

TOWARD AN ENTITY OF DECOLONIZATION

ALESSANDRO PETTI

This text is an extract from the lecture given at the Festival of the Peripheries in Rome on 7 June 2023 and the result of ongoing collective work and reflection with Sandi Hilal, Emilio Distretti, Walter Mignolo, Charles Esche and Eyal Weizman.

Prelude

In 1940, the Italian Fascist regime established the *Entity of Colonization of Sicilian Latifundium* on the model of the *Entity of Colonization of Libya* and the colonial architecture in Eritrea and Ethiopia. These territories were considered by the regime as ‘empty’, ‘underdeveloped’ and ‘backward’ and therefore in need of being ‘reclaimed’, ‘modernised’ and ‘repopulated’.

To this end, the Entity of Colonization inaugurated eight new rural villages in Sicily, and many remained unfinished.

Today, most of these villages have fallen into ruin. However, what does not seem to be in ruins is the persistence of fascist, colonial and modernist rhetoric, culture and politics.

Despite the fall of Fascism after the Second World War, the defascistisation of Italy unfortunately remains an unfinished process. This is one of the reasons why there are many visible architectures and monuments celebrating the fascist regime.

Moreover, having lost its colonies during the Second World War, Italy never embarked on a real process of decolonisation.

With the re-emergence of fascist ideologies in Europe, it becomes urgent to ask: what kind of legacy is the fascist-colonial-modernist legacy? And who has the right to reuse it? Should this heritage simply be demolished or could it be redirected to other ends?

The European colonial/modern project of exploitation, segregation and dispossession divided the world into different races and nations, constructing their own identity in opposition to 'other projects' labelled as traditional or backward. The suppression of alternatives was, and is, an attempt to create a singular modernist/colonial epistemology. Therefore, modernity cannot exist without the disqualification and degradation of other approaches and worldviews.

In 2017, the nomination of Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, as a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its modernist colonial architecture built by the fascist regime during the period of Italian colonisation, raised a number of fundamental questions for both the former colonised and the former colonisers: who has the right to preserve, reuse and re-arrange colonial and modernist fascist architecture?

While architectural modernism in particular continues to be celebrated for its supposed aesthetic qualities, what the modernist rhetoric of progress and innovation obscures are actually its inherent authoritarian dimensions of homogenisation and segregation. These modernist conceptions are still present in contemporary architecture and urbanism; where in the name of modern architecture, entire communities, forms of life and historical places are erased.

While a critique of modernism alone is not sufficient, having already been conducted by postmodernism, the task of the present is also to imagine architectural forms of *demodernisation*.

Demodernisation for us does not mean anti-modernism, such as that expressed by reactionary, anti-technological, nationalist and fascist melancholies. *Demodernising*, in fact, does not mean opposing the use of electricity and the internet, or new materials and new technologies. Instead, it means profaning the lines of separation and disconnections embodied by modernism, which instead wants to segregate, divide, categorise. Opposing the abstract and aggressive universalism of modernity, *demodernisation* is a practice of de-segregation that is applied both as discourse and as practice, to invent forms of re-appropriation and re-use of modern architecture.

After decades of work in Palestine - where decolonisation essentially means the practice of opposing Israel's regime of occupation, colonisation and apartheid - moving to Europe, through Palestine, *demodernisation* became our frontline in the broader struggle for decolonisation, and we began to

understand the so-called “Italian Southern Question” more clearly as a case of internal colonisation.

