

The Meaning Making of the Built Environment in the Fascist City: A Semiotic Approach

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on interpretative semiotics to address how spatial designers endow the built environment with meaning. From a semiotic perspective, designing the built environment is an activity that extends beyond its physical reshaping. Designers use complex sociosemiotic strategies to funnel users' interpretations, drawing upon their manifold resources. Analyzing these strategies is important to not naturalize the dominant meaning that is inscribed in the built environment. As a case study, we analyze spatial design in the city of Forlì, Italy, during the Fascist regime (1922–43). Through the case study, we delineate two complimentary design strategies: typification and environmental propaganda. Typification establishes and uses familiar types of buildings to channel individual interpretations; environmental propaganda spreads cultural artifacts and enacts political rituals about the built environment. Both of these strategies try to steer users' interpretations of the built environment in everyday life. Finally, we provide a detailed analysis of a particular built form in Forlì—the headquarters of the Opera Nazionale Balilla—showing how these strategies were deployed for this particular building.

In 1932, at the height of the Italian Fascist regime, the Catholic chief of the city of Forlì, Italy, wrote Benito Mussolini to complain about two recently inaugurated built forms, namely, a war memorial and a post office building. The

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Catholic authority claimed that the built forms presented examples of “nudism,” that is, sculptures of nude human beings. Such sculptures represented “an insult” to common decency. He suggested that Mussolini should remove these statues and place them in “reserved rooms inside Pagan Museums.”

Since the Fascist government financed the creation of the new built forms, Mussolini wanted to ascertain whether the Catholic objection had any ground: if the population had interpreted the built forms as an offense to public decency, the Fascist investments would have failed their goals. Therefore, Mussolini forwarded the complaint to the local Fascist authority of Forlì, which reassured Mussolini that the sculptures did not offend the population. The local authority clarified that, in fact, the sculptor got inspiration from Renaissance art.

It is worth noting that both the Catholic and the local authorities did not speak merely on their own behalf. They claimed to represent the population of Forlì: the Catholic chief mentioned “the fathers” and “the mothers” in Forlì, whereas the Fascist authority reported the sentiments of “the citizens.” The quarreling authorities were not writing about their personal tastes, but about general interpretative patterns.¹

This correspondence may appear an uninteresting quarrel about secondary monuments. Actually, it highlights general issues about the built environment and its interpretation. How could the Fascist and the Catholic authorities write on behalf of the population? That is, how can we conceive a shared interpretation of the built environment? How could the Fascist government be sure that the shared interpretations of the new built forms conformed to its plans? More in general, if a general interpretation will eventually emerge, how can designers tame it? Based on a semiotic framing of shared interpretations, we address these questions by analyzing the strategies that Fascist designers employed in Forlì. However, we claim that such strategies can be generalized beyond the case study.

A Sociosemiotic Approach to Design

The meaning of the built environment has attracted a growing interest in architecture, geography, and semiotics. Architects have suggested ways in which architecture can convey meanings beyond physical structure (Goodman 1985, 643). Human and cultural geographers have prioritized the cultural dimension of the built environment exploring how culture connects with the social, eco-

Casa, Anthony Chen, Paul Cobley, Zoe Crossland, Kalevi Kull, Craig Rawlings, Marcello Sacchetti, Philip Smith, Cesare Valle, and Valeria Zappalà.

1. Archivio Storico del Comune di Forlì, Gabinetto della Prefettura, Busta 307. The paper trail on this issue stops here—from historical pictures, we can infer that the statues were not modified.

nomic, and political dimensions (Duncan and Ley 1993, 332). Since the 1980s, cultural geography has conceptualized landscape as a construction to perpetuate social order and power relations (Cosgrove 1984; Jackson 1989; Duncan 1990). Most cultural geographers have converged on two assumptions: landscape has power and it can be seen as a text that communicates meanings (Boogart 2001, 39). These assumptions have been extended to the built environment as the result of human actions on the “primeval” landscape (Duncan 1990).

Although informed by semiotic concepts, this geographical debate has never explicitly aligned itself with semiotics (Lindström et al. 2014). Yet, since the late 1960s, scholars in semiotics have explored the concepts of space, place, and landscape using different paradigms ranging from the semiological tradition associating built forms with texts (e.g., Marrone 2009; Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou 2014) to more ecological understanding of landscape (e.g., Lindström et al. 2014). In this context, semiotic analysis has begun to prioritize the signifying dimension of the built environment by investigating the processes through which built forms convey meanings (Barthes 1970; Lotman 1987; Eco 1997). A specific field called “urban semiotics” analyzes the signification processes in existing urban spaces (Gottdiener and Lagopoulos 1986). Most of this semiotic research converges on one assumption: that the built environment conveys meanings in space.

Even if previous works have theorized and analyzed the meaning of the built environment, the processes through which designers manage to endow the built environment with collectively agreed upon meaning remains substantially unexplored. Previous literature tends to model design as the act of selecting elements from a catalog of signs and deploying them in the physical space. Yet, a semiotic approach to design may question the processes leading to the establishment of sign-relations themselves. For example, Atkinson and Cosgrove (1998) examine the design strategies implemented by the Italian state to define a unitary national identity through the Vittoriano, a huge monument erected in Rome to commemorate the first king of united Italy. The authors argue that the vertical spatiality of this monument extends its meanings “from the depths of the tomb to the heights of atmosphere, from death to life and from past to future” (Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998, 45). This may be the case for the Vittoriano, but vertical spatiality in a monument does not necessarily convey “life” or “future”—as the obelisks in Rome suggest (Sorek 2010). What did designers do to connect verticality to “life” and “future” in the case of the Vittoriano?

Similarly, Abousnougua and Machin (2013) claim that a “repertoire of semiotic resources” is available to designers who combine them “to communicate

specific meanings in context” (57). Those semiotic resources all contribute in the meaning making of the built environment. With reference to war memorials, the authors argue that the choices on iconography, symbolism, and materials can “have very different meaning potential” (131). For instance, stone as a construction material conveys “longevity and ancientness” but also “naturalness”; when carved in smooth and rounded shapes it could communicate “softness” (134). Stone is certainly durable and present in the wild—justifying its longevity and naturalness. Yet, other qualities of stone may stand out, while other materials are similarly long-lived or natural. Deploying stone in a monument does not suffice to convey naturalness or longevity.

In general, employing signs does not guarantee that users will interpret those signs as expected. Such possible failures reveal something on the semiotic aspects of design. Specifically, we can interrogate the processes that make users’ interpretations predictable, but not certain. Ultimately, this line of questioning suggests that design is more than a selection of signs and their deployment in the built environment: it encompasses all of the multifarious strategies that diverse actors employ to funnel users’ interpretation of the built environment. To articulate this claim, we draw upon interpretative semiotics. Here, the word *interpretative* refers to a specific semiotic tradition, based on Umberto Eco’s semiotic theory (Eco 1976, 1984, 1986; Paolucci 2008, 2010). Starting from the time-honored debate on the definition of sign, Eco redefines the sign through his original reading of Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotics (Eco 1984, 1986): a sign is a set of instructions guiding an interpreter during its interpretation. Interpretation, in turn, is the act of recalling signs. For example, the word *man* is a sign that (may) elicit the recalling of the words *human* and *male* as an interpretation. In turn, the recalled signs (may) elicit the recalling of further signs, and so on *ad libitum*. From Eco’s point of view, signs are not limited to words, images, and symbols. On the contrary, Eco’s definition of sign follows the Peircean tendency to stretch the category well beyond its common boundaries: following Eco, a sign is anything that enters into an interpretative chain—regardless of its form.

