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Citation: Jarzombek, Mark. "Book review of: Italy: Modern Architectures in History." Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 73, no. 3 (September 2014): 421–423. © 2014 by the Society of Architectural Historians

As Published: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/jsah.2014.73.3.421>

Publisher: University of California Press

Persistent URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/92585>

Version: Final published version: final published article, as it appeared in a journal, conference proceedings, or other formally published context

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING

SOCIETY OF
ARCHITECTURAL
HISTORIANS

Review: Italy: Modern Architectures in History

Italy: Modern Architectures in History by Diane Ghirardo

Review by: Mark Jarzombek

Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Vol. 73, No. 3 (September 2014), pp. 421-423

Published by: [University of California Press](http://www.ucpress.edu) on behalf of the [Society of Architectural Historians](http://www.sah.org)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jsah.2014.73.3.421>

Accessed: 05/01/2015 12:19

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early as 1900 in the American Negro exhibit at the Exposition Universelle in Paris. While European expositions were by no means free of racial essentialisms, as Patricia Morton describes in her study of the Paris Colonial Exposition of 1931, the American Exhibit in 1900 situated black achievement squarely within the American body politic.⁴ During the same time period, W. E. B. Du Bois's Pan-African conception of black identity was on display in scientific and political studies documenting the ways in which racial laws limited black achievement in the United States. Considering Wilson's emphasis on the black counter-public sphere, it is hard not to think of Du Bois's sociological study of the Georgia Negro exhibit as an explicit critique of the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition and the beginning of his mature attempts to promote Pan-Africanism in world's fair venues.

A noteworthy aspect of Wilson's study is her demonstration of the range of material forms that were used to promote the black counter-public sphere in the twentieth century. After the popularity of Negro exposition buildings had begun to wane, Du Bois experimented with black pageants and plays. The display of black cultural history at these pageants combined African themes, including the use of Egyptian iconography on temporary pavilions, and plays such as *The Song of Ethiopia*, performed over a three-hour span. Wilson details the political implications of Du Bois's use of North African props that augmented the civilizational origins of Western European culture in the United States, which "hinted at racial assimilation" for African Americans "in the American melting pot" (158). This bid for acceptance was also counterbalanced by the promotion of Black Nationalism and protest within middle-class communities. As Wilson points out, the temporality of these early twentieth-century pageants were echoed in postwar plans for the International Afro-American Museum (IAM), which was deployed in a mobile home to disseminate oral histories of black leaders to the black diaspora spread across North America. In this way, her history resonates in the present, anticipating, for example, the Pan-African themes of David Adjaye's design for the

new Smithsonian Museum for African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. The one thing this otherwise excellent volume lacks is an appendix listing all the buildings and spaces covered in its nearly 500 pages. As it stands, it requires readers to keep careful notes as they progress through its many pages.

These three books advance the presence and importance of race and ethnicity studies in architectural history in important ways. They fill obvious gaps in the field and invite scholars to reexamine existing archives with new eyes. One can only hope that we will take the invitation seriously, as more work is yet to be done on such a serious subject.

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Notes

1. See St. Claire Drake and Horace R. Clayton's *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), as an example of ethnographic research that attempts to present a sociological portrait of a people, with some indication of its architectural environs.
2. Martin Berger, *Site Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
3. Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), ix.
4. Patricia Morton, *Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003).

Diane Ghirardo

Italy: Modern Architectures in History

London: Reaktion Books, 2013. 336 pp., 207 b/w illus. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 9781861898647

When we think of the history of modern architecture the story might revolve around the Germans and the Bauhaus, but Diane Ghirardo's *Italy: Modern Architectures in History* might give us pause, since it reminds us of a more fundamental driver of "the modern," namely, the rise of the nation-state. This was a significant aspect for the Prussians during the Enlightenment, and indeed some have argued that Friedrich

Schinkel was, in a sense, the first modern for the Germans. But the German unification as such took place only in 1871, and though there are many parallels, the Italian situation was considerably more stressed, for they not only had to build a nation-state after 1861 out of the chaos of unification but also had to do so in the vortex of modern industrialization. Timing was everything; the Greeks won their independence in 1830, but the Greeks never accepted—or perhaps one can say embraced—"the crisis of modernity" in quite the same way as the Italians.

