

## Occupying History: Film, Fascism, and Architecture in the Work of Kevin Van Braak and Rossella Biscotti

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A tiny figure moves about, scrubbing and patching within the vast empty space of an Olympic-size pool [Figure 1]. In the background murals of oversized athletes cover the walls. In one corner of the natatorium, for example, three mosaic giants hunch down preparing to throw the discus. Nearby, another group of super-sized joggers are frozen in mid-step, while the tiny man below methodically tends to the pool. The contrast in movement and scale between the figure cleaning the pool and the frozen athletes highlights the disconcerting aura of the place, an aura that is only intensified by the history of the site. The natatorium was constructed in Rome as part of a larger sports complex, designed to serve as Mussolini's Forum (1928–36). Living in the shadow of the likes of Trajan, Augustus and Hadrian, Mussolini was determined to make his own mark on the city of Rome. What began as a Physical Education School on the north side of the city along the banks of the Tiber soon grew into the enormous sports complex that would earn the name "Foro Mussolini." Renamed Foro Italico after WWII, the complex includes the natatorium, a private gym and pool for Mussolini, an outdoor arena, the "Stadio dei Marmi" and more. Today Foro Italico stands partially rebranded with Olympic rings from the 1960 games held here marking most of the buildings. Yet the rings do not manage to rewrite or disguise the history of the site, they simply add another layer to it. An obelisk at the entry to the complex, for example, retains its original inscriptions: "Mussolini" and "Dux."

In Italy, monuments to Fascism remain nearly everywhere you look. In some cases the markers of Fascism, often some version of the fascio—the an-

cient roman axe from which the movement drew its name—have been removed. But in many other cases such symbols remain, as do buildings, urban spaces, and even entire towns that were designed and constructed to glorify Fascist power. In Latina, one of the Fascist new towns, for example, a building shaped like a giant M, in reference to Mussolini is still actively in use.

The existence and reuse of Fascist architecture in Italy begs the question: does the political program of these projects cease to mean when a regime loses power? Can a space, building or pool contain Fascist impulses or house political ghosts? These are some of many issues raised by the "Cities of Continuous Lines" project by the artists Kevin van Braak and Rossella Biscotti. Film is but one of their media of choice; they utilize whatever means necessary to explore their subject including photography, restoration and even the reconstruction of select bits of Fascist architecture. While the work spans media the goal is singular: Biscotti and Van Braak's explorations repeatedly pry open the fractured space between intention and reception. Watching the tiny figure methodically move through the vast empty vessel in the shadow of the caricature-like athletes visually emphasizes the absurd distance between the Fascist make-believe world populated only by heroes and the daily life of Italians today. By using a variety of media types, van Braak and Biscotti are able to provoke questions from all angles, even if they offer no easy answers.

For designers interested in how abstract and experimental cinema can offer understandings of architecture that are not possible in other media, van Braak

and Biscotti's *Cities of Continuous Lines* project serves as a case study. An examination of their work reveals what kinds of knowledge about space might be gained through explorations in abstract film that are not possible with other conceptual art forms. Moreover, a comparative analysis begins to suggest ways in which architects and artists might be able to use non-narrative filmmaking to explore architecture and urban spaces in unconventional ways.

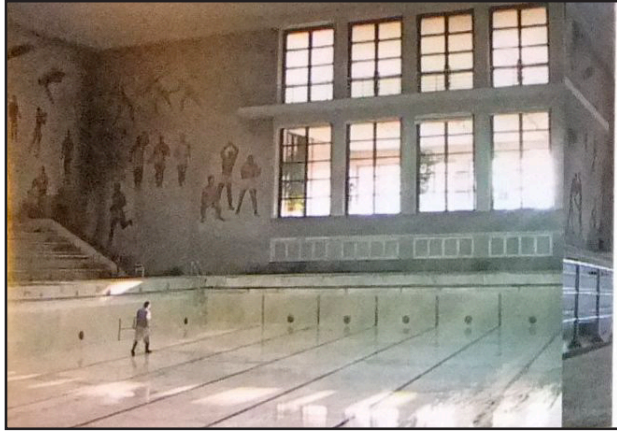


Figure 1. Still image taken from "Restoration of the empty pool."