Of course, as many of you know, this is not a new interpretation. In writing *The Question of Palestine* (1922), Edward Said was influenced by Antonio Gramsci’s conceptual political categories of subalternity and hegemony, developed precisely in relation to the ‘southern Italian question’ (1926). Descriptions of colonised subjects, including southern Italians, as backward, underdeveloped, uncivilised, lazy and slow to catch up with modernity characterise the ideological justification for legitimising the invasion and occupation of Libya, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia. Obviously, I am not comparing the populations of southern Italy here with the formerly colonised populations in Africa who suffered a level of racialized violence and dehumanisation by both fascist and liberal governments that just cannot be compared. Rather, it is an attempt to reconnect these two parallel histories that post-World War II Italian historiography has deliberately kept separate in order to build possible new alliances. Paradoxically, the colonisation campaigns in Africa were justified by the need to find land and work for the poor Italians in the south. If Gramsci hoped for alliances between the industrialised proletariat of the North and the peasants of the South, today, in a similar spirit, one might invoke a new alliance between southerners and immigrants. In a modest and intimate register, the work that Sandi Hilal and I have undertaken together can also be understood as the result of an exploration of this possibility.

Positioning

At this point let me clarify my position, the specific point from which I observe the world, and my belonging to a specific cultural geography and local history. In this I hope to distance myself from the pretentious, universalist and arrogant European modernist male subject, and at the same time to hope build genuine alliances.

I come from a family in southern Italy, from a small region unknown to most Italians called Molise. As a southern Italian, I experienced a specific peripheral position within the hegemonic idea of Europe. Since my childhood, ‘the south’ has been both a political and philosophical perspective and at the same time a specific subaltern socioeconomic condition that I have experienced in my body and in my language.

I emigrated to northern Italy to study. In Venice, my marked southern accent immediately identified me as one of the many southerners, immigrant

students from the south. Studying became a way to build my political subjectivity and I recognise the privilege of having had access to a public education. I graduated in Architecture in 2001 and received my PhD in Urban Planning in 2006. The PhD scholarship gave me the opportunity to move and live in Palestine since 2002. I had no specific religious or political motivation, Palestine was first and foremost my new home, family after meeting Sandi, my life and work partner. During my first years in Palestine, I learnt to connect my personal life with my research interests and to make sense of my lived experience under Israeli colonial occupation. That is why I write here neither as the ‘expert’ nor as the ‘researcher’, but as a party involved in a liberation struggle.

I currently live in Stockholm, having spent more than a decade in Palestine with my family, in precarious conditions, without the right to stay, despite the fact that my wife and two daughters are Palestinian. I experienced dehumanisation during the border crossings that Israel imposed on Palestine, alongside the humiliations of daily life under Israeli occupation. These experiences taught me important lessons; they provoked in me a sense of disgust at the deceptive freedom of movement granted to Europeans and their descendants but denied to the rest of the world. Injustice is a bodily experience. Therefore, mine is an embodied gaze from the border, which means inhabiting at least two spaces at once, the inside and the outside, the normal and the abnormal. It means seeing more than one thing at the same time, recognising the separations and witnessing the aberrations of the nation-state as well as the crucial role architecture plays in processes of colonisation and decolonisation in organising spatial relations and expressing ideology. Even when it is abandoned or in ruins, it is still mobilised as evidence of political and cultural claims.

The analysis of the ways in which colonial architecture has been reused is a new arena for understanding broader political and cultural issues around national identity and exile, senses of belonging or alienation, social control or urban subversion. In our practice, architectural space is seen simultaneously as a product of the interaction of social and political transformations and as a privileged site for the analysis of these dynamics.

Profanation

In recent years, the right-wing Sicilian regional government, in an attempt to re-legitimise fascist policies, has financed the architectural conservation of the agricultural villages built by the Entity of Colonization of Sicilian Latifundim, restoring them as they were originally constructed. Supported

by strands of modern architectural history and restoration theories that, after the Second World War, cynically separated aesthetic values from social, political and economic ones, buildings began to be restored as they had been designed in the 1940s, reinforcing the idea that fascist architecture could exist without perpetuating fascist ideology.