In addition to this definition of sign, Eco conceives a stock of shared signs that interpreters use during their interpretative processes, a construct named “encyclopedia” (1986). Importantly, encyclopedia is not an unordered bunch of to-be-recalled signs. Rather, encyclopedia contains “interpretative habits”—a Peircean-inspired phrase to indicate that interpreters recall signs following habitual patterns. For this reason, encyclopedia contains both shared sign

and shared ways to use signs, that is, shared interpretative habits. It follows that recalling signs from encyclopedia is mostly a routinized activity. For example, urbanists are quite sure about drivers' interpretation of a traffic light; yet, unexpected interpretations may always happen.

Following this theory, we can frame design as an attempt to control users' interpretations of the built environment—as Thomas Gieryn explains, “every design is a blueprint for human behavior and social structure, as well as a schematic for the ‘thing’ itself” (2002, 42). In other words, design tries to regulate the interpretative habits regarding the built environment. Hence, design stabilizes social life by inscribing selected interpretative habits in stone (Bourdieu 1970). Noticeably, this definition of design encompasses a wide range of activities that do not alter the physical shape of built forms. From this perspective, design is a collective activity, entailing the collaboration (or conflict) of diverse agents: “Makers of law and policy, developers, planners, engineers, architects and designers, producers and consumers, and the everyday inhabitants” (Tonkiss 2014, 12). All of these actors try to set the habitual interpretations of the built environment—all of them are designers.

Previous research in architecture, geography, and semiotics has emphasized the potential gap between designers' intentions and users' interpretations (e.g., Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998). Interpretative semiotics provides theoretical insights about this gap and indicates how it may (or not) originate: designers cannot fully control the emergence of the users' interpretative habits, but diverse designers employ various sociosemiotic strategies to control users' interpretations. Such strategies are “sociosemiotic” in the sense that they unfold in the social arena, they draw upon semiotic resources—such as existing habits—and they try to achieve semiotic goals. These goals, when achieved, will in turn feed-back on the social arena.

This theory reframes design as a tentative of control over meaning. It follows that analyzing those machineries that designers use to control what the built environments signifies is critical from a theoretical, analytical and political perspective. On the other hand, overlooking these machineries risks to naturalize meaning as well as the power relations it entails. In the following sections, we address two strategies that designers use to create spatial interpretative habits and we analyze their deployment in the design of a specific built form in Forlì. We want to show through a case study that design is a varied effort that draws upon large sociosemiotic arrangements to bend the interpretative habits about the built environment.

Case Study: The City of Forlì

Studying spatial design may be a complex task. Often, there are intricate situations wherein different agents struggle to set the interpretative habit regarding one space; divided cities such as Jerusalem are blatant examples of these situations (Calame and Charlesworth 2011; Bollens 2012). Here, we focus on the simplest theoretical configuration, that is, wherein one set of agents generally share one design goal in order to influence one community of interpreters. Specifically, we analyze the renovation of the city of Forlì during Italian Fascism (1922–43). Indeed, in Fascist Italy, non-Fascist spatial designers were either outlawed or simply overpowered. For an extensive review on the Italian architecture during the Fascist regime, see Kirk (2005, 69–137).

At the advent of Fascism, Forlì, located in the north of Italy, was a small, agricultural city. From a spatial point of view, the city developed along the Via Emilia—an ancient Roman road. Maps show that, before Fascism, Forlì had changed slowly over time (Gambi 1992).

Fascism drastically changed this context. Since Mussolini was born in Dovia di Predappio—a tiny village a few miles to the southwest of Forlì—Forlì was inserted into the national propaganda as the “city of the Duce.” Fascist media frequently stressed the link between Forlì and Mussolini, who boasted his popular origin from a tiny village and praised its rural hometown. For example, images of Mussolini in its rural estate in Forlì widely circulated in Italy and strictly tied Mussolini to Forlì (Falasca-Zamponi 1997). As Mario Proli (2017) shows, the Forlì-Dovia route eventually became a popular touristic attraction: many visitors traveled to Forlì and Dovia di Predappio to see the birthplace of Mussolini. Local newspapers referred to these visitors as “pilgrims,” highlighting the sort of religious admirations for Mussolini (Proli 2017, 33). Under the direction of Achille Starace, the national secretary of the Fascist Party from 1931 to 1939, pilgrimages became meticulously organized rituals emphasizing Mussolini’s popular origins (Proli 2017, 32).

The title of “city of the Duce” had major consequences. Suddenly, Forlì became an important city for Italian culture. From an economic point of view, substantial financial sources were steered to Forlì and its infant industry (D’Attorre 1993). From a political point of view, after a difficult seizure of power (Federazione Fascista della Provincia di Forlì 1927, 3–4), the Fascist government of the city seemed stable. This was an exception compared to many other cities, where conflicts internal to the Fascist Party frequently resulted in the direct intervention of the central government. However, when Forlì faced political

unrest, the central government sent important national figures to appease the city (Guiso 2010, 62–65).

Yet, the most apparent innovations regarded the built environment. Between 1923 and 1944, the Fascist government approved the construction of 341 public or private built forms. These built forms included houses and streets as well as structures for industry, transports, health care, education, and religion (Carli Moretti 1999, 387–410). In 1923, the year after Mussolini became prime minister of Italy, the local Fascist government approved the first urban *piano regolatore*² of the city. Forlì was a preexisting city: the inhabitants interpreted the built environment drawing upon already established interpretative habits. Therefore, from a semiotic perspective, the urban plan aimed at changing the preexisting habits in order to mark the built environment of Forlì as “Fascist.” To do this, it suggested two complementary strategies: first, to restore the historical urban space to meet the new traffic needs and, second, to expand the urban space of Forlì beyond its historical urban layout.

As for the expansion, Fascist authorities planned to expand the urban space of Forlì along a new axis toward southeast (red in fig. 1). Before Fascism, Forlì was developing from the central square toward the northeast (blue in fig. 1). Indeed, the northeastern axis was the route that connected the central square to the old train station and industries. In addition, the northeastern axis was the path that political and religious ceremonies followed through the city (Lodovici 1998, 88). From this perspective, the planned expansion had clear political and symbolic implications: the new southeastern axis replaced the axis of urban development encouraged by previous governments. It is significant that the Fascist political ceremonies followed a new L-shaped path, from the new train station to the central square (Tramonti 1999, 62). It is interesting to note that a similar use of the built environment and public rituals to constitute and reinforce political power can be observed in a wide range of cases—for example, the Inca empire of the central Andes in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Coben 2006).