The task of creating Italy's image fell, of course, to the architects, city designers, and artists whose accomplishments gave visible definition to the question of what a national architecture should look like, especially in comparison with the architecture of countries far ahead in the modernization enterprise. The Italians were not alone in that general ambition. The Americas were equally concerned with developing a national style, as were many of the other European nations in the era of Romantic nationalism. But the Italian story remains unique, given the tension between that nation's deep history and its now-nationalized civilizational ambitions. Unique to the Italian perspective was the situation that the country was not a colonial power with access to far-flung resources. In 1861, it was largely a rural nation. The scale of the transformation should, therefore, not be underestimated. Between unification and the end of World War II, Italy's urban landscape was completely transformed. Almost everything that one might expect from a modern nation had to be built: monuments, schools, train stations, slaughterhouses, operas, markets, power plants, stock exchanges, and department stores, not to mention industrial quarters, harbors, and roads. Through a judicious selection of these projects, Ghirardo penetrates to the heart of Italy's social and political history.

Though the book's chapters are arranged more or less chronologically, they are designed as a series of essays that move us through various relevant themes. Chapter 2, for example, looks at the changing status of the metropolis from the 1860s to about 1925. Ghirardo's goal is not to spend too

much time on any single structure but to portray in large brushstrokes the dynamics of the times: to flesh out the consequence of choosing Rome as a capital; to point to the interconnected issues of finance, urban development, and demolition; to contextualize Rome's master plan of 1883; to describe the emerging housing problem; to discuss the rise of electrical, chemical, and metallurgical economies; to reach the threshold of the depopulation of villages for industrial cores. All this information could be quite formidable, but the pace of the writing and the rhythm of insights keep the reader moving along without getting lost in the minutiae.

Chapter 3 brings us to the core of the emerging (or perhaps festering) problem of Italian nationalism. In the 1920s, the country was ruled by a king and an elite who were remote from the peasants who, when they returned from fighting in World War I, began to question the nature of their identity within the nation. Fascism addressed this discontent and built its strength upon the ideology of cross-class Italian solidarity. The question for Ghirardo is not about what is or is not fascist architecture. Rather, her goal is to address the massive modernization program of dams, highways, railways, and aqueducts as well as the politics of the Ministry of Public Works. Buildings, although more important to our particular disciplinary perspective, constituted only a small percentage of the overall expenditures. Nonetheless, architectural debates were now front and center in the national polemic. Was architecture to proclaim its functionality or was it to ally itself with historical precedent, and if so was it to translate that precedent into something abstract or was it to evoke Italy's classical past in a more literal way? The complex array of approaches has perplexed historians, who have labeled some more fascist and others more modernist. Ghirardo moves away from such an approach by looking less at the style than at the patronage system with its deep continuities to the previous regime. She walks us through a host of buildings, from schools and factories to operas, post offices, and party headquarters. No subsequent Italian government commissioned such a diverse group of buildings. This extraordinary

output of inventive design over the twenty years of fascist rule needs some historical explanation, and indeed the reasons for the diversity of approaches have less to do with a competitive desire to define a fascist aesthetic than with a deep-seated aristocratic culture in the field of architecture as well as with the engagement of architects with the other arts, graphic designers, actors, poets, and the like that opened the field to experimentation. If we remove the accusatory finger, we find a level of experimentation unparalleled anywhere else in Europe.

Chapter 4 deals with rise of postwar industrialization, labor unrest, and housing, once again focusing on the anxiety about what an Italian architecture should look like, given the general contamination after the war of both modernism and tradition. The result, with Le Corbusier serving as predictable referent, was the proliferation of large linear housing tracts that rarely survived the test of time, propagating (or at least representing) the growing problem of scale in the modern metropolis.

