

Modern Roman Architecture

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Most people come to Rome for one of a handful of obvious reasons: the gorgeous antiquities, the museums, the fountains and the shopping, the local cuisine, or for an experience of that hard to define thing known as Romanness which includes a certain dash and deviltry, a certain Mediterranean style and flair.

A very select band of tourists come for something with which the city is far, far less associated: modern architecture

Modern what?

One of the best kept secrets of Caput Mundi, or the head of the world, as Rome used to be called, is the modern architectural wealth tucked in carefully concealed corners around the ancient city. To the average stroller, of which I'm one, these are not necessarily easy to spot. Why? Because the matinee idols of the Colosseum, the Forum, St. Peter's and the Tiber rob you of the time and the mental oxygen left over for other things, and because any given corner of Rome is so dense, so chockablock with styles and architectural citations, that it's the optical equivalent of seven layer cake, and just a few glances tend to glut the eyes.

And yet all the movements that swept through European modern architecture can find their echo, sometimes oddly angled and Italianized, but identifiable, within a single long and focused walk in Rome. And for good reason: because Rome entered the late 19th century as little more than a collection of moldy old buildings erected on a swamp. Whereas Paris and London were by that point already living breathing metropolises, thickly settled, their urban look and feel already cast in travertine and brick and steel, Rome in the 1870's was still essentially a sprawling village. The most dominant culture in the history of the earth had dwindled down to 200,000 sun-

baked souls who went about their ancient ways in nearly complete indifference to the industrial ferment sweeping the rest of Europe

Enter, history. Or rather, nation-making. In the 1870's Italy was finally unified, Rome was chosen as its capital, and the city began the self-conscious task of rising to the occasion. Areas around Rome were drained. The first in a series of Town Plans was passed, stipulating residential areas. People began to pour into the newly vibrant capital. And architecture followed suit, keeping up with the influx.

Of course, the Italian economy and political system being what they are, the architectural development of 20th century Rome did not take place stably, but in fits and starts fashion, and against a background of pure chaos. Adding to the natural incoherence of such a process was the ingenuity of Romans at finding loopholes in existing housing codes and laws through which to insert entirely new wings of building, along with terraces, cupolas, pediments and pillars. The city government traditionally turned a blind eye to the process, which is called *abusivismo*. All of these reasons, added to the jumbled ancient base of the city, explain why the Rome of today is as close as a city can possibly be to architecturally incontinent, exploding in disconnected expression from one block to the next.

Strolling the streets of Rome, you quickly realize that one modern historical period probably left a deeper impact on the facades and buildings of the city than any other: Fascist. The Italian Fascists were thankfully far less effective than their German counterparts at war, but they were equally concerned with the look of things, and the Fascist architecture of Rome with its cool, accentuated volumes and wrap-around exteriors is a joy to the eyes. During much of the 20 and 30's the city was reconfigured to make way for the coming Mussolinesque dream of monumental "rationalist" architecture. Priceless ancient ruins were bulldozed into the ground. Atmospheric quarters were razed to make way for gigantic cheerless straight avenues.

The hapless residents of these quarters were moved to the suburbs in a forced relocation to often substandard housing. And yet the Fascist architecture itself is often thrillingly beautiful.

Take the central post office of Rome, which is probably the most famous Fascist building in the city. It's near my house and I often pass it walking. Somewhat resembling a giant submarine designed by Raymond Loewy, its long low fuselage lined with square porthole windows and covered in aspirin-white marble cladding causes it to leap with a startling violence out of the otherwise antique landscape. As if to underscore its modernity, it's situated right near an ancient Roman pyramid erected by one Gaius Cestius in his own honor, and now the center of a large traffic circle.

Take, on a lesser scale, the pool where I swim (or used to, until the chlorine in the water began changing the color of my hair). Now officially under the protection of the Comune or city hall and therefore sentenced to a slow death by civic indifference, this pool is a picture-perfect piece of late 30's architecture, and has that fascination to contemporary eyes that a Packard or Chevy of the same period would: its anticipation of the Modern gives it paradoxically a classic look. The only problem? The paint is peeling, the joists are sagging, and the building overall is beginning to look like it's about to collapse and spill its lanes of backstroking swimmers into the street.

Of all the architecturally oddest, most incoherent areas of the city, there is one that towers above the rest: Garbatella. The characteristically delirious facades of this neighborhood can be seen to great effect in the film *Dear Diary*, by Nani Moretti, (the auteur who is currently the darling of Italian film.) In *Dear Diary* Moretti put-puts around deserted Rome one summer afternoon on his Vespa motor scooter, and while waxing philosophical about life spends much time scrutinizing the architectural

marvels of Garbatella. As the camera lingers lovingly on the facades of this quarter, you quickly realize it's doing so for good reason. From the point of view of sheer architectural oddity, this neighborhood is the eighth wonder of the world.

