Between Modernization and Preservation:

The Changing Identity of the Vernacular in

Italian Colonial Libya

BRIAN MCLAREN

Harvard University

This paper concerns the changing identity of the vernacular architecture of the Italian colony of Libya in architectural discourse, and the related appropriation of this re-configured vernacular by architects working in this region. In this effort, I will describe the difference between an abstract assimilation of these influences in the early 1930s and a more scientific interest in the indigenous culture of Libya in the latter part of this decade. In the first case, the work of architects like Sebastiano Larco and Carlo Enrico Rava subsumed references to vernacular constructions into modern aesthetic practices. In the second, architects like Florestano Di Fausto evinced the material qualities of these buildings in works that often directly re-enacted traditional forms. However, rather than discuss the transformation of this discourse as the product of a dialectical mediation of modernity and tradition, I will argue that these approaches offer two distinct modalities of the same modernity—the first connected to its aesthetic tendencies and interpretive procedures and the second to its historical consciousness.

The appropriation of the Libyan vernacular by Italian architects will be examined through the architecture of the tourist system of this colony. The creation of a tourist system in Libya began in the early 1930s and was an integral part of the more general development of this colony during this period—a development that saw the improvement of the road network, the creation of transportation systems and the construction of a modern infrastructure. Among the most important of these projects was the completion of the 1800 kilometer long strada litoranea—a coastal artery of commercial, military and touristic significance that gave symbolic expression to the Italian control over this section of the Mediterranean.[1] The constitution of a viable system for tourism also responded to contemporary scientific interest in the local culture—an interest that was manifested in research and preservation activities related to historical sites. The group that was eventually responsible for this system—the Ente turistico ed alberghiero della Libia—was a para-state organization created in 1935 that exercised unprecedented control over all aspects of tourism. The group's activities included the promotion of this network in Italy, the organization of travel itineraries, the provision of transportation services and the management of a system of eighteen hotels—including the most prominent and luxurious hotels in Tripoli, Benghazi and other major tourist centers. Advertised as an expression of the indigenous architecture, these facilities reflect the desire to see the tourist experience of this colony in a continuous relationship with the local culture.[2]

The architecture of this tourist system balanced a need to project an image of a modern and efficient network of travel, with the desire to preserve and even accentuate the characteristic qualities of the indigenous culture of each region. In the first instance, the tourist system in Libya offered an experience of the colonial context that was fundamentally modern—facilities like the dining room at the Albergo "alle Gazzelle" in Zliten conveying an image of metropolitan comfort. In the second, a conscious effort was made to organize indigenous cultural manifestations that would enhance the tourist experience. One prominent example were the musical and dance performances in the Caffè Arabo at the Suq al-Mushir, which were made in a setting that was intended to enact the mysteries of the East. These strategies for the development of the tourist system were closely tied to the politics of Italian colonization of this region—which called for the incorporation of Libya into metropolitan Italy and the preservation of the customs and practices of the local populations.[3] One of the most compelling symbols of this first strategy is the so-called ventimila—a mass emigration of 20,000 agricultural colonists from Italy to Libya in October of 1938. The preservation of Libyan culture included a relatively systematic program of preserving Muslim religious sites, such as the restoration of the Qarahmanli Mosque in Tripoli, completed in 1934.[4] This second strategy was aimed at simultaneously disarming dissent by gestures of reconciliation, and placing the culture of the Libyans under the strictest regulation.

Fig. 1. Umberto Di Segni, dining room of the Albergo "alle Gazzelle," Zliten, 1935.

Fig. 2. Florestano Di Fausto, Caffè Arabo, Suq al-Mushir, Tripoli, 1935.