The new axis pivoted around the avenue, linking the new train station with the preexisting Piazzale Casalini. This new avenue, the Viale Benito Mussolini

2. A *piano regolatore* is a very precise urban plan dictating how a city should develop. This tool was used extensively throughout the Fascist period (Piccinato 1930), and the regime made it mandatory for every city in 1942. Indeed, through this tool, Fascist designers virtually controlled every built form in existing cities. As a Fascist designer put it, the “*piano regolatore* includes everything that concerns the organization of people’s life” (Natoli 1937, 33).

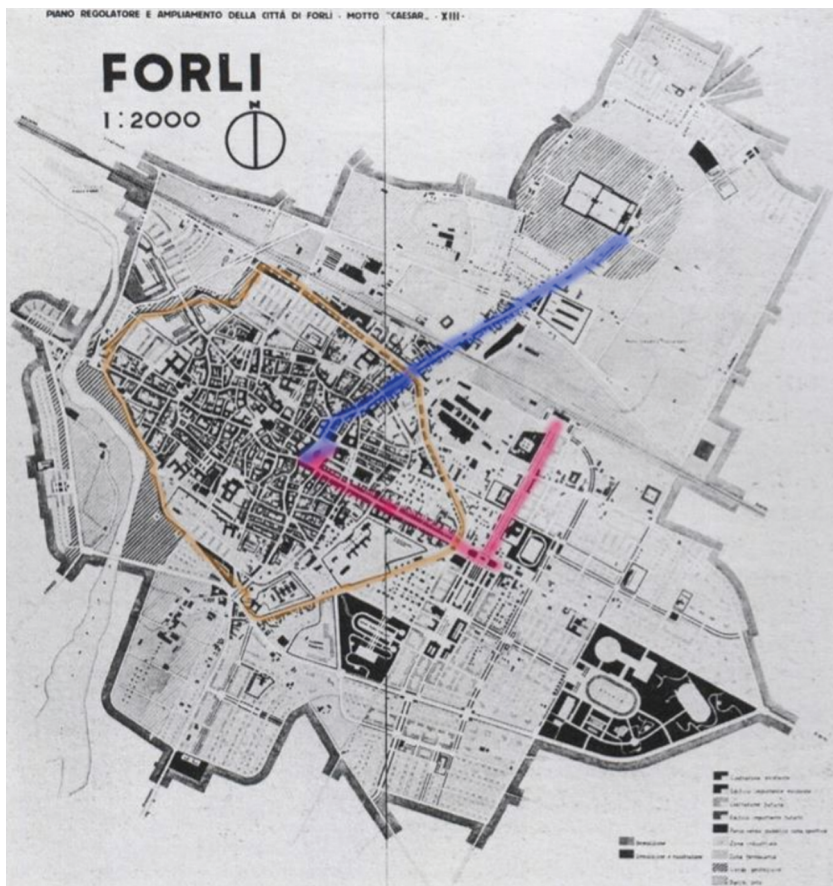


Figure 1. The *piano regolatore* of Forlì in 1931. The purple line signals the L-path (with Mussolini Avenue), and the blue line indicates the previous direction of development. The brown line follows the Renaissance walls.

(fig. 2), was oversized with respect to Forlì.³ It was conceived as a symbolic road embodying the power of Fascism in Forlì. The buildings overlooking this avenue should have conveyed meanings of modernity and elegance. As a contemporary commentator put it, “new elegant buildings will be erected here to imprint ideals of modernity to our country” (Casadei 1928, 213).

3. The new avenue was initially dedicated to Benito Mussolini (fig. 2). In 1935, a new policy made local administrations rename all of the streets and squares named after Benito Mussolini. Thus, this avenue was baptized again as XXVIII Ottobre (28th of October), to celebrate the day on which the National Fascist Party came to power in 1922. In 1945, after Fascism, the avenue was finally called Viale della Libertà (Freedom Avenue). For simplicity's sake, we refer to this street with its original name, Mussolini Avenue.

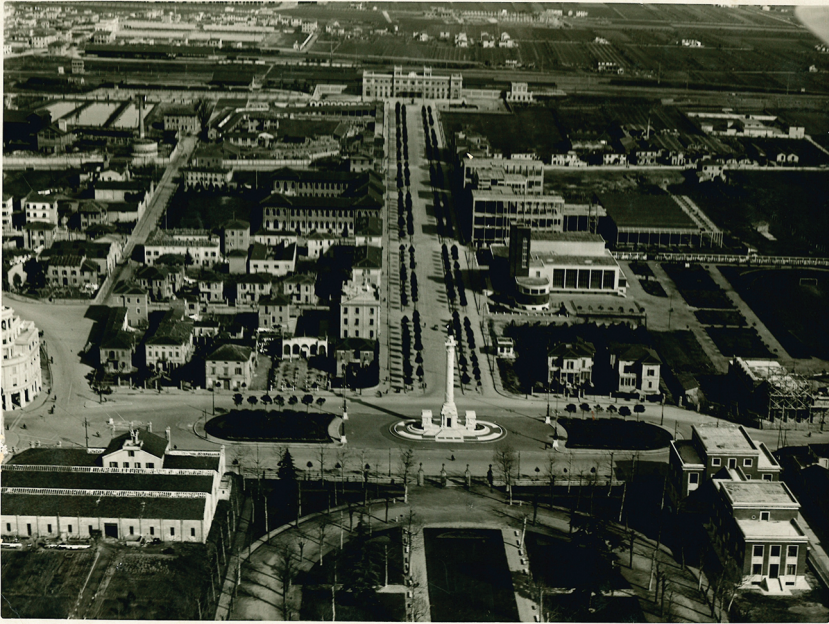


Figure 2. Aerial picture of Mussolini Avenue in 1935. From Archivio Cesare Valle in Rome [CV FOT/039].

Following the original plans, monumental Fascist built forms were indeed erected on Mussolini Avenue throughout the Fascist period. On this street, the Fascist regime built state-managed houses for civil servants and railway workers, an elementary school, a secondary school, the headquarters of the Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB) youth organization (see analysis below),⁴ and a military academy. As a result, this part of the city was patently marked as Fascist, becoming a perfect stage for Fascist political ceremonies.

From a semiotic perspective, the *piano regolatore* and the new built forms reinforced each other. The *piano regolatore* enforced the expansion of the city toward a new zone, whereas the building policy concentrated in that zone the most monumental public built forms. It is not surprising that the regime endorsed the expansion of the city along a new axis. In this way, the regime could build a Fascist part of the city from scratch—without the need to change well-established interpretative habits about the preexisting urban space. Through Mussolini Avenue as well as through other interventions on the existing built

4. The Fascist youth organization provided the youth with military, physical, religious, and cultural education as well as with professional and technical training (Santuccio 2005, 94). The Fascist youth organization started in 1926 as Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB) and changed its name in 1937 to Gioventù Italiana del Littorio (GIL) (Koon 1985).

environment, the regime marked the whole city of Forlì as Fascist, changing the shared interpretation of the city.