Located about ten minutes south of central Rome, Garbatella was built in 1920, as a residential area for the new working class. The plan was to construct houses in the so called "barocchetto" style, a style unique to Rome which attempts to fuse an idiosyncratic scattershot modernism with the more traditional values of the local Baroque. The result, to walk or drive through today, is dizzying. Narrow twisting streets are flanked on either side by five and six story apartment houses which deviate from the typical blocky Roman condo style to erupt inexplicably in gigantic curved sections, or a sudden apparition of celled windows. Trompe l'oeil British country perspectives, replete with trees and garden paths, abruptly give way to the minimalist sleek volumes of the International Style. Lest anyone miss the point of Garbatella's Fascist origins, the roofline of the local high school is crowned with four huge Reichian eagles (blazoned just now with jaunty banners proclaiming the recent victory of the Roman soccer team in the national championships) and surmounted by a faintly Cubist clocktower. This bubbling architectural stew reaches its boiling point at the tastily named Piazza Michele da Carbonara, a main square of sorts where the apartment houses seem to hurtle towards each other in a completely abstract riot of geometric forms. Garbatella gives one the impression that a group of wild and crazy architects were let loose upon the land with the command, "Let's see what you can do!" And that, in fact, is more or less exactly what happened.

The only other Roman area on a par with Garbatella for oddball architectural brio is the so-called "Fascist City" of EUR. EUR stands for Esposizione Universale di Roma, and as the name suggests, it was planned not only as a satellite city of Rome but also as a World's Fair to showcase the budding glories of Fascism. Work on the

city was begun in the late 30's, interrupted by World War Two, and picked up again in the 1950's. It is now home for a limited residential community and a variety of offices. None of which explains the fact that it looks and feels like it's from planet Mars. The streets are unnaturally wide. The operative color is an off-white. The architecture is of course the robust, pumped-up swoops and sections of Fascism at its breast-beating best, and the names of streets, as befits a World's Fair, are all idealized nouns and states of mind: Rembrandt Alley runs directly into Poetry Plaza. Technique Street finishes in—my favorite—Agreement Lane. And yet, rather than impressing, the city spooks. With its self-important streamlined spaces and mysterious emptinesses, it resembles a disused lunar base camp for a 1950's black and white tv show on space exploration. Anyone with a love of modern painting will instantly see the origins of some of the most famous images of Giorgio di Chirico, the Italian "metaphysical" painter, whose shadowed galleries and deserted squares seem lifted right out of the city's downtown. And while EUR has lately achieved a kind of reverse cult-chic among Romans for its kitsch excesses (and its occasional beautiful building: the Pierluigi Nervi sports arena is a true piece of gorgeous anti-gravity architecture) to a casual visitor, the city reads as mainly strange.

If it is true, as is often said, that buildings are the pads upon which the zeitgeist doodles its deepest institutional dreams, then these two places, Garbatella and EUR, make for some fascinating reading. They are unlike any other places in the world, and are fitting bookends for the kooky but fruitful Roman experiment in modern architecture. But they are also showcase places, trophy neighborhoods, self-consciously going about the task of representing a particular phase of Italian history.

There is also that other kind of architecture, faintly noticed, but daily in its place in one's life; that regular, walking-around kind of architecture amidst whose more modest ambitions most of us pass our lives. It's about that architecture I'd like

to talk now. I've lived in the city of Rome for three years. The first year was passed at the American Academy in Rome, a kind of neo-classical cruise ship parked on the wealthy Janiculum Hill, whose inhabitants live in a cultural bubble, and have almost no experience of daily Roman life. The second year was passed in the part of the city called Trastevere, which was historically Rome's answer to Greenwich Village (that particular honor has now been bestowed on a nearby zone called Testaccio, which has the same faintly forlorn Boho vibe one associates with Greenwich Village). No matter that Trastevere has become in many ways boutiquey, overly cute, and with that same slightly cloying air that certain Italian towns along the Amalfi Coast have of being picturesque little fishing villages populated inexplicably by the maxi yachts of millionaires. The important point is that the sturdy Renaissance-era buildings of Trastevere retain their characteristic period charm, and that after having lived among them, walked among them and ridden my motorbike among them for over a year without paying any special attention to my surroundings, I returned to New York for a visit and found myself paying attention to my surroundings with a bullet: the city of my birth suddenly seemed to me the ugliest place on earth. It seemed brutal, punishingly vertical, dirty and squalid. I had never before seen how impersonal the city was, and how anonymous in its disconnect between building height and street life. I had never before noticed the scarifying harshness of the place, nor that feeling that there was no comfort, no tenderly inset private spaces.

What had happened to me, of course, was that without noticing it I had been infected by the Roman visual rhythm. I could only see that negatively, as it were, by recording my own horror at a city—that of New York—which I'd always thought of as the epitome of a certain kind of speed and style.

Add yet another notch to the belt of the many things dear dirty Rome is capable of: making Manhattan look bad. It's always been many things to many

people: scholastic to scholars, romantic to lovers, poetical to poets. Amazingly enough, it even stretches to accommodate those interested in modern architecture. But as my New York experience demonstrated, it would be foolhardy to think you can live here with impunity, indifferent to your surroundings, for beneath its bad air and loud streets, its galloping inefficiency and occasional rudeness, the city is quietly going about its business of making it impossible for you to live anywhere else on earth.