectural history are trained to ask in year one. For urban historians with an interest in state-sponsored design, Marcello's node-rhetoric model may prove especially alluring. In sum, this book is as accessible as it is instructive, and students, scholars and tourists alike would do well to bring it along on their next visit to the Eternal City.

James J. Fortuna 
University of St Andrews
jf253@st-andrews.ac.uk