The initial interest of Italian architects in the vernacular traditions of Libya arose at a particular moment in architectural discourse in this colony. Through the figure of Alessandro Limongelli, who was art consultant to the Municipality of Tripoli from 1928 to 1932, the approach to architecture took a distinct turn away from the arabising tendencies that had marked its early history.[5] Projects like Limongelli's proposal for the rearrangement of Piazza Italia from 1931 exemplify a condition of hybridity where the urban image of the metropole combines with the vernacular architecture and characteristic landscape of the colonial context. However, this interest in the anonymous architectural organisms of Libya was itself a product of a metropolitan discourse. The vernacular architecture of Italy was already a topic of great interest in the journal *Architettura e Arti Decorative*. In this publication, so-called "minor architecture" was both a subject of scholarly interest related to the preservation of the historical center of cities and the foundation of a modern aesthetic proper to Italian architectural culture.[6] Notably, the native architecture of Libya was a prominent part of this examination of minor architecture—such as Pietro Romanelli's essay on the courtyard houses of Tripoli, in which he erroneously argues that these buildings were based upon Roman precedents, and influenced by the masonry work and decorative schemes of Southern Italian craftsmen.[7]

The first prominent reference to the Libyan vernacular within modern architectural discourse was in an article published by Carlo Enrico Rava in 1931, where he argued that the indigenous Libyan architecture, designed according to the climate and geography, was a rational solution to the problem of building in the colonial context.[8] The three principal attributes of these buildings that, according to Rava, made them a suitable inspiration for a modern colonial architecture was their Roman influence—a typological connection that could still be seen in the so-called Arab-Turkish house—their primitivism—a quality that came from their rapport with the Sahara and the Sudan—and their Mediterranean character—an environmental dimension that linked this architecture with that of the Italian coastal regions. It should be clear that in these arguments the indigenous architecture of Libya had been subjected to a process of simplification and abstraction. In tracing out the exchange of influences that he felt defined the Libyan vernacular, Rava was utilizing the interpretive procedures proper to modern art historical practices. Moreover, in theorizing the Libyan vernacular as Latin, modern and Mediterranean, the writings of Rava represent a fundamental erasure of the Arab identity of this architecture. In concluding his discussion, Rava makes this removal quite clear when he states: "we are not at all inspired... by an Arab architecture, but we recover, through it, the undying traces of the Latin-ness of an architecture that is, first of all, profoundly Mediterranean."[9]

Rava's theories on the value of the Libyan vernacular for the creation of a contemporary colonial architecture were preceded by his earlier design for the Albergo "agli Scavi di Leptis Magna"—a tourist facility whose drawings were exhibited at the first Exhibition of Italian rationalist architecture held in Rome in 1928. Eventually completed in

March of 1931, this project was literally and rhetorically expressive of Rava's position within Italian rationalism. It was understood by contemporary critics as a combination of the theoretical and formal concerns typical to this movement—such as, "pure architectonic constructivity and functionality"—with abstract typological and climatic and references to the vernacular architecture of this region.[10] Constructed to address the tourist interest in the archeological site at Leptis Magna, the ground floor is organized around a central covered courtyard that links a series of large public rooms, with an entrance facing the archeological site. Diagonally opposite from this secondary entrance is the area on the ground floor dedicated to the residents—its orientation being toward the Mediterranean. As well as providing the point of intersection between two distinct audiences, the courtyard refers to the vernacular tradition of the Arab house—a scheme that, for Rava, was both derived from Roman origins and reflected modern demands.

Fig. 3. Sebastiano Larco and Carlo Enrico Rava, Albergo "agli Scavi di Leptis Magna," Homs, Libya, 1928-31. View from seafront.
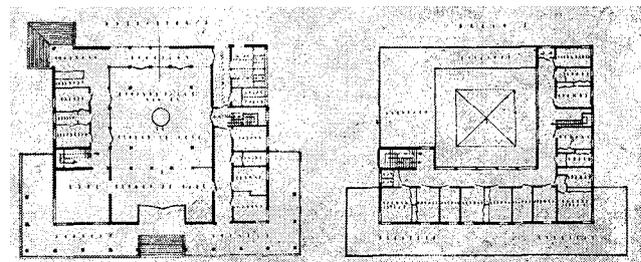

Fig. 4. Larco and Rava, Albergo "agli Scavi di Leptis Magna." Floor Plans.