In Borgo Bonsignore, for example, where only a few years ago the first building renovations began, a new plaque appeared next to the old one, recalling the “heroic acts of patriotism” acts that in fact amounted to crimes against humanity) of General Antonio Bonsignore, who was killed by the Ethiopian resistance fighters during the invasion and occupation of Ethiopia. These rural towns are all named after war criminals and fascists. Borgo Rizza, for instance, was named to commemorate the death of a young fascist militant.

Against this nostalgic and neo-fascist approach, in Borgo Rizza (we have started striking through the name Rizza to deny its commemoration but at the same time not to forget what it represented, a fascist militant) we collaborated with the Municipality of Carlentini, the local community and the university to establish the *Difficult Heritage Summer School*, a space for critical pedagogy and discussions around practices of re-appropriation and re-narration.

Over the years, we have begun to discuss with the municipality and the local population how to transform the former Entity of Colonization of Sicilian Latifundim of Borgo Rizza into an Entity of Decolonization.

This collective process is open to all those who feel the urgency to question the vast historical, cultural and political heritage inherent in colonialism, fascism and modernism, and thus begin a common path towards new practices of decolonisation and *demodernisation*.

Modernist architectures, both in former colonies and colonising countries, were built as isolated sacred objects to be admired; therefore, it is not enough for us to simply reuse them in the same ways as previous regimes used them or simply demolish them. They must to be profane, used against themselves, and opened to new common uses other than those for which they were intended.

Giorgio Agamben (2007) proposes the idea of ‘profanation’ as a strategy to return things to their common use. To profane is not simply to abolish or erase separations, but to learn to make new uses of them. To profane is playing with the lines of separation, to use them in a particular way. If to

sacralise is to separate - to bring common things into a sacred, separate sphere - then its opposite is to profane, to restore the common use of these things.

Decolonising architecture can be therefore understood as an act of profanation, which means not only dislocating power, but also using its destructive potential to reverse its functioning and subvert its uses. It is therefore important to distinguish between secularisation and profanation.

Secularisation leaves power structures intact; it simply moves from one sphere to another. Profanation, on the other hand, succeeds in disabling power and returning to common use the space that power had confiscated.

There are various historical precedents for the re-use of colonial architecture. These generally depend on the location, period and process of decolonisation. We can distinguish three general approaches in dealing with evacuated colonial architecture: destruction, reoccupation and subversion.

Destruction

The impulse to destruction seeks to spatially articulate 'liberation' from an architecture understood as an instrument of domination and control. If architecture is a weapon in a military arsenal that implements the power relations of colonialist ideologies, then architecture must burn. The impulse of destruction seeks to turn back time. Frantz Fanon (1961) argued that the colonial city cannot be reused, otherwise, colonial segregation will continue to exist. The colonial city must be made to disappear from the face of the earth.

However, today we know that time and its processes of transformation can never simply be reversed, and rather than a return of the Earth to a romantic nature, destruction leaves behind desolation and environmental damage that can last for decades. In 2005, Israel evacuated Gaza's settlements and destroyed 3,000 homes, creating not the *tabula rasa* promised for a new beginning but rather a million and a half tons of toxic rubble that poisoned the soil and groundwater. And as we know, it did nothing to get rid of Israeli colonial domination, which took other forms.

Reoccupation

A strong temptation present in all histories of decolonisation has therefore been to reuse buildings exactly as they were used under colonial regimes.

Such re-appropriation tends to reproduce in space certain colonial power relations and colonial villas inhabited by new financial and political elites while evacuated military installations of colonial armies used as prisons by new governments to suppress internal dissent. Unfortunately, we now know that the evacuated infrastructures were also often seen as a legacy of 'modernisation' and as an economic and organisational resource.

In post-colonial India, we know that Nehru advocated the reuse of colonial infrastructure in the same way it was designed to continue to secure power for the new nation-state, while Gandhi argued that the new Indian government freed from British colonial hegemony had to prove that it could change the functions of these inherited buildings from the past, with functions that would serve the urgent needs of the Indian people.