"Restoration of the empty pool," the 10-minute long film by van Braak and Biscotti painstakingly showcases the slow and methodical process of cleaning the pool. As the artists describe this process:

The restoration of the marble pool and the cleaning of the mosaics are part of a procedure that is repeated annually. Every September, for more than twenty years, the pool has been lined with cement by the same masons. Between 6 and 10 a.m., sometimes even before sunrise, we recorded the restoration work.<sup>1</sup>

While the masons politely ignored the artists filming them, Biscotti and van Braak had to leave the site before the manager arrived each day and caught them filming. Often they had enormous trouble getting access to contested sites as those in positions of power questioned what good could come of making the afterlife of Fascist constructions public.<sup>2</sup> Watching the film with its agonizingly slow pace and nearly silent soundtrack it is at first difficult to comprehend why anyone would deem this threatening or controversial art. It simply documents a pool being carefully restored, a process which takes place without fanfare every year. This is hardly a private or secret space; it

is a public pool used daily by hundreds of Roman swimmers. But watching the film does force viewers to pause and reflect in our world of fast moving images and dramatic attention grabbing sounds. It is a sort of forced meditation on the relationship between contemporary life in Italy and the forgotten promise and glory of Fascism. The film insists we pause and consider this condition in which Italians live so nonchalantly in the shadows of such a storied past. The threat presented by the film is not any neatly contained message within it; it is rather the individual awareness it provokes within those who watch it. The film reminds us that meaning is not fixed in stone or mosaic tile. The way in which we occupy buildings has the ability to alter their meaning. In other words, van Braak and Biscotti's film draws our attention to that room to negotiate between intention and reception.

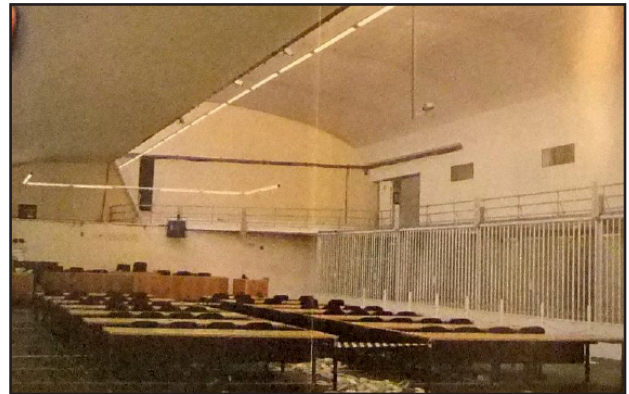


Figure 2. "Aula Bunker," a photograph of the interior of the courtroom in the former Fencing Academy.

In another instance, the artists use photography to show how one of the greatest works of Fascist architecture has already been recast [Figure 2]. In a photograph of the interior of the Fencing Academy in Mussolini's forum, designed by the celebrated rationalist architect Luigi Moretti, we can still see the elegant lines of the original design.<sup>3</sup> But we also see that in the 1970s the building was shoddily remodeled as a courthouse. The floor has chartreuse carpet, the furniture is cheap, and cables, electric cords, and video cameras are visible everywhere. In contrast, photographs from the time reveal why the building was heralded as one of the greatest works of Italian rationalism. The building is comprised of two rectangular volumes sheathed in white marble panels and connected by a bridge. Inside, Moretti designed the main space, the fenc-