As a final remark, most buildings on Mussolini Avenue were named after members of Mussolini's family and were visited by pilgrims traveling to Dovia di Predappio, Mussolini's birthplace. All those buildings had educative functions: the elementary school was named after Benito's mother, Rosa Maltoni Mussolini; the secondary school was named after Benito's father, Alessandro Mussolini; the aeronautics college had a statue of Icarus on one of its entrances in remembrance of Bruno Mussolini, a son of Benito who was killed in an airplane crash; and the ONB headquarters contained a votive chapel in memory of Arnaldo Mussolini, Benito's younger brother (fig. 8). Clearly, this naming strategy underscored the connection between Forlì and Benito Mussolini.

Two Semiotic Design Strategies

We have noted that Fascist designers enacted a complex policy to physically mark the city of Forlì as Fascist. This is not surprising: it is well understood that Fascism used the built environment as a propaganda medium (Gentile 2007; Nicoloso 2008). Yet, if nonpolitical interpretative habits had arisen among the users, the Fascist investments in the built environment would have failed. In other words, the risk was that "new built forms could be noticed merely as marvelous piece of modern engineering" (De Vita 1930, 439), disregarding their Fascist meaning. Thus, reshaping the physical environment could not suffice. The effectiveness of the renewed built environment depended on the interpretations of the users. In semiotic terms, Fascist designers had to set the interpretative habits regarding the new built forms so that the built environment could effectively help the regime. What strategies did Fascist designers use to set the interpretative habits? In the case study, designers used two strategies to shape the interpretative habits of the local population: typification and environmental propaganda.

Environmental propaganda and typification were complementary and resonated with each other. In the first instance, each of them had its particular goal: environmental propaganda was mainly used to attach discursive meaning to the built environment, while typification was useful in guiding the behavior of users. In the second instance, they were applied differently: environmental propaganda could focus on new as well as on already existing built forms; typification was a way to shape new built forms. In the third instance, different actors enacted the two strategies: every person involved in the Fascist regime

could potentially produce environmental propaganda, while mostly architects and engineers enacted typification.

Typification of Built Forms

Built form types—such as the train station, the cathedral, the cinema, and so on—are shortcuts to access the shared, institutionalized interpretations of a certain built form. Built form types work as categories, which provide “as much possible information with the least possible cognitive effort . . . [and] make us smarter by providing a ready-made way of drawing inferences” (Patterson 2014, 8; see also Rosch 2002). The interpretations of a built form as belonging to a certain type enables a semiautomatic interpretation of the built form itself. For example, a user saves interpretative efforts by recognizing that a certain built form is a train station. This mechanism is particularly important when a user visits a built form for the first time: if the user can recognize a built form as belonging to a type, she will know how to behave recalling the shared, institutionalized interpretation for that type. Using a Peircean terminology, built forms of the same type have an iconic relation with each other as long as the interpreter recognizes the type (for similar cases, see Coben 2006; Crossland 2013). Arguably, even the most unique built forms belong to types, for example, St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City is a Catholic church, albeit a very special one.

Fascist designers tried to elicit these kinds of semiautomatic interpretations by modeling their built forms on shared types. This practice is here dubbed “typification.” However, it is important to notice that interpreters may fail to recognize types. For this reason, Fascist designers signaled the purpose of built form types—for example, in their use of writing on buildings’ facades (fig. 3).

Typification left little space for innovative design. Indeed, Fascist designers mostly employed typification for the creation of unoriginal built forms, simply replicating standardized models. This happened because the regime mostly erected new instances of well-established built form types, such as schools. However, inventive applications of typification were also present. For example, Fascist designers recycled old types for the creation of innovative ones, as in the case of the local party headquarters—Case del Fascio. At the beginning of the regime, this particular built forms were inspired by the medieval *palazzi comunali*,⁵ which were renowned symbols of local power (Mangione 2003, 21–31). In

5. The medieval commune was a form of government in northern and central Italy during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Generally speaking, communes were little city-states based on commerce. In many cases, they built palaces to house their governments.



Figure 3. An example of typification through writings on the wall: the writing clarifies the type of the building (i.e., office building).

particular, the tower was the central common feature between these two built form types (Pagano 1932; see, e.g., fig. 4).

Environmental Propaganda

Fascist designers spread cultural artifacts or enacted political rituals trying to shape users' interpretations of the built environment. These artifacts and rituals about the built environment will be termed "environmental propaganda." Environmental propaganda used manifold discursive devices to change the shared interpretation of a built environment. Employing diverse discursive devices to comment upon the meaning of the built environment, environmental propaganda can be conceived as having a metapragmatic function (Silverstein 1993; Parmentier 1994; see also Urban 2006). Environmental propaganda could comment upon single built forms as well as whole cities, new built forms as well as historical ones. Fascism used environmental propaganda to show the population the "proper" way to read the built environment and to append the desired narratives to the right places.

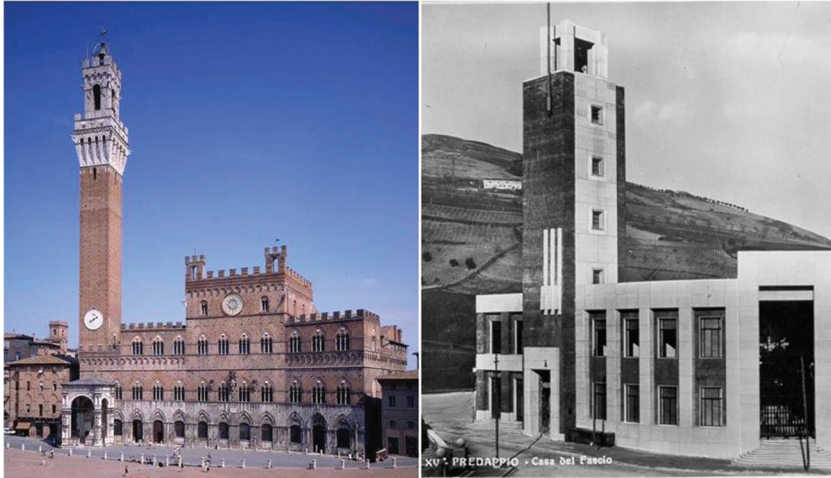


Figure 4. *Left*, a palazzo del comune in Siena; *right*, the Predappio party headquarters.

Fascist designers used many means to spread macro habits about the built environment: writings and images on the walls, post cards, newspapers, journals, books, political ceremonies, newsreels. In fact, environmental propaganda was a complex strategy spreading different meanings depending on the technique it used. At the very least, we should consider two dimensions of environmental propaganda: complexity and diffusion. On the one hand, some means such as books could carry a complex meaning, whereas other means such as post cards could convey simpler notes. On the other hand, other means had dissimilar diffusion among the population; for example, newsreels reached more people than books. Environmental propaganda involved new as well as existing built forms. When a new important built form was erected, Fascist designers deemed environmental propaganda necessary. In the first instance, every new built form was marked with the Fascist symbol par excellence—the *fascio* (fig. 5).⁶

Moreover, local newspapers reported on the inauguration of almost every built form and, once a year, they celebrated the anniversary of the March on Rome by listing all of the built forms constructed in the previous year.⁷ Additionally, if the new built form was somehow important, it followed a clear

6. *Fascio* was the official symbol of the Fascist Party. Every building made by the regime had to feature a *fascio* on its façade (Gentile 1996, 45).