The three dimensional development of this project follows directly from the rationality of its plan, the diagonal relationship of its organization manifesting itself in an asymmetrical massing of a higher block related to the seafront. This building also reveals its debt to the colonial environment through the relatively blank nature of its surfaces and the conscious use of shading devices—such as the large covered verandah and a system of brightly colored canvas panels that allowed the exterior spaces to be protected from the sun and the wind. However, despite any gestures of harmonizing with the Libyan environment, the Albergo agli Scavi was more closely tied to architectural discourse in Italy than it was to its colonial context. Seeking an abstract point of reference— the Roman house—and expressing it through a contemporary language—Italian rationalism—this project elides the revelation of its indigenous sources. Not unlike the photographs that Rava took of the Mosque of Qasr al-Haj—whose "primitivism" was not so much present in the pure geometries of the building as it was crystallized in its image— the Albergo agli Scavi represents a re-interpretation of the Libyan vernacular according to a set of already existing aesthetic principles. The modernity of the references to the Libyan vernacular found in this project were the product of an attempt to fuse these regional traditions

with a contemporary architectural expression—a process that had already defined these vernacular sources as belonging to a broader Mediterranean category.

Fig. 5. Mosque of Qasr al-Haj, Libya. Photograph, Carlo Enrico Rava, January 1930.

A second and equally influential interpretation of the Libyan vernacular was offered in the later 1930s by scholars like Fabrizio Maria Apollonj, who published a survey of the monumental and vernacular traditions of Libya in the journal *Rassegna di Architettura*.[11] Describing the local traditions of this colony as the spontaneous product of a poor and static population, Apollonj argued that its primitive qualities were an indication of its lack of any real artistic content. As such, he did not deem it to be a worthy reference point for Italian architects working in this colony. Although Apollonj offers a radically different view of the Libyan vernacular, this interpretation was no less modern in its conception. It was closely tied to contemporary research into the culture of the Libyan populations by anthropologists and ethnographers like Emilio Scarin—for whom the Libyan people were a "primitive" society that could be understood through a direct reading of their cultural artifacts.[12]

This "scientific" interpretation of the Libyan vernacular finds its corollary in the writings and works of Florestano Di Fausto. In an article entitled "Visione mediterranea della mia architettura," he emphasizes the use of a slow and studied process of design by which he developed a reciprocal relationship between his projects and their historical and environmental context.[13] This is an approach to colonial architecture that calls for literal appropriation of local references within a contemporary expression. Although he recognized a more localized and specific dimension to the architecture of this colony, for Di Fausto the Arab identity of Libyan vernacular was merely one of a series of possible regional expressions. Through a process of direct incorporation, this identity was to be re-enacted as part of an eclectic architectural vocabulary for the purpose of harmonizing with the spirit of the place. The tourist architecture of Di Fausto was derived almost directly from this theoretical position—which sought to create a contemporary architecture proper to a regional context. This approach is particularly evident in his most elaborate project, the Albergo-Casinò "Uaddan" in Tripoli of 1935. Located along the eastern seafront, this project is a complex assembly of different building elements that responds to both its seafront location and the diverse architectural heritage of the city of Tripoli. This last relationship is largely by way of analogy—the composite nature of its forms and stylistic references being comparable to those of the old city, which was marked by a combination of Roman, Arab and Ottoman interventions.[14] This connection is particularly strong with regard to Tripoli's monumental buildings like the Mosque of Sidi Darghut, which is itself a composite of independent elements that bears the marks of successive additions and restorations.