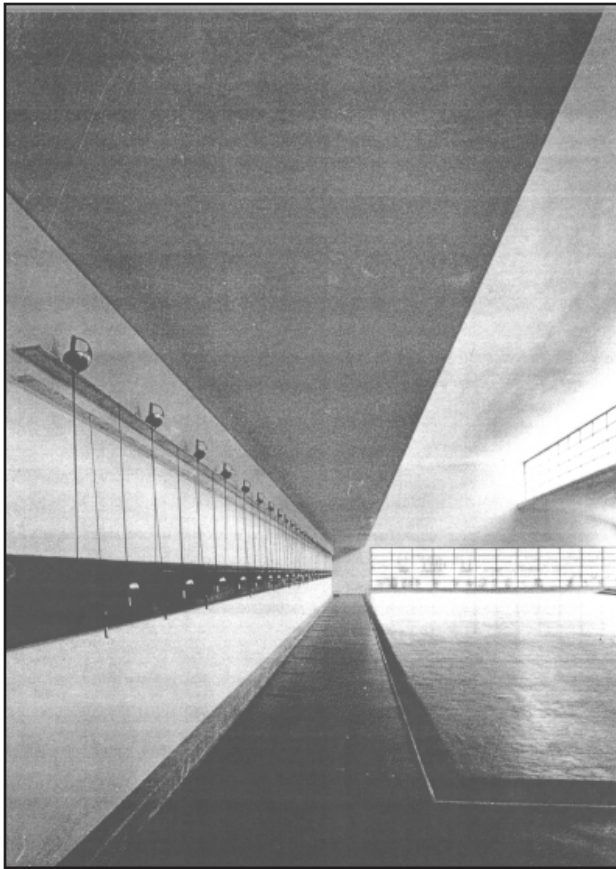


Figure 3. Photograph of the interior of the Fencing Hall in the Fencing Academy.

ing hall, as a large rectangular volume with an asymmetrically arching roof. The interior space is also rendered in white marble panels, modern steel railings and industrial windows [Figure 3]. The simplicity and pristine character of the original design make it hard to believe that the photographs of the courtroom could be part of the same structure.

While the building's Fascist origins have almost certainly played a role in its denigration Biscotti and van Braak's photographs do not judge whether it is a just end for a politically tainted design or whether the quality of the architecture warrants respectful preservation despite the political intentions of the patron. The artists simply present the building as is and leave it up to us to wrestle with such questions personally. Their image forces a confrontation between the building's initial grand promise and its subsequent inglorious history and use. The pristine and empty building celebrated in photographs from

the 1930s is pitted against the moment captured in van Braak and Biscotti's photograph taken in 2006. As viewers we stand apart from both in a later moment still.

In another instance, Kevin van Braak opts for direct engagement with distant and recent history. Van Braak reconstructed an entire staircase of a Fascist building, the *Colonia Torino*, that had been demolished [Figure 4]. The building was one of the many *colonia* or summer camps built in the 1930s in the mountains and along Italy's coasts. While the *colonia* building type dates to the nineteenth century, under Fascism the *colonia* became political projects, intended to be sites where children could be indoctrinated into the faith of the regime. As Biscotti and van Braak describe how they came to the building:

In 2005 we travelled along both of Italy's coasts to visit various *coloniae marine*, using an old map from a 1985 *Domus* magazine. One of the first buildings we saw was the *Colonia Torino*, designed by Ettore Sottsass senior in 1938. Abandoned for sixty years, it was eventually bought by a private investor and is now being converted into a youth hostel. Part of the structure had been destroyed by the local community, which were planning to demolish it altogether.<sup>4</sup>

The stair in question was a ribbon-like spiraling concrete appendage to a crisp modern building that visually stood apart from the orthogonal volumes of the main building. The stair, which had connected a second story terrace to the ground, was the only part of the building to be destroyed by locals after the fall of the regime. As the most distinctive architectural element of the complex, it was an easy target for anger and resistance. In his studio in Amsterdam, van Braak used the original drawings to reconstruct the stair with one notable difference—he used wood instead of concrete in order to “reveal the fragility and temporary nature of the staircase.”<sup>5</sup> In this case it was van Braak himself undertaking the painstaking and time-consuming work of reconstruction. Yet he never tells us what to make of his actions. Once again we are left to decide for ourselves whether his actions to revive this architecture are heretical and dangerous or whether perhaps this is all a demonstration of the ridiculousness of thinking that architecture could contain political ideology in the first place? Do we fear, for example, that the youth who will soon populate the renovated hostel in the old *colonia* complex will be unwittingly subjected to the



power of the Fascist ideology through the architectural skeleton now cloaked in new dress? Or has the structure been rendered impotent by the decades that have passed?

The connections between the monuments of Fascism and their meaning in the collective Italian consciousness are particularly charged in the present moment during which the Fascist party is experiencing a revival in some areas. Monuments and symbols are being reclaimed not to force a confrontation with the past but rather to help rewrite the story of Fascism as a glorious one. Fascist symbols have even been added to public monuments in recent times. The mayor of Latina (a committed Fascist who fought for Mussolini's Republic of Salò in WWII) had Fascist axes added onto a public monument in the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> How, given this context, can we trust that this architecture does not have power or ghosts? Are architectural forms ever really inert?