7. The March on Rome was an actual march that took place October 22–29, 1922. After that, the king of Italy officially proclaimed Mussolini as prime minister. In Fascist narratives, the march is the most celebrated historic episode in the Fascist seizure of power.



Figure 5. A *fasces* on a streetlight in Mussolini Avenue. Photo courtesy of Giorgio Casa.

propaganda sequence in the press. At first, brief news on the local newspaper reported on the bureaucratic, technical, and funding processes necessary for a new plan; once officially approved, longer news described the plan; finally, newspapers accurately reported on the dedication of the built form, which most often happened during a Fascist holiday. Mussolini and other important Fascist representatives presided over the most significant dedications (Berezin 1997). Some of the dedications were also filmed, mounted, and shown as newsreels in all of the national cinemas—for example, the inauguration of the World War I Memorial in Forlì (Istituto Luce 1932).

In many cases, environmental propaganda focused on new built forms to change the interpretations concerning a broader, already existing built environment. In these cases, designers magnified the significance of small interventions in order to change institutionalized interpretations of entire cities or urban areas. Since this operation used the renovation of a small part to change the interpretation of a whole, we may dub this strategy “environmental synecdoche” (Glaeser 1998). For example, the restoration of a noble palace in 1927 was presented as a synecdoche for the renovation of the entire Forlì (*Popolo di Romagna* 1927).

Environmental propaganda could involve older non-Fascist built forms insofar as they were significant for the whole built environment. In these cases, Fascist designers tried to change institutionalized interpretations of the old built forms to “fascistize” them. For instance, the imperial fora in Rome were used in a complex spatial configuration that emphasized the continuity between the Roman and the Fascist empires (Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998; Gentile 2007). Finally, environmental propaganda could tie a built environment to a particular narrative (Smith 1999). For example, an incessant production of cultural artifacts as well as the organization of Fascist “pilgrimages” tied Mussolini’s birthplace to a semimythological narration of his popular, rural origins (Passerini 1991; Proli 1998).

ONB Headquarters Semiotic Design

In the final part of the article, we will analyze the typification and propaganda strategy regarding a specific built form in Forlì, the Casa Stadio del Balilla on Mussolini Avenue. This building was the local headquarters for the Fascist youth organization ONB. In the early 1930s Adalberto Gigli started to collect funds for the new headquarters.⁸ In 1933, the definitive plan, by Cesare Valle,

8. Adalberto Gigli was the ONB president in Forlì from July 1929 until October 1937, when ONB became GIL (Archivio Storico del Comune di Forlì, Gabinetto della Prefettura, Busta 290).

was finally approved. On July 7, 1935, Benito Mussolini and the ONB president, Renato Ricci, presided over the dedication ceremony of the building.

We chose this building because the organization of the youth was a pervasive issue during the Fascist regime (Koon 1985; Gibelli 2005) and the headquarters had to testify to the importance of the youth organization within the regime. Therefore, the headquarters was symbolically placed on Mussolini Avenue and it was one of the most notable buildings in Forlì (fig. 6). However, the meaning of the headquarters was more complex than these simple remarks. The Fascist designers carved the specific meaning of the headquarters by tuning typification and environmental propaganda to the peculiarities of the Forlì urban space.

Typification of the Forlì ONB Headquarters

The typification of the ONB headquarters in Forlì is linked to the creation of the ONB headquarters type at a national level. Indeed, ONB headquarters required appropriate structures to host sport and cultural activities for the youth (fig. 7).

Before ONB's establishment, no specific buildings housed a combination of sport, cultural, and welfare activities in Italian cities. In pre-Fascist Italy, archi-



Figure 6. The ONB headquarters in Forlì in 1935, viewed from Mussolini Avenue. From Archivio Cesare Valle in Rome [CV FOT/039].

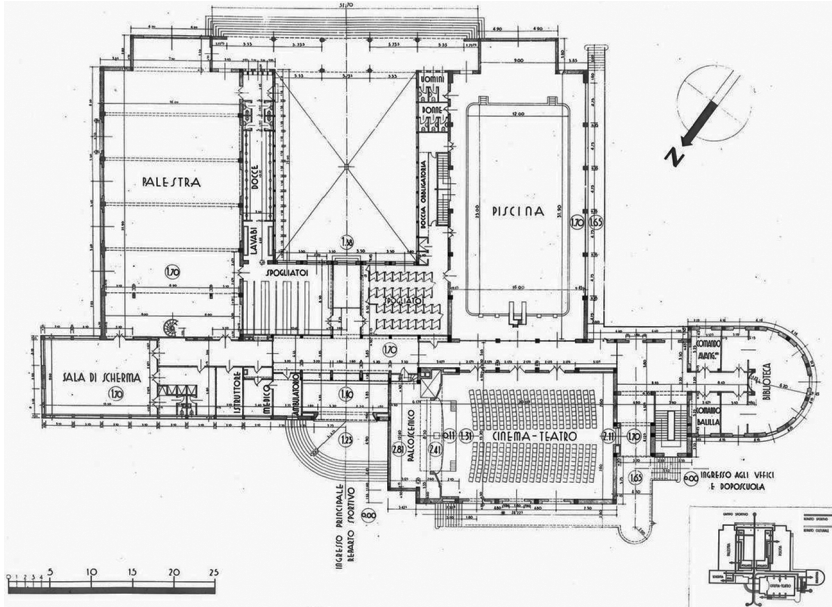


Figure 7. Plan of the Forlì GIL headquarters by Cesare Valle. Photo from Archivio Cesare Valle in Rome (CV Pannello 24). On the left of the main entrance in the sport area (*ingresso principale reparto sportivo*); then, clockwise, are a clinic (*ambulatorio*), a doctor's office (*medico*), an office for physical education teachers (*istruttore*), a fencing room (*sala di scherma*), a gym (*palestra*) with showers (*docce*), wash basins (*lavabi*), and a dressing room (*spogliatoi*). On the left there is the swimming pool (*piscina*), with dressing room (*spogliatoi*), mandatory showers [before entering the pool] (*docce obbligatorie*), and women's and men's toilets (*donne/uomini*). In the area for cultural activities, there is a cinema hall (*cinema-teatro*) with a stage for theatrical performances (*palcoscenico*), a library (*biblioteca*), and the administrative offices of the ONB (*Comando Avang./Comando Balilla*). The area for cultural activities has a separate entrance (*ingresso agli uffici e doposcuola*).

pects neglected spaces for physical education and most of the sport activities took place outdoor. As the architect Cesare Valle explained, “around the 1920s, none of us knew what a gym was, even those of us who had already planned a school. As an architect and as a student, you didn’t come across a gym. At school, you did your physical activities outdoors, in a courtyard” (Santuccio 2005, 94). In addition to sport facilities, ONB headquarters provided spaces, such as cinemas, theaters, and libraries, for various cultural activities. Moreover, ONB headquarters had offices for administration, health-care settings, and spaces for mass gathering (Moretti 1936; Milani and Fasolo 1940).