The Mediterranean intonation of the "Uaddan" was one of two regional languages found in Di Fausto's tourist-related projects. A second group of hotels followed an itinerary from Tripoli deep into the Libyan interior—a route that, from the late 1920s, had been understood as one of the most desirable and characteristic tourist experiences of this colony. This interest was fueled by a combination of literary speculation and reportage, and scientific exploration and research. By the mid-1930s this route had become a well organized tourist itinerary serviced by Saharan motor coaches that provided luxury travel and comfort through the most demanding geographic and climatic conditions.[15] The first two hotels were the Albergo "Rumia" in Jefren of 1934 and its virtual twin, the Albergo Nalut of 1935. These projects explored a regional expression proper to the architecture and landscape of the Gebel and sub-Saharan regions of Libya through a fixed vocabulary of forms, expressed in an abstract language.

It was, however, on the final stop—the Albergo "Ain el-Fras" in Ghadames—that Di Fausto most directly explored the potential of this regionalism. This hotel responds to the formal language of the city—a complex labyrinth of narrow passages, covered courtyards and terraces shaped by dense walled structures—through a massive exterior wall behind which a series of courtyard spaces were created. Forming one edge of a luxuriantly landscaped piazza in front of one of the main gates of the old city, this project establishes a metonymic relationship to this oasis setting—something that is particularly well expressed in the *portichetto delle palme* where columns shaped like the trunks of palm trees mingle with those of its own verdant landscape. This literal incorporation of an element of landscape into architecture is an indication of the fact that, with the "Ain el-Fras," the means of appropriation of local references was quite direct. When looking more closely at the arcaded wings that flank the central body of this building, there is an unmistakable relationship between this element and the streets of the old city.

Fig. 6. Florestano Di Fausto, Albergo "Ain el-Fras," Ghadames, 1934. Main facade with oasis.

Fig. 7. Albergo "Ain el-Fras." Postcard, 1937.

While at one level, Di Fausto's direct appropriation of the forms of the town of Ghadames in this project can be understood as a more consistent manifestation of his intention to relate to its various building traditions—this project should also be analyzed in reference to its function within the tourist panorama. Through the direct incorporation of vernacular forms, this project created a seamless relationship between itself and the local architecture—something that, for the tourist, would have served to blur the connection between the hotel and its historical setting. The use of local forms in this project was part of a self-conscious staging of the image and the patterns of living of Ghadames that a tourist could comfortably experience. In so closely replicating the culture of this town, the Albergo "Ain el-Fras" became its more perfect replacement. Indeed, to travel to Ghadames, it may have no longer been necessary to see the actual town.
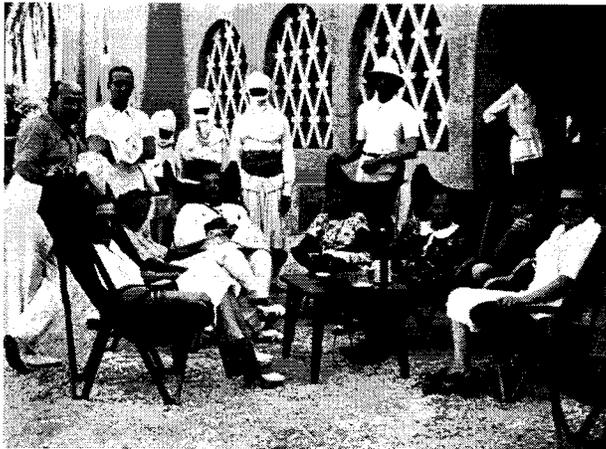

Fig. 8. Albergo "Ain el-Fras." Tourists in courtyard.