The relationship between building materials—glass, wood, and steel—and political ideology is central to Biscotti and van Braak's restoration of a door [Figure 5]. The artists salvaged and restored the door from the *Palazzo degli Uffici* in the Fascist-designed EUR neighborhood of Rome. The door and two accompanying side panels are of glass and wood covered with a thin layer of linoleum. The artists reassembled the pieces and sanded away layers of paint and the whole stands now as a section of an interior corridor wall, ready for its next coat of paint. Looking at it, one can't help but think that this is merely a door, a simple construction of aged wood and glass. It can hardly contain either the secrets to the regime or the power of its ideology. Or can it?

The door restoration asks: how does architecture *mean*? The physical remains of this door may not contain an overt ideology, but the design was almost certainly intended to communicate one. Design is the link between the architect's intentions and the viewer's reading of a work, and in the *Palazzo degli Uffici* we find an architecture that is grandiose, unornamented, and modern. These characteristics were intended to link the regime to the Roman Empire, while at the same time displaying its revolutionary nature.

But whether or not the material remnants, like the door retain any political power is unclear. It is as if

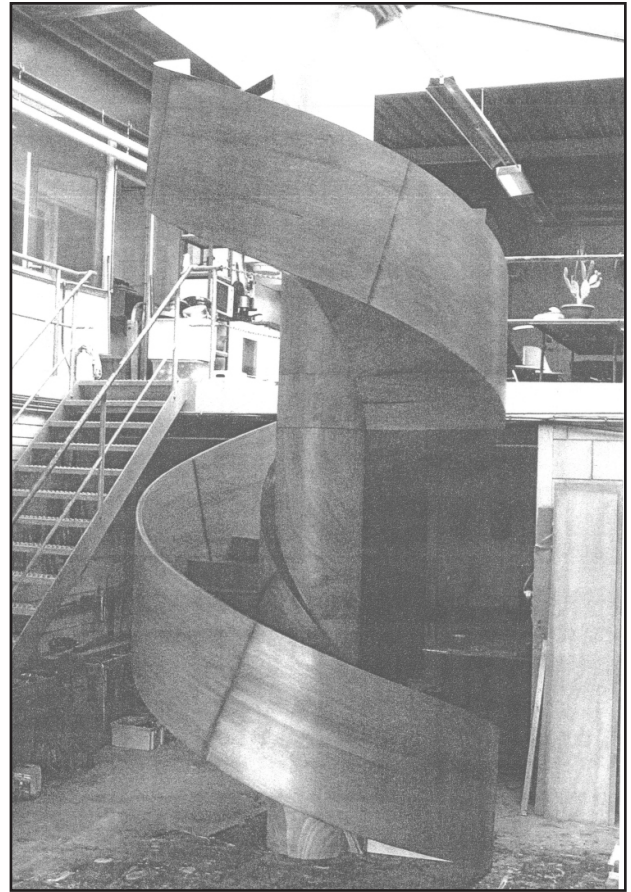


Figure 4. Untitled photograph of the Colonia Torino stair created by Kevin van Braak.

we need ritual chants or ceremonies or perhaps undertakings like Christo's wrapping of the Reichstag to de-commission political buildings and exorcise Fascist demons from every door, wall, and brick of a building.

In attempting to capture this moment when Fascist architecture is cleaned, restored, remodeled and otherwise transformed, van Braak and Biscotti are reminding us that we too have a role in ascribing meaning to buildings, and that in fact, meaning can evolve and change. Buildings and objects are not sealed containers of meaning.

To understand what separates their film in particular from narrative cinematic depictions of Fascist architecture, it is helpful to compare it to Bernardo Bertolucci's 1970 film *The Conformist*, which was based on Alberto Moravia's 1951 novel. The *Conformist* follows the story of Marcello, an Italian



Figure 5. "Tramezzo in vetro," the door salvaged and restored by van Braak and Biscotti.

man desperately striving to fit in and belong after a troubled childhood and family history. When his best friend asks what he thinks he will get out of marriage, for example, Marcello responds "The impression of normality, stability, security. In the morning when I'm dressing in the mirror I see myself and compared to everyone else I feel I'm different." Marcello's search for a place in society leads him not only to marry a woman he does not love, but also to undertake a mission for the secret police, to help them seek out "subversives" working against the Fascist agenda.