Due to this original mixture of diverse functions, ONB headquarters represented a new attitude toward physical and cultural education in Italy. For this

reason, in 1927, the ONB president entrusted the architect Enrico Del Debbio to supervise the design process and the construction of new local ONB headquarters all over Italy. Throughout his tenure, Del Debbio aimed to create the new built form type of the ONB headquarters.

The political (and semiotic) stakes were high. Since ONB planned to build a headquarters in every city, it was intended that the entire Italian population should interpret ONB through the same interpretative habits. In particular, ONB headquarters had to appear as spaces providing youth with an essentially Fascist education (Moretti 1936, 20; Gigli 1937, 17–18). At the same time, ONB headquarters were not to be confused with other educative built forms, such as schools. For this reason, it was essential to define and popularize an original built form type for the ONB headquarters.

To achieve this goal, in 1928 Del Debbio composed *Progetti di costruzione: Case Balilla, Palestre, Campi sportivi, Piscine, ecc.*—a typological manual reporting detailed planning guidelines for the construction of ONB estates. This typological manual described the official built form type for the ONB headquarters throughout nine sections (1928; see also Sardo 2005). The first section detailed fourteen types of headquarters, each one accompanied by a building plan. In the second section, Del Debbio showed nineteen maps with the parameters on orientations and dimensions of the ONB headquarters. The rest of the manual gave instructions on how to design sport fields and facilities (soccer, tennis, basketball fields, swimming pools, bleachers for spectators, etc.). Every Italian province received a copy of this manual, and all the designers were supposed to conform to the guidelines.

In addition to this, Del Debbio and Ricci supervised the planning and the construction of every ONB headquarters: every plan had to be approved by the central ONB administration in Rome. In this way, Del Debbio could check whether his guidelines were properly followed. Using Peircean terminology, Fascist designers tried to create a new built form type by enforcing a diagrammatic relation between Del Debbio manual and the ONB headquarters. This distinction underlies the different interpretations of the headquarters that architects and laymen could have: architects could use the manual as a canon in their interpretative patterns (see, e.g., Milani and Fasolo 1940).

Apparently, the manual succeeded in establishing an original built form type. In his writings, Giuseppe Pagano acknowledges that architects followed Del Debbio's guidelines. According to Pagano, the architects agreed on the fact that ONB headquarters presented common modernist architectural features: "When the lettering O.N.B. dominates the façade of a building, we can easily

consider that building as the most modern of the city, as the most up-to-date, as the building that would intentionally represent a step beyond progress” (Pagano 1933, 32).

Even after Del Debbio was removed from office, ONB headquarters were planned according to his guidelines. For example, Milani and Fasolo (1940, 195–206) clearly recalled Del Debbio’s guidelines in their description of the ONB headquarters built form type.

In Forlì, a historic old building initially housed the ONB activities. This location was soon inadequate to host the increasing number of youngsters involved in ONB activities (Santuccio 2005, 76). Moreover, this location did not conform to the ONB type, as specified by Del Debbio.⁹ For this reason, in 1935 the local ONB built a brand new headquarters planned by the architect Cesare Valle,¹⁰ who admittedly followed the guidelines by Del Debbio in his plans for ONB headquarters. In a later interview, Valle stated, “We entrusted by Ricci rushed to buy the book by Del Debbio. It would have been difficult to plan ONB headquarters without it” (Santuccio 2005, 95).

As the Del Debbio manual dictated, the Forlì ONB headquarters included spaces for cultural, organizational, and sport activities. The building was divided into two main areas: one for sport, and one for cultural activities (fig. 7). As for the sport area, Valle designed the gym and the Olympic-size swimming pool following the manual scrupulously. Likewise, he followed the guidelines in planning outdoor football and tennis fields, running and biking tracks, and terraces for the audience. For the sport facilities, dressing rooms were located in such a way that they could be accessed before entering the gym in order to enter the gym with clean shoes (Del Debbio 1928, 9–11). Dressing rooms were to be connected with the gym and the showers. The toilets were to be entered without crossing the dressing rooms. The gym was to include a supply room. The fencing room had to be large enough to accommodate two pairs of fencers at the same time. Within the sport area, there had to be an emergency room. The Forlì ONB headquarters included all of these features.

Conversely, the cultural part of the Forlì ONB headquarters deviated from the guidelines. This part encompassed a movie theater, a tower, and a library. The inclusion of a movie theater proves that built form types can change over time. As prescribed by Del Debbio’s guidelines, the ONB type did not include a

9. Archivio Storico del Comune di Forlì, Gabinetto della Prefettura, Busta 174.

10. As mentioned above, the construction of the building took several years. Cesare Valle made the first plan for the Forlì ONB headquarters already in 1931. The design of this plan was more modest and did not include the cinema hall.

movie theater. However, movie theaters gradually became a component of some of the more prominent ONB headquarters throughout Italy.¹¹ We can conclude that movie theaters were eventually incorporated into the built form type. On the other hand, the tower of the Forlì ONB headquarters is an example of built form type changing due to context. Like the movie theater, towers were not included in the ONB headquarters type as described by Del Debbio. Yet, the tower was a central element in the composition of the Forlì ONB headquarters (Currà 2010, 88; see fig. 10). It stood out between the cinema and the library. Within the tower, the two lower floors housed the administrative offices of the ONB.¹² The top floor housed a votive chapel in memory of Arnaldo Mussolini—younger brother of Benito (fig. 8).¹³ Usually the chapel was visited during political pilgrimages going from the central station of Forlì, through Mussolini Avenue, all the way to the birthplace of Benito Mussolini in Dovia di Predappio. The tower served as a landmark signaling to the pilgrims the location of the votive chapel. A bell was placed at the top of the tower to collect citizens during Fascist rituals (fig. 9).

This is a local singularity insofar as Fascist pilgrims did not regularly visit other ONB headquarters in Italy. From this perspective, the architect Valle used the tower to adapt the ONB headquarters type to this exceptional situation. As seen above, towers were a traditional element in the Italian urban space: they marked the most important political and religious buildings. Mussolini himself explicitly recognized their meaning: during the dedication of Littoria (a city in central Italy now known as Latina), Mussolini told the crowd that the tower was a symbol of Fascist power dominating the land around the city and bringing “help and justice” for citizens (Imprenti 2016, 287). Some researchers have also emphasized an association between towers and religion (Gentile 2009, 119; Currà 2010, 92), while other scholars have seen the tower as a large-scale reproduction of a *fascio* (Imprenti 2016, 287).