Subversion

We also know, however, that evacuated colonial architecture does not necessarily reproduce the functions for which it was designed. There are examples of other uses, both planned and spontaneous, that have invaded evacuated colonial architecture, subverted their programmes and unleashed their potential. Even the most terrifying structures of domination can yield to new forms of life.

Grounded in a belief in the capacity of existing forces to shape reality, our interventions seek to reuse colonial architecture for purposes other than those for which it was originally designed. They ask what new institutions and activities might inhabit evacuated spaces, and what physical transformations such spaces require.

What follows is a series of examples intended to clarify our understanding of the profanation of colonial architecture.

In May 2006, the Israeli army evacuated a military camp strategically located on the highest hill at the southern entrance to the Palestinian town of Beit Sahour. Originally constructed by the British Mandate Army during the Arab Revolt of the 1930s, the site later served as a base for the Jordanian Legion after 1948, before being taken over by the Israeli army following the 1967 occupation. Resembling a menacing fortress, the base overlooked and dominated the city's edge. Many of the surrounding houses were destroyed by tank shelling and gunfire originating from the camp.

The most controversial part of the site is its summit, where a cluster of concrete buildings formed the core of the former military base. Encircled by a massive earthen embankment running along the upper ridge of the hill, these structures appear to sit within the crater of a volcano. In Arabic, the hill is known as Oush Grab—the “crow’s nest.”

In the days immediately following the evacuation, Palestinians entered the base and removed all materials and objects that could be reused or recycled. At the time, some argued that the site should continue to function as a military base under Palestinian control, while others insisted that its function had to be radically transformed if its militarised role was not to persist. For several months, the abandoned base became a space where former prisoners recounted the violence and torture they had endured there.

Soon after, Israeli settlers—under military protection—reoccupied the site with the intention of transforming it into a new settlement. As is well documented, many Israeli settlements in the occupied territories originate as military outposts before being converted into gated civilian enclaves for Israelis only. The site was repeatedly reoccupied and reclaimed: when settlers returned, so did we. In response, we organised a series of public events and actions that deliberately disoriented soldiers who anticipated confrontational demonstrations.

It was in this context that Imad Al Atrash, director of the Palestine Wildlife Society, climbed one of the military watchtowers—previously used by soldiers to fire on Palestinians—and turned it against its original function. In a literal act of profanation, he transformed the tower from a panoptic device of surveillance and control into an observation point for birds and plants. The structure that once dominated Palestinian life was repurposed as a site for ecological observation.

Imad explained that every spring and autumn thousands of migratory birds stop at Oush Grab. The area hosts approximately 520 bird species and over 2,700 plant species, making it a crucial node along major migratory routes linking Siberia to southern Africa via the Jordan Valley–Jericho corridor and the Jerusalem mountains. Hills such as Oush Grab offer ideal resting and nesting conditions for storks, pelicans, and birds of prey.

At one point, Imad challenged us directly: “You are architects, right? So instead of planting trees, bringing people here, and organising events, why don’t you design something for Oush Grab?” Accepting this challenge, our

proposal for the site became an explicit intervention in the political struggle over the hill.

Because of the site's revolving-door occupation, it became crucial to render the buildings inhospitable to human use. Rather than renovating or converting the base for another program, the project aimed to accelerate processes of decay and disintegration. Our intervention thus became a project of obsolescence: the hilltop, together with its military structures, would no longer serve human occupation but would instead be returned to non-human life.

Colleagues at the Palestine Wildlife Society anticipate that birds will eventually inhabit the cavities and voids created by this process, transforming Oush Grab into a vast nesting ground—a former military stronghold reclaimed through ecological profanation.

Confession

In the same summer in which we were resisting a renewed wave of Israeli colonisation, I travelled to Rome to consult the National Archives in the EUR district. I increasingly felt the need to understand how my experience in Palestine was reshaping my perspective on both my personal history and the collective history of Italy. While conducting archival research, I came across an atlas-book titled *Entity of Colonization of Libya*.