In the film, Bertolucci uses Fascist architecture to probe the central issues of the story—how we try to conform to society's norms and how those norms constantly shift and change. Fascist characters and architecture are often used in the film to demonstrate the lack of difference between the so-called subversives, the decadent bourgeoisie, the insane, and the Fascists. In some instances, the stark, white, modern and monumental architecture of Fascism provides a backdrop for abnormal or deviant behavior. When Marcello visits his father in a mental institution, for example, the institution is staged in Adalberto Libera's Congress Hall in the Fascist EUR neighborhood of Rome. His father and the other patients roam around the outdoor auditorium space on the roof of the building. In other scenes, however, we see aberrant behavior staged in more typically bourgeoisie environments,

such as the Marcello's family villa in Rome. In other words, the architectural settings are used to support the narrative, which seeks to undermine the strict categorization of normal and subversive; we see deviant behavior in the most rigid of settings and even by Fascist characters.

Van Braak and Biscotti's cinematic engagement with Fascist architecture differs from Bertolucci's in some key ways. In contrast to *The Conformist*, they showcase an anonymous Italian man cleaning the pool, a man engaged in somewhat generic or familiar actions to which viewers can relate. In this sense, the "Restoration of the pool" recalls neo-realist depictions of everyday life, of working class characters and mundane details. But what is most significant about van Braak and Biscotti's film is the way in which it illustrates how the human occupancy and use of a space or building can overshadow its material symbolism. In drawing our attention to the routine actions of the man cleaning the pool, van Braak and Biscotti remind us of the role we each can play in shaping the meaning of the spaces we inhabit. Even the smallest and dullest actions in certain contexts have the potential to alter meaning. For better or worse, the actions of the living always retain the power to rewrite the meaning of the spaces they inhabit.

Unlike either Bertolucci's film or the other works by Biscotti and van Braak, their film, "Restoration of the empty pool," suspends us in the moment of its cleaning, as if giving us a moment to pause and consider if the meaning could be scrubbed clean despite the looming Fascist figures behind. Moreover, it is the only medium used by the artists that embroils ordinary and even disinterested people. In doing so, the film is able to remind viewers that space is not only shaped by its patrons and designers, but also by its occupants. What the film does like no other medium is to draw attention to the relationship between the living and the insensate or defunct, in this case the Fascist backdrop with its frozen heroes. The film may lack the tactile physicality of the door, the captured time sense of the photograph, or the power to intimidate of the reconstructed stair. But the film underlines the fact that we, the living, have the ability to redefine what spaces mean through our actions.

Beyond a re-examination of Fascist architecture, van Braak and Biscotti's exhibition as a whole re-

minds us of the power that cultural productions retain in the political realm. Most of us understand politics not simply through legislation or policy proposals but more often through the subtle messages communicated by culture. It might be through the culture of celebrity – the Kennedy dynasty or even Alessandra Mussolini – or it might be through architecture and design. It is culture, in fact, that provides the tangible connections among people, their nations, and their governments. And the architecture of Fascism is often breathtakingly beautiful. This is why it was successful when it was new and why it is still a bit chilling now.

While the architecture of Fascism may never be entirely liberated from the politics of its creation, it is also true that designers never have the last word on what their buildings mean; society does. Now, as the architecture of Fascism is being remodeled, repainted, and reused, its meaning can be redefined by new and unforeseen voices. In this vein, Van Braak and Biscotti's film asks us all: What will the architecture of Fascism mean next?

1 Rossella Biscotti and Kevin van Braak, *Cities of Continuous Lines*, (Rotterdam: Veenman drukkers, 2007), 48.

2 See for example the many official letters written requesting access to sites included in the exhibition catalog. Ibid.

3 On Moretti, see Federico Bucci and Mulazzani, *Luigi Moretti: works and writings*, trans. Marina deConciliis, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002). See also the exhibition, "Luigi Moretti: From Rationalism to Informalism," MAXXI, Rome.

4 Biscotti and van Braak, 53.

5 Ibid.

6 Mia Fuller, "Italian Colonialism Still at Work: The Agro Pontino," in *Language, space and otherness in Italy since 1861*, (British School in Rome: 2010).