11. Beside Forlì, movie theaters were built in the ONB headquarters of Milan (central headquarters, 1933–34), Rome Trastevere (1933–36), Bolzano (1934–36), Cuneo (1933–36), Avellino (1933–36), Campobasso (1936–38), Ascoli Piceno (1934–37), Civitanova Marche (1933–35), and Rijeka (1933–34). The function of movie theaters was to broadcast Fascist movies to educate the youth on Fascist ideology. Mussolini understood the potential of cinema as a means of propaganda. Thus, he spent a lot of resources to organize the film industry and to create new cinematographic institutions. Fascist movies were designed to produce movies and documentaries in order to spread Fascist ideology. Unsurprisingly, ONB headquarters started to include movie theaters. Transformed into movie sets, the ONB headquarters became part of this propaganda: sport performances and cultural activities of the youngsters were broadly represented in Fascist movies (Teja 2005, 31).

12. The first and second floors of the tower housed the local presidency of Forlì ONB (Uffici dei comandi delle legioni Balilla ed Avanguardisti) and the provincial committee (Rusticus 1934).

13. The headquarters itself was named after Arnaldo Mussolini.



Figure 8. The chapel dedicated to Arnaldo Mussolini inside the tower of the Forlì ONB headquarters in 1935. From Archivio Cesare Valle in Rome [CV FOT/039].

In semiotic terms, the use of a common element (i.e., the tower) encouraged users to employ established interpretative habits in an original context (namely, the Forlì ONB headquarters). By mixing existing cultural units from the shared encyclopedia, Valle tried to control the emergence of a shared interpretation regarding the unique features of the Forlì ONB headquarters: he tweaked the ONB headquarters type to the city of the Duce. Leaving the case study aside, we believe that mixing existing cultural units is a central mechanism for the adaptation and evolution of built form types.

The Environmental Propaganda of the Forlì ONB Headquarters

The Fascist regime used many rituals and media in environmental propaganda. Yet not all of the usual propaganda means were used in the Forlì ONB headquarters. For example, local newspapers barely reported on the dedication of the building—which was an important ritual to attach meaning to built forms.¹⁴ Nonetheless, we have a plethora of images, writings on the walls of the headquar-

14. An article on the Forlì local newspaper describes the ceremony briefly (*Il Popolo di Romagna* 1935). The article reports that Mussolini and the ONB president Ricci chaired the ceremony, but it does not detail how the inauguration unfolded. There is no newsreel about the inauguration. Curiously, there is a newsreel regarding a minor event that Mussolini presided in Forlì the very same day of the inauguration (<https://youtu.be/etC5lRTKHEQ>).



Figure 9. The bell atop the Forlì ONB headquarters tower in 1935. From Archivio Cesare Valle in Rome (CV FOT/039).

ters, as well as seventeen articles from the local newspapers, seven articles in journals (six in architectural journals), two books describing the building, and one newsreel. In these sources, the authors tried to establish a shared interpretation of the ONB headquarters. However, the texts do not reiterate one interpretation. Rather, they establish a system of complementary Fascist interpretations of the ONB headquarters and, in general, the Fascist regime. Here, we will explore this system of interpretations.

Writings and images on the wall were far-reaching because everyone using the building saw them. However, they did not carry elaborated meaning. As Victoria de Grazia and Paul Corner explain, most of the activities promoted by Fascism did not have intrinsic ideological contents (De Grazia 1981, 243; Corner 2012, 128–168). For this reason, the regime worked hard to underline the Fascist qualities of organized activities. Writings on the walls served this function: they connected the activities routinely happening in a room to Fascist ideology.

The most prominent writing appeared on both sides of the tower: “In the name of God and Italy, I swear to execute the orders of the Duce, to serve the cause of Fascist Revolution with all my strength and, if necessary, with my blood” (fig. 10). This writing reported the oath that the young members



Figure 10. The Fascist oath on the Forlì ONB headquarters tower as it appeared in 2016.

of the ONB and GIL had to pronounce during the *Leva Fascista* (Partito Nazionale Fascista 1929, 1932, 1938).¹⁵

15. The *Leva Fascista* was an annual ceremony where the members of the ONB/GIL were promoted to the next age group within the youth organization or became members of the Fascist Party if they belonged to the oldest age group.

One could hardly miss these writings, which were addressed to ONB members as well as to passers-by (Imprenti 2016, 290). In the first instance, this writing assimilated the building to the ONB organization and the Fascist regime. From this perspective, the sentence reinforced the meaning of the *fascio* outside the front door. In the second instance, the oath clarified what happened inside the building by recalling the bellicose atmosphere of the ONB organization.

The same bellicose atmosphere appeared inside the building, where only members could enter. A famous motto welcomed the users to the library: “Book and musket, perfect Fascist man.” Also in the library, a map reported the enterprises of the “Italian pioneers.” In the gym, there was a quote by Mussolini from the inauguration speech of the ONB headquarters:¹⁶ “Multiply [*Centuplicate*] your muscles, light your hearts with the flames of faith, so that you will be ready to serve the cause of revolution however, wherever and against whoever, if time comes.” Similarly, there was another quote by Mussolini in the fencing hall: “Prepare your arm and heart in order to be ready to defend the nation [*patria*] when it calls.” These sentences connected the activities happening inside the rooms to the Fascist culture. In general, since Mussolini was the quintessence of Fascism, quoting one of his sentences was a way to assimilate any subject matter to Fascist culture.

Finally, a huge map in the refectory connected Fascist Italy to the Roman Empire—a popular issue in the 1930s. Moreover, the writings in the memorial to Arnaldo Mussolini identified the subject of the bust (i.e., Arnaldo Mussolini; see fig. 8) and mentioned his achievements. These writings disseminated the Fascist doctrine, since the figure of Arnaldo was central in the regime propaganda (Passerini 1991, 105–9).

Leaving wall writings aside, the ONB headquarters often appeared in newspaper, journals, and books. Most likely, newspapers reached fewer people than writings on walls. Unfortunately, we do not have detailed data about the circulation of the local newspapers, which the local Fascist Party directly managed. However, we should consider that illiteracy was still high, especially in the countryside (Klein 1989). Moreover, confidential reports inform that Fascist newspapers were discredited among the population.¹⁷ Yet, newspaper played an important role in environmental propaganda, because they potentially reached people who could not experience the buildings in their everyday lives.

16. Actually, this is the only excerpt we have from that speech.

17. Archivio Centrale di Stato, Polizia Politica, Per Materia, busta 220.

The ONB headquarters followed the entire propaganda sequence described above. In the first phase of the propaganda sequence, the local newspaper, *Il Popolo di Romagna* (The People of Romagna), reported on the bureaucratic and funding processes in ten articles. Two articles described the bureaucratic approbations that the headquarters project received: these articles used a spatial synecdoche on the building, stating that the construction of the ONB headquarters demonstrated the efficiency of the Fascist administration.¹⁸ The eight remaining articles regarded the funding procedure.¹⁹ They used another spatial synecdoche: the contributions coming from different sources (local as well as national, public as well as private) demonstrated that the entire Italian elite supported the same objectives. In other words, the ONB headquarters symbolized and proved the unity of the Italian elites. The article highlighting the offer of a bell by the local church is a transparent example of this spatial synecdoche (*Il Popolo di Romagna* 1934d).

