



Urban Design under Mussolini

Fascist Italy in Search of the New City

Harald Bodenschatz (Ed.)

Authors: Harald Bodenschatz and Daniela Spiegel,

with essays by Uwe Altrock, Lorenz Kirchner, and Ursula von Petz

Schriften des Architekturmuseums der Technischen Universität Berlin 4

DOM publishers, Berlin 2011

520 pages, 630 illustrations

ISBN 978-3-86922-186-1

While Italy is famous for its historic architectural achievements, its contribution to urban design in twentieth-century Europe is often overlooked. Yet no other European country initiated and carried out as many urban planning projects in the interwar years as Italy did: urban planning under Mussolini extended not only to the big cities, but also to numerous large and small towns. After the Second World War this intense activity was forgotten or disowned; it is only in the past two decades that exhibitions and publications in Italy have brought its projects to the attention of a broader public. The focus tends to be on design, however, ignoring the fascist background. And while cultured western Europeans generally claim a deep attachment to all things Italian, this does not, apparently, involve an awareness of architecture and planning under fascism.

The book *Urban Design under Mussolini* is the product of several years of research in a project of the Berlin University of Technology. Drawing extensively on Italian sources, it not only provides a systematic overview of urban planning under the fascist regime, but takes a fresh approach to the subject, offering new, unexpected angles. Its numerous illustrations

include many unfamiliar views. Since Rome was the centre of planning activity in the Mussolini era, one major focus of the book is on urban planning issues and projects in and around the Eternal City and the attempts made to form the capital of fascist Italy into a NEW ROME rivalling the power and glory of ancient and papal Rome. The book's second focus is on the new cities built by the fascists as part of the massive project of reclaiming the Pontine Marshes southeast of Rome. Intended to demonstrate an allegedly efficient settlement policy within Italy, it was much applauded internationally. Next in the book is a brief overview of important urban planning projects in other Italian cities as well as the new towns. The geographic focus cannot be limited to the Italian peninsula alone, however, since that would mean denying the Janus-faced character of urban planning under Mussolini. While urban design in Italy itself – apart from the areas close to the country's northern border, such as Bolzano – was intended to boost support for the regime, in the Italian colonies, especially in Africa, urban planning policies served to assert, consolidate, and demonstrate the regime's absolute power. The efforts undertaken by planners at this time to establish urban design both institutionally and legally as well as at universities are also discussed in detail.

Both in Italy and elsewhere, architecture and urban planning under autocratic regimes are generally discussed in isolation, with policies explained solely from a national context. Since this approach necessarily limits our understanding of what went on at the time, this book seeks to offer a wider perspective also extending to the policies of Mussolini's fellow dictators Hitler and Stalin. In this context the book draws on Harald Bodenschatz's research on urban design under Stalin (published in *Städtebau im Schatten Stalins*, 2003) and Nazi planning in Berlin, which not only provided valuable background for his research into urban planning under the Mussolini regime, but also significantly broadens the scope of analysis, making it possible to compare specific aspects of urban planning under different autocratic regimes.

Numerous urban planning projects in interwar Italy are significant from a European perspective, too, and need to be discussed in the wider context of urban planning in Europe. The radical and ruthless restructuring of old town centres under Mussolini, for example, reflected the international consensus among urban planners at the time. Yet urban renewal can take various forms: Gustavo Giovannoni, for instance, developed alternative programmes involving a rather more cautious thinning out of old buildings (*diradamento*). Though fascinating in terms of the history of ideas, however, his programmes were not implemented

to any satisfactory extent in Mussolini's Italy. A large number of Italy's urban development projects are relevant for international developments, too, including the projects initiated in the 1920s by the Roman Institute for Social Housing, foremost among them the garden city of Garbatella. International comparison also shows that the oblivion into which the new cities founded by the fascists have fallen is largely undeserved. With their carefully differentiated architecture they offer an attractive small-town atmosphere that communicates itself even – or perhaps especially – today. The prime example in this context is Sabaudia, where the marriage of modern architecture and traditional urban planning has been remarkably successful. The attractiveness and high quality of interwar urban planning is both striking and disturbing, but one has to keep in mind that these pleasant habitats were reserved for the new middle classes that benefited most from the regime, while the urban poor were pushed to the suburban periphery and marginalized spatially as well as socially.

The title of the book, *Urban Design under Mussolini*, is not meant to imply a strict hierarchy of top-down mechanisms. Urban planning in fascist Italy did not follow the dictates of the *Duce*, nor did urban planners submit unconditionally to the *Duce's* will. Though most were wholly and enthusiastically committed to fascism, ideas varied about the forms that commitment might take. This does not rule out timeserving and opportunism, on the contrary; but Mussolini had to work with the people who were available and who were willing to serve him – or, as graduates of the new universities, might be willing to serve him in future. His rewards for individual experts were motivated by the need to encourage the commitment of the profession as a whole. A differentiated analysis of urban design under an autocratic regime which also takes account of historical and structural contexts therefore requires a reconstruction of the complex actor-networks around which urban planning in fascist Italy revolved.