Until that moment, I had been entirely unaware that the fascist regime had established a series of *Enti* (agencies), each housed in purpose-built structures known as *Enti di Colonizzazione*, through which architecture was explicitly mobilised as a tool of colonisation. The atlas assembled architectural drawings, statistical data, maps, and photographs into a manual for the systematic colonisation of the countryside—territories described as underdeveloped, unproductive, and uninhabited. Within fascist ideology, the supposed Libyan desert was equated with the Sicilian countryside: both were framed as empty, backward spaces in need of modernisation.

During the fascist period, Italy employed modern architecture to advance its imperial ambitions in Libya. A series of rural villages was constructed along the Libyan coast and connected by an extensive infrastructural network. Expropriated land was assigned to Libyans and to Italian settler families, and what were sometimes described as “Muslim villages” were built as part of this colonial apparatus. For young Italian architects, the fascist imaginary of Libya as a desert to be modernised offered a delirious rhetorical

framework within which to realise modernist architecture. Photographic campaigns accompanied the inauguration of these villages, reinforcing fascist propaganda that framed colonisation as a project of modernisation and civilisation.

What these modernist dreams concealed, however, were widespread massacres and the mass displacement of the local population. During the 1930s, approximately two-thirds of the Libyan population was deported to the eastern part of the country and confined in refugee camps. Although officially justified as measures to protect non-combatant civilians, these deportations effectively rendered the entire population a legitimate target, functioning as a form of collective repression against the popular resistance led by Omar al-Mukhtar.

The use of refugee camps enclosed by barbed wire to control populations deemed dangerous was first developed in the colonies and only later returned, like a boomerang, to Europe in the form of extermination camps. The horror of the modern refugee camp was thus initially conceived, tested, and normalised in colonial contexts before being applied to ethnic minorities within Europe itself.

In recent years, politicians have publicly confessed to and apologised for colonial crimes committed by national governments. Yet, in many cases, such gestures amount to little more than the continuation of colonialism by other means. In 2009, for instance, Silvio Berlusconi first addressed the Libyan parliament to apologise for crimes committed during Italian colonisation, only to declare a few months later before the Italian parliament that the colonial question had been resolved—at precisely the moment when Libya had become Italy's principal supplier of gas and oil.

Confession, once a practice confined to the church, appears today to have permeated the entirety of social life. We willingly disclose our stories, submit to interviews, allow our faces to be photographed, our dreams exposed, our pasts scrutinised, and our biographies recorded. As Michel Foucault observed, we inhabit a confessional society in which no priest is required for absolution; confession itself seems to guarantee forgiveness.

On the occasion of the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2014, we produced an installation that profaned the confessional used by priests to absolve sinners. By transforming this religious and psychological apparatus of individual redemption into a political device, the work sought to expose and denounce the enduring connections between the crimes of the past and the

criminal practices of the present that continue to bind Europe and Africa through countless entanglements.

Prosthesis

Following this research chapter on the colonisation of Libya, we felt the need to redirect our attention to Southern Italy. This opportunity arose during Manifesta 12 in Palermo, where, together with the Decolonising Architecture Advanced Course at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm, we presented a project for the critical conservation of the Casa del Mutilato—a fascist monument inaugurated by Benito Mussolini in 1936.

The Casa del Mutilato was constructed to commemorate wounded soldiers of the First World War. More than eighty years after its inauguration, the narratives embedded in its architecture—narratives that continue to legitimise contemporary forms of fascism, racism, and white supremacy—remain clearly legible. Conceived as a space with a quasi-mystical function, the building sought to transform human sacrifice into one of the moral pillars of transcendent nationalism in imperial Italy.