Chapter 5 studies the architecture of the 1950s and 1960s, when the Italian economy righted itself, and we see the emergence of a generation of talented designers such as Gino Valle, Vittorio Gregotti, and Luigi Moretti, not to mention those working for Olivetti and other industrialists. National architecture became something more akin to a national style, associated less with identity politics than with Italy's new industrial revolution. Here we see a range of office buildings, apartment houses, universities, and factories that are rarely discussed or analyzed. The chapter addresses the work of Renzo Piano and Aldo Rossi, who brought back Italy's history to bear on the discussion of architectural design. Chapter 6 looks at the larger question of preservation and restoration, which has a major history throughout this period. It is an important theme, since Italians have increasingly dominated the politics of renovation. Given their patrimony, architectural history was always an element of the national consciousness. We should, therefore, not forget that in Italy preservation was, in essence, born out of a nationalist-modernist trope, despite the illusions to the contrary. The Ferrara Town Hall, for example, as discussed by

Ghirardo, may look medieval to most observers but was rebuilt in its present form in 1923. Here the author also gives us a penetrating account of the commissioning of Aldo Rossi for the rebuilding of the fabled La Fenice, which had burned in 1991, and the role that Bruno Levi played in bringing architectural issues to a wider audience. She discusses the great don of modern preservation, Carlo Scarpa, as well as Richard Meier's building to house the Ara Pacis, a structure that encapsulates the shift in Italian architecture in the 1970s. The question was less about Italian style than about how Italian architects work in the increasingly large world of global practices dominated by star players.

And it is this theme that is picked up in the last chapter, wherein Italian architects now work abroad and have made prominent careers doing so—Renzo Piano being the best known. At the same time, global architects have moved into the Italian scene: Kenzō Tange, Richard Meier, Frank Gehry, Tadao Ando, Foster + Partners, Zaha Hadid, and Santiago Calatrava among others. It was a wave—sometimes called an invasion—that many in the United States can hardly appreciate but that caused a lot of anxiety among Europeans who were opening their borders, and not just to star architects.

The result was that the old national/nationalism project softened or disappeared outright as an aesthetic ideology in architecture—although most certainly not in politics. The issue at stake here, however, was an architecture that was in keeping with “the requirement of being—and appearing—modern” (291). But at the same time, Italian tradition was most certainly not being lost, although it was profoundly transformed. There are now more buildings preserved under UNESCO in Italy than in any other country in the world, leading to a kind of split between prestige imports and sanitized history. The result, for Ghirardo, is clearly a loss of the dynamic nature of modern architecture and its promise for a more open-ended search for meaning and form. But this is not exactly the end of the story, for despite the systemic problem of corruption, the difficulties for women to enter the field, not to mention the recent economic

meltdown, the author holds out a glimmer of hope for the younger generation, who now make their unique mark in smaller commissions. Arassociati (formerly the office of Aldo Rossi), the firm known as MARC (Michele Bonino and Subhash Mukerjee), and Elena Manferdini are among a group of firms that she feels hold the keys to the Italian spirit.

As the book moves from the nineteenth century to today, it becomes less historical and more on the order of criticism. In this shift, Ghirardo is sending a powerful message about the advantage of seeing current practice through a long lens. She emphasizes this in the subtitle, *Modern Architectures in History*, where the plural of the word *architecture* is critical. There is no one Italian modernism, just as there is no “right” or “wrong” modernism. But there is, nonetheless, in her writing that classical sense of precedent, where some buildings are better than others, and this is where the historian-critic plays a role different from the standard role of the architectural critic working for a newspaper or design magazine. In a sense, one could almost read the book backward, ending—or beginning—with the first great example of Italian modernism, Giuseppe Sacconi’s imposing monument to Vittorio Emanuele II in Rome, a structure that has often been scorned as a “wedding cake” but that set the tone for devotion to spectacle and the spectacular. That a book on modern architecture should open with this monument sends the message that we should not overdetermine what we understand by modern, for that particular devotion was still strong in the work of Paolo Portoghesi and even today resonates in the architecture of Renzo Piano. Other modernities that developed in the context of early nationalism (namely, those that tried to integrate rationalism with the historical) also survived, and now that the historical is no longer wrapped up in compulsions of class identity, patriotism, and antimodernism, the project of modernity opens itself up to the elasticity of experimentation, though under threat, as Ghirardo suggests, from the Italian anxiety about its role in the global economy.