Although the intention of this approach was one of creating a regional expression within a contemporary architecture its implications are quite different. The hotel by Di Fausto represents a crisis in the status of architecture, and in its relationship to its context. It so closely imitates the identity of the traditional forms of Ghadames that it both calls into question the line between restoration and innovation, and challenges the identity of these historical forms. However, rather than consider this as a fundamentally anti-modern approach, when analyzing this project it is clear that it is quite the opposite. The Albergo "Ain el-Fras" is the logical outcome of the modern historical consciousness that called for authenticity in the tourist experience. It is related to and a product of contemporary scientific research into the form and the culture of the Berber people of this region—a so-called "primitive" culture which held a particular fascination for a tourist audience. By so carefully re-enacting the forms of Ghadames under the aegis of a regional vernacular, this project was both a tourist facility and ethnographic museum. As a consequence, the politically motivated racial discourses that were already infused into modern scientific practices were here beginning to be mapped onto architecture.

NOTES

[1] Italo Balbo, "La litoranea libica," *Nuova Antologia* 72, 1559 (March 1, 1937): 5-13.

[2] Eros Vicari, "L'Ente turistico ed alberghiero della Libia (E.T.A.L.)," *Gli Annali dell'Africa Italiana* V, 4 (December 1942): 955-75.

[3] Balbo, "La politica sociale fascista verso gli arabi della Libia," in *Reale Accademia d'Italia, Fondazione Alessandro Volta. Convegno di scienze morali e storiche. 4-11 ottobre 1938-XVI. Tema: l'Africa. Vol. 1* (Roma: Reale Accademia d'Italia, 1939), 733-49.

[4] Luigi Turba, "La Moschea dei Caramanli a Tripoli," *Le Vie d'Italia* XL, 8 (August 1934): 583-91.

[5] Marida Talamona, «Città europea e città araba in Tripolitania,» in *Architettura italiana d'oltremare 1870-1940*, ed. Giuliano Gresleri, Pier Giorgio Massaretti and Stefano Zagnoni (Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 1993), 242-77.

[6] Richard A. Etlin, "*Architettura e Arti Decorative*: the Virtues of Rustic Architecture," in *Modernism in Italian Architecture, 1890-1940* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 134-9.

[7] Pietro Romanelli, "Vecchie case arabe di Tripoli," *Architettura e Arti Decorative* III, 5 (January 1924): 193-211.

[8] Carlo Enrico Rava, "Di un'architettura coloniale moderna, parte prima," *Domus* 41 (May 1931): 89.

[9] Rava, "Di un architettura coloniale moderna, parte seconda," *Domus* 42 (June 1931): 36.

[10] N.D.R., «Architetture libiche degli Arch. Carlo Enrico Rava e Sebastiano Larco,» *Architettura e Arti Decorative* X, 13 (September 1931): 682-87.

[11] Fabrizio Maria Apollonj, «L'architettura araba della Libia,» *Rassegna di Architettura* IX, 12 (December 1937): 455-62.

[12] Emilio Scarin, *L'Insediamento umano nella Libia occidentale* (Verona: A. Mondadori, 1940).

[13] Florestano Di Fausto, «Visione mediterranea della mia architettura,» *Libia* I, 9 (December 1937): 16-18.

[14] *Islamic Art and Architecture in Libya* (London: The Architectural Association, 1976).

[15] Ente Turistico ed Alberghiero della Libia, *Itinerario Tripoli-Gadames* (Milano: Tipo-Litografia Turati Lombardi, 1938).

ILLUSTRATION SOURCES

Figure 1. Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (ASMAE). MAI.5-29. Fascicolo 338. Foto africa settentrionale, Libia. Busta, turismo (36 f.).

Figures 2 & 7. Collection of the author.

Figure 3. ASMAE. MAI.3-56. Fascicolo. "35 Fotografie OO.PP. Libia."

Figure 4. Marcello Piacentini, «Prima internazionale architettonica,» *Architettura e Arti Decorative* VI, 12 (August 1928): 561.

Figure 5. Carlo Enrico Rava, Album di viaggio, 1928-30, p. 89. Collection of Rava family.

Figures 6 & 8. Wolfsonian Foundation, Genoa. Archivio Fotografico Azione Coloniale. Reparto 1. Busta 15B. "Tripolitania: Alberghi."