While in many European countries traces of totalitarian architecture have been destroyed or radically transformed, in Italy a large part of the architectural production of the fascist regime has instead been normalised within the everyday urban landscape. The Casa del Mutilato in Palermo exemplifies this condition. Numerous inscriptions remain visible throughout the building. At the entrance, a plaque signed by Mussolini celebrates the so-called foundation of the Empire on 9 May 1936. The text proclaims the sealing of Ethiopia's destiny, the birth of a "Fascist Empire" and an "Empire of Peace," allegedly devoted to civilisation and humanity. In reality, this self-proclaimed empire was responsible for the killing of more than 300,000 civilians through indiscriminate massacres and the use of chemical weapons.

On 19 August 1936, only three months after the occupation of Addis Ababa, Le Corbusier sent Mussolini a sketch proposal for a new capital of Italian East Africa, accompanied by a letter declaring: "This is how a city for modern times is born." The invasion of the sovereign Ethiopian state was thus sustained not only by military force but also by an extensive cultural campaign in the press and public debate. Architects played a central role in this process, asserting the supposed superiority of modern architecture over what was portrayed as irrational and degenerate local building traditions. In a 1936 issue of *Domus*, modernist forms were superimposed onto Ethiopian

architecture, described as barbaric, with straight lines naively proclaimed superior to organic and vernacular forms.

Almost a century after their construction, many buildings erected during the fascist regime—such as the Casa del Mutilato—are now in need of restoration. This situation makes it urgent to ask: what kind of heritage is fascist heritage? How can monuments produced under fascism be preserved without reproducing or legitimising its ideology? Is it truly possible to detach aesthetic values from the political, economic, and social forces that generated them and that continue to shape the present?

How, then, can one conceive of a reuse project that neither enhances these ideological traces nor erases them? How might visitors and users be offered access to the historical conditions from which this architecture emerged?

During Manifesta 12, we invited historians, activists, architects, and politicians to collectively re-narrate denied and suppressed histories. As a physical platform to support this multiplication of narratives, we employed a scissor lift—an apparatus commonly used in architectural restoration work.

Technically, a prosthesis is an artificial device designed to replace or augment a missing or impaired body part. It is an addition that materialises as a form of repair. Drawing on medical knowledge and practice, we realised that this concept could be productively transferred to architecture. In this sense, the prosthesis reveals a dual function. First, it serves to support marginalised historical narratives, challenging the dominant discourse inscribed in the building and the ongoing reproduction of neo-fascist and neo-colonial rhetoric. Second, it calls into question the Western paradigm of architectural preservation grounded in ideals of perfection, authenticity, and return to an original state. Rather than restoring buildings to an illusory purity, prosthetic interventions acknowledge damage and incompleteness as conditions that open up new possibilities for use, meaning, and collective engagement.

Asymmetrical doubles

On 8 July 2017, in Kraków, during the 41st session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, Asmara—the capital of Eritrea—was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The successful nomination, entitled *Asmara: A Modernist City of Africa*, focuses on the colonial fascist and modernist architectural and urban transformation of the city during the Italian occupation between 1890 and 1941. The inscription marked the culmination of a long-term project, initiated after Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia in 1991, to document and catalogue more than 4,000 modernist buildings.

Asmara's inscription has generated a series of contradictory questions surrounding the unresolved issue of colonial heritage. Does the nomination represent a new chapter in Eritrea's national liberation struggle, signalling the conclusion of a long process of decolonisation from fascism? Or does it instead constitute a post-ideological, economically driven initiative aimed at reviving the myth of benign "colonial times" for Western tourism? More fundamentally, does the inclusion of Asmara within UNESCO's evaluative framework reproduce the subjugation of non-European cultures to universalist, Eurocentric values rooted in colonial epistemologies?

The UNESCO World Heritage area closely follows the perimeter of the colonial master plan—that is, the portion of the city originally designed "for whites only," shaped by modernist principles of segregation. By contrast, the indigenous settlement of Aba Shawl is relegated to an external buffer zone. In line with modernist conservation doctrines centred on "authenticity" and "originality," the protected area includes pre-colonial villages predating Italian occupation while excluding the informal growth and densification of Aba Shawl that followed colonisation.