Ghirardo has certainly earned her right to have opinions about contemporary practice. She has lived, breathed, Italian

architecture for decades and is by far one of the most accomplished scholars of architecture in that part of the world, and this book certainly proves it. There is a lot she is not telling us, and indeed she could have used the opportunity to present a more expansive and personal text. Instead, she gives a grand view and a powerful foundation from which we can work.

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Kimberly Elman Zarecor

**Manufacturing a Socialist
Modernity: Housing in
Czechoslovakia, 1945–1960**

Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press,
2011, 480 pp., 292 b/w illus. \$45 (cloth),
ISBN 9780822944041

Until very recently, almost every study of the history of the Communist period in Central Europe has shown evidence of the political and ideological views—or the personal life experiences—of those who lived through the era. Only rarely does one find works that are wholly free from the burden of such context. Kimberly Elman Zarecor is the first author to address the history of housing during the Communist period—the product of deliberate social engineering—in a fully dispassionate way.

Throughout her book, Zarecor challenges one of the standard myths of the era. “Architectural historians and the general public,” she writes, “have long assumed that Soviet architects forced panel technology on unwilling architects in the Eastern Bloc after they had mastered it at home” (266). She goes on to ask several related questions: To what extent was Czechoslovak postwar architecture an autonomous development? How was Czechoslovakia different from, or similar to, other countries of the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union? In posing these questions, Zarecor presents a far more complex view of an important chapter in the history of architecture—one that until now has not been the subject of deeper scholarly attention.

Zarecor’s approach—to study the process of change rather than the resulting aesthetic qualities of the works—led her to focus on two key points: the transformation

of architectural practice and the shift of the status of architects in society. Tracing these processes from the late nineteenth century through the end of the 1950s, she demonstrates a “shift from individual commissions to mass production” (5) at a time “when architects became technicians and industrial producers rather than artists or individual creators” (66).

The book is divided into five thematic chapters, each related in some way to the mass-produced residential architecture of the period. Zarecor points out the gaps in contemporary research and the “desire for something more than just a survey” in current discourse (3). In doing so, she exposes the main problems—especially the tendency toward oversimplification—inherent in most previous research on the subject.

The first chapter traces the continuity of the interwar period and the postwar years, arguing against the commonly held notion of “either 1938 or 1945” representing a “break between high modernism and what came later” (16). Rather, Zarecor maintains that it was the social and political engagement of the prewar avant-garde attempting to build a new society that played a crucial role in the postwar transformation of the profession. She points out that prewar Czechoslovakia was already heavily industrialized, and that there were examples of collective architecture and standardized building before the advent of the Communist building program, most notably in Zlín, the city of the future built by the Baťa Shoe Company, and in the works of some of the best interwar architects. Especially important for laying the intellectual foundation by the late 1920s for what came afterward were the ideas and writings of Karel Teige, the leading figure in prewar Czechoslovak architecture. His 1929 attack on Le Corbusier’s Mundaneum project challenged its monumentality and artistic pretensions and established the basis for similar discussions for the next half-century.

Zarecor briefly discusses Teige’s story, his falling out with the new Communist regime and his later theoretical legacy, but mostly she follows a different line of inquiry. It must be pointed out that her book is concerned almost exclusively with