Later in the propaganda sequence, *Il Popolo di Romagna* stressed the modernity and rationality of the ONB headquarters building. For example, the journalist Rusticus used the word “modern” four times in his description of the building (Rusticus 1934). Moreover, the building was repeatedly defined as “magnificent,” “impressive,” and “deserving the dedication to Arnaldo Mussolini.” Images of the plan (six pictures published in two years) visually sanctioned the “modernity” and “rationality” of the headquarters.²⁰ The local magazine *Il Rubicone* (managed by the local party) confirmed that the headquarters was “an important realization in the field of modern architecture” (*Il Rubicone* 1933). Surprisingly, the article regarding the last part of the propaganda sequence (i.e., the inauguration event) is very short (*Il Popolo di Romagna* 1935). However, few months after the inauguration, a national newsreel on new Fascist buildings described the building as “beautiful and very modern” (Istituto Luce 1936).

By remarking on the modernity of the ONB headquarters, these articles and images and the newsreel tried to spread this interpretation in the nonspecialist Forlì local community. The projection of “modernity” on the ONB headquarters was meant to reinforce the perception of “modernity” about the whole Fascist educational project, wherein the ONB youth organization was the most innovative branch.

18. *Il Popolo di Romagna* (1933f, 1933g).

19. *Il Popolo di Romagna* (1933a, 1933b, 1933d, 1933e, 1934b, 1934c, 1934e).

20. Images may be found in *Il Popolo di Romagna* (1933c, 1933e, 1934a, 1934f, 1933h); Rusticus (1934).

Architectural journals focused on the technical aspects of the Forlì ONB headquarters.²¹ Notably, only few articles remarked the “modernity” and “rationality” of the whole building, which should have been clear to the expert community. Rather, the articles on these journals focused on technical particulars. Clearly, these articles carried complex meanings and reached only the experts. Every article stressed the positions of the gym, the swimming pool, the fencing hall, and the dressing rooms. Moreover, they emphasized that the cultural and the training parts of the edifice were separated—a “perfectly rational” solution. Finally, architects focused on the big moving windows in the swimming pool, which was deemed as a smart and autarchic solution to bring light to the swimming pool (Mornati 2003).

The four books mentioning the ONB headquarters were diverse. In his popular tourist guide on the Forlì province, Rezio Buscaroli (1938) quickly described the ONB headquarters. However, the few generic words devoted to the building suggest that the ONB headquarters was not an interesting attraction for the tourists.²² Two other books were clearly addressed to the architect professional community. These books presented the ONB headquarters in Forlì along with many other buildings. Agnoldomenico Pica (1936) basically echoed previous architectural journals, whereas Milani and Fasolo (1940) mentioned the ONB headquarters in Forlì as a perfect example of the ONB headquarters type. Finally, Adalberto Gigli (1937) wrote a pamphlet on the ONB activity in the province of Forlì.²³ This short book summarizes eight years of ONB activities just before the GIL replaced the ONB as the official youth organization. The book was published by the Forlì Fascist Party and was addressed to the local political community. Gigli wrote the pamphlet to claim that he performed well as the ONB local leader. Unsurprisingly, he put the construction of the ONB headquarters in the foreground: he concisely described the building and presented it as his greatest achievement (1937, 17–18). As a result, Gigli presents the ONB headquarters as an important political success—recalling the spatial synecdoche that the local newspapers used in the first part of the propaganda sequence.

This exploration of the environmental propaganda reveals that Fascist designers tried to fuse the ONB headquarters with a stratified and complex meaning. No apparent contradictions existed between the interpretations Fascist

21. These articles are N.d.R. (1934); *Rassegna d'Architettura* (1934); Masera (1935); Paniconi (1936); and Pagano (1937).

22. Buscaroli uses fifteen words to describe the ONB headquarters. His book has 156 pages.

23. On Adalberto Gigli, see n. 8 above.

designers suggested. Rather, Fascist designers envisaged different meanings for different interpretative communities. In fact, the different Fascist sources interpreted the building from complementary points of view—political, architectural, and propagandistic. In the environmental propaganda, this building was qualified as Fascist, modern, rational, smartly conceived, autarchic, and so on. It supposedly demonstrated that Italian elite was united and that Adalberto Gigli performed well as a local ONB leader. It honored Arnaldo Mussolini. It diffused Fascist propaganda. It promised to prepare the Italian youth for war.

Fascist designers employed environmental propaganda to shape and control the numerous shared narratives regarding the ONB headquarters. Designers needed political rituals, movies, and printed material to suggest rich and complex meaning about the ONB headquarters and, through a synecdoche, the Fascist regime. These narratives complemented the typification strategy that the architect Valle used in his plan.

Conclusion and Future Directions

We have analyzed the design of the built environment as a semiotic process. From this perspective, design implies controlling the common interpretations of the built environment. Consequently, design has implications beyond the reshaping of the physical space: designers try to achieve their semiotic objectives through manifold means. We have used the city of Forlì during Italian Fascism as a case study. In Forlì, the Fascist regime reshaped the built environment to influence the local and national communities of interpreters. Fascist designers implemented multifaceted actions to set the interpretative habits regarding new built forms, so that the built environment could effectively help the regime. Two distinct but complementary strategies were prominent: typification and environmental propaganda. Typification established and used familiar types of buildings to channel individual interpretations; environmental propaganda spread cultural artifacts and enacted political rituals on the built environment. Both strategies entailed the collaboration of many social actors in different arenas, emphasizing the extensive sociosemiotic arrangements on which Fascist designers drew during their activities.

Specifically, we have examined how Fascist designers used these strategies on the local headquarters for the Fascist youth organization, the Opera Nazionale Balilla. Recently, the ONB headquarters has assumed a new function: it has been restored as an exhibition center and now hosts the head office of ATRIUM—Architecture of Totalitarian Regimes in Urban Managements, an international organization aiming to develop a cultural itinerary around total-

itarian built environments in southeastern Europe. This is another example of spatial design: it tries to reframe the meaning of Fascist built forms in current democratic Italy. Even if the regime ended in 1943, Fascist buildings and their meaning continue to evolve in the Italian sociosemiotic environment.

This article has addressed spatial design from a semiotic perspective using Forlì as a case study. As argued, this case study has the virtue of simplicity: it entails a (mostly) coherent set of designers working on nonconflicting objectives. Future research may expand our analysis to cases where groups of designers have conflicting objectives or where one group enjoys disproportionate power over the other groups²⁴ (see, e.g., Crossland 2013). Naturally, the two strategies we have described are not exhaustive. Future research may complement the present article by analyzing other sociosemiotic strategies. However, the most interesting questions stem from the theoretical framework. This article has analyzed how designers use different resources to change the collective interpretation of the built environment. Yet, there is no guarantee they will succeed (Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998). Thus, it is important to analyze the user side of this process. How do users react to the designers' input? What interpretation finally emerges as an encyclopedic habit? What encyclopedic processes lead to the emergence of such habit? Future studies may address the production and resilience of spatial meanings from the current theoretical perspective.

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24. Even if anti-Fascist groups certainly existed in Forlì, our analysis ignores them since they are never mentioned in our historical sources before World War II.

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