In the language of architectural and cultural preservation, a *buffer zone* denotes a protective belt surrounding a designated heritage site, intended to facilitate its preservation - bureaucratically, technically, and strategically. The term also belongs to military vocabulary, where it describes the space separating opposing forces. This concept is deeply rooted in Western architectural thought, dating back to Vitruvius, who used it to define the inaccessible area surrounding the statue of Artemis, thereby demarcating the sacred from the profane. According to the 2008 guidelines of ICCROM, a buffer zone functions as an instrument that disconnects the object of protection from external threats. Within this framework, Aba Shawl is effectively positioned as a no-man's land, serving to safeguard the colonial city.

Historically, Aba Shawl was viewed by colonial authorities as a "native quarter" - backward, dangerous, and underdeveloped. Today, it is a densely populated neighbourhood composed of low, clustered houses, narrow

alleys, and sandy passageways, sharply contrasting with the geometric, open layout of the modernist city. Although widely recognised by Eritreans as the living pulse of Asmara's identity, Aba Shawl continues to bear the stigma of an underserved and insecure ghetto. Many residents of the city avoid the area, and Eritreans remain acutely aware that the social divisions inherited from colonial segregation persist as what has been described as "the colony within."

By defining Aba Shawl as a buffer zone, the UNESCO nomination produced a paradox. Rather than passively accepting renewed marginalisation, residents have articulated an inverted narrative: the former colonial city can only exist as heritage because it is shielded by the indigenous one. Without Aba Shawl, the preservation of Asmara as a World Heritage Site might not have been possible. By claiming themselves as custodians of this heritage, inhabitants symbolically overturn the exclusion historically imposed upon them.

Asmara's nomination thus brings former colonising and formerly colonised societies together around a shared and unresolved question: is it possible to reuse fascist colonial architecture without celebrating fascist ideology? Under fascism, architecture and urbanism were mobilised to construct a fictive unity between the "metropolis" and its "peripheries," producing what might be described as an asymmetrical double. The imperial project relied on the replication and duplication of architectural forms and spatial models across Italian and African territories: Rome and Asmara imagined as twin capitals, mirrored by squares, case del fascio, churches, villas, cinemas, theatres, and monuments.

In Italy, the construction of New Towns in the Agro Pontino, Sardinia, and Sicily was presented as a modern project of territorial and social redemption. Similarly, the agricultural settlements in Libya, along with the master plans for Asmara and Addis Ababa, were framed as instruments for the modernisation and "civilisation" of colonised populations. A new imperial geography emerged: a network of urban and rural centres connected like an electrical grid, transmitting ideology from Italy to its colonies through a series of architectural doubles.

Yet the rhetoric of symmetry concealed a radically asymmetrical reality. In Italy, the celebration of new urban forms followed land reclamation projects in the south, where local populations were often demonised as uncivilised or backward. In the colonies, modernist architecture revealed its darkest potential: racial segregation, the destruction of local cultures and economies, the imposition of rigid public-private divisions, the violent separation of

secular and religious spheres, and the instrumentalisation of religion as a technique of divide and rule.

The colonies functioned as laboratories in which modernist principles of zoning and *tabula rasa* were tested without restraint. Models of forced urbanisation developed in Southern Italy were later transposed onto African territories, where colonial legislation enforced strict legal and spatial separation between Italian citizens and colonial subjects. Although metropolitan and colonial architectures shared the same modernist vocabulary, their beneficiaries were never the same. The New Towns built in Italy found their counterparts in the White Towns planned for Addis Ababa and realised in Asmara. The architectural “double” was always intended for the settler alone—revealing itself, ultimately, as an irreducibly asymmetrical double.

Domestication

Finally, we returned to Sicily—where this trajectory began. In the summer of 2020, on the occasion of the Quadriennale di Roma, we visited, together with photographer Luca Capuano, all the rural villages built by the *Ente di Colonizzazione del Latifondo Siciliano*. Many of these settlements are now in ruins; some have been repurposed as tourist destinations, others partially restored and once again abandoned. Among them is Borgo Rizza, located in the municipality of Carlentini.

At every election cycle, Borgo Rizza had been promised a “new life.” When we first entered the municipal offices of Carlentini, the mayor, Giuseppe Stefio, and the deputy mayor, Salvatore Larosa, greeted us by saying: “*Where have you been? We were waiting for you.*” That same day, we agreed to reuse the former building of the *Ente di Colonizzazione del Latifondo Siciliano* as the site of a summer school, which we named the *Difficult Heritage Summer School*.

Supported by the Royal Institute of Art and the University of Basel, and developed in collaboration with Emilio Distretti, we inaugurated the first edition of the Summer School. Students from both institutions participated alongside researchers, scholars, and local residents, whose active involvement shaped the project from the outset.

The municipality launched a campaign to collect and recycle second-hand furniture for reuse in Borgo Rizza. This strategy of reuse served to domesticate spaces originally conceived as monumental backdrops for fascist military parades and political or religious performances rather than

for everyday inhabitation. In doing so, it directly challenged fascist propaganda, which treated architecture primarily as façade and spectacle.

The participation of the local community was essential. For this reason, evening activities organised by the students, ranging from collective cooking to dancing, became central moments of encounter. Furniture was placed outdoors, in the main square, in order to invert the modernist separation between private and public space. By bringing the kitchen into the square, we sought to transgress this division and foreground everyday practices traditionally excluded from public and political life.

While deeply rooted in Borgo Rizza, we also felt the need to extend this conversation to other contexts, expanding opportunities for comparative learning and the formation of new alliances. The installation *Entity of Decolonization – Borgo Rizza* profanes the former Ente di Colonizzazione del Latifondo Siciliano by dismantling and recomposing a replica of its façade into a series of modular seats. These elements form a platform for an open discursive space in which the public is invited to critically reconsider the social, political, and economic consequences of fascist, colonial, and modernist legacies, while collectively imagining new forms of common use.

The first activation of *Entity of Decolonization – Borgo Rizza* took place in May 2022 at the Mostra d'Oltremare in Naples, inaugurated in 1940 as a monumental exhibition intended to display the overseas territories and peoples colonised by the fascist regime. The exhibition closed only forty days after its opening, when Italy entered the Second World War. Since then, the site has undergone multiple temporary reuses, including housing refugees during the war and functioning as a vaccination centre during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The second activation occurred in the Hansaviertel in West Berlin, built in 1957 for the Interbau International Building Exhibition. Here, we explored how modernist architecture was mobilised to represent a democratic Germany, despite the fact that many of the architects involved had previously worked for totalitarian regimes.

The third activation took place in Brussels at La Loge, where, together with local groups, we visited monuments linked to Belgium's colonial past and discussed the urgent need to decolonise European public spaces.

At the time of writing, the installation is presented at the Venice Architecture Biennale, where it received the Golden Lion for Best Participation at the 18th International Architecture Exhibition, and is also

exhibited at the Museum of Civilisations in Rome. At the conclusion of this long journey, we imagine the Entity of Decolonization – Borgo Rizza returning to Sicily, where it will be burned, and its ashes used as the founding gesture for new decolonial initiatives.

References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 2007. *Profanations*. New York: Zone Books.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1961. *I dannati della terra*. Turin: Einaudi.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1926. *La questione meridionale*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Hilal, Sandi, Alessandro Petti, and Eyal Weizman. 2013. *Architecture After Revolution*, Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- Said, Edward W. 1992. *The Question of Palestine*. New York: Random House.