ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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Totalitarian Tools of Seduction

How does one view a Fascist work of art? Is there such a thing as a Fascist work of art? And why do these questions, and the work itself, seem to hold such a fascination now, three decades after European Fascism was supposedly put to rest and its art dismissed as aberrational and esthetically worthless?

There is a discernible upswing of interest in the art of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy among many younger historians and architectural practitioners, particularly in what passes for the avant garde. An exhibition and symposium held this month at the Columbia University School of Architecture addressed the issue of Fascist architecture with the display and discussion of a show of Mussolini-era planning and design called "Armando Brasini: Roma Imperiale." The exhibition had been traveling in Canada since 1978. The relationship of art and Fascism was analyzed in a 1974 book by Berthold Hinz, "Art in the Third Reich," published originally in West Germany and translated and reissued in the United States and Canada last year. A recent M.I.T. Press publication on "Art and Architecture in the Service of Politics," edited by Henry A. Millon and Linda Nochlin, includes excellent essays by Professor Millon and Spiro Kostof on architecture and urbanism under Mussolini.

There are disquieting images of the repeated cellblock and the endless arcade and a preoccupation with mortuary monumentality in the highly influential but largely unbuilt designs of the internationally known Italian architect Aldo Rossi. These images are presented as stripped and disembodied abstractions, but they are chillingly close to the iconography of the public buildings of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy — so much so, that critics like Bruno Zevi deplore the work. This is a vocabulary that carries enough associative horror to dismay an older generation. But it intrigues the young with an air of sinister — and to them, poetic — mystery. These forms are appearing in projects of architectural students around the world.

This curious renaissance cannot be put down just to a morbid fascination with the forces of evil or the terror and the tragedy that accompanied totalitarian regimes. That appeal obviously exists, fed by the escalation of violence in art and entertainment today; the popularity of books, movies and television dramatizations of the period was described by Drew Middleton in these pages last week. It is significant that attention is being paid not only to the events but also to the cultural products.

A good deal of this interest can be attributed to the current emphasis on revisionist history, including a preoccupation with the record of the recent, rejected past, which some find too painful, and others too repellent, to treat with objectivity. The best of such studies are aimed at documentation

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and analysis; the worst, either through innocence or perverseness, can turn history on its head and black into white. But it is clear that this dark moment in human history will figure prominently in future assessments of the 20th century.

The exhibition at Columbia consisted of a striking set of original drawings from a presentation portfolio prepared by the architect Armando Brasini for Mussolini in 1928, illustrating a master plan, evidently approved by Mussolini, that was to create a new, Fascist, Imperial Rome.

The display has been the center of some controversy. The symposium that accompanied it was marked by a range of attitudes from the insistence that the scheme was patently evil and should not have been presented without a strong moral judgment (a very small and apparently non-architectural minority) to complete emotional detachment and concentration on its architectural esthetics. That this was a long-forbidden kind of esthetics — an extravagant, theatrical neo-Baroque of mind-boggling vastness and scale of the sort banned by the modern movement — seemed of far greater interest to the students and some of the professors than the architect's service to Fascist ideology. Surely nothing could have better indicated the change in attitudes from the involved and anguished 60's to the disinterested and distant 80's.

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Despite its documented provenance as a genuine Fascist artifact, the example was inconclusive. It is easy to call a scheme Fascist that involves the "aventramenti," or disembowelling, of old, working-class neighborhoods, for the "liberation" of ancient monuments and the creation of huge new monuments, avenues and squares with the obvious names of Via Imperiale and the Forum of Mussolini. But similar clearance concepts of urban renewal were universally popular among planners for many years.

Armando Brasini (1879-1965) just happened to be the right architect in the right place at the right time, whose vision coincided with the Duce's idea of a new Imperial Rome. He was a self-taught architect who had devoted his life to the kind of scenographic megalomania eminently suited to the taste of an operatic Italian dictator. This does not mean to make light of totalitarianism or to beg the architect's role or responsibility.

But Brasini's Roma Imperiale must be seen within the total context of his work. His product is too personal and eccentric to fit the standard totalitarian image of stillborn, overscaled, underdecorated classicism so consummately exemplified by the work of Albert Speer in Nazi Germany. He was an incredible performer in any number of styles, from neo-Baroque to Secession Modern; he could play to any audience. He was also a performer of considerable skill with an instinctive, bravura grasp of the complex architectonic relationships of substance and scale, capable of daring, high-wire acts of architectural theater. He could produce serious, subtle and accomplished works, like the 1930 Convent of the Good Shepherd outside Rome or a thoroughly bourgeois, stodgy Italian Pavilion for the Paris Exposition of 1925; he was prolific with the kind of picturesque, stage-set buildings that suggest an Italian Addison Mizner.

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In fact, Brasini began his career designing stage sets for such epic films as "Quo Vadis," which gave him a leg up on fantasy and an overreaching Imperial style. Once seen, it is hard to forget his phantasmagoric entry in the Palace of the Soviets competition of 1930 or the massive, Ledoux-like, fused temple and tower bridge project for the Straits of Messina.

Brasini was branded and buried by the modernists, who disliked both his Fascism and his classicism. He was almost universally forgotten by 1966, when Robert Venturi cited a Brasini basilica in his now-famous manifesto, "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture." With the eye of a disenchanted modernist, Venturi delighted in Brasini's baroque play with inner and outer space; he found in this work the traditional richness of means and effect proscribed by modernist theory.

It was clear that Brasini's Roma Imperiale was received at Columbia with a curiosity and detachment that would not have been possible a generation ago. Attitudes have changed with the breakdown of modernist orthodoxy. Admiration is easy for those without memories of the repression and cruelty of despotic regimes.

As a Fascist architect, Brasini was a maverick and an accident of history. But the questions raised by the architecture of Fascist states still remain. Among the freedoms abrogated was that of artistic expression; modern forms were commonly outlawed as "decadent." But this was not just the indulgence of the leadership's reactionary tastes. In the early years of the Soviet revolution, the most radical modernism had been encouraged; the Futurist, Marinetti, was accepted by the Italian Fascist hierarchy, and the avant-garde Italian rationalists found favor right up to the aborted plans for the International Exposition of 1942.

However, it soon became clear that only more familiar forms could carry ideological messages to the masses. And if social monolithic homogeneity and fanatic concensus were the objectives, architecture could shape and express the desired response by the way it looked and by the way it manipulated those who used it. Monolithic societies and monolithic buildings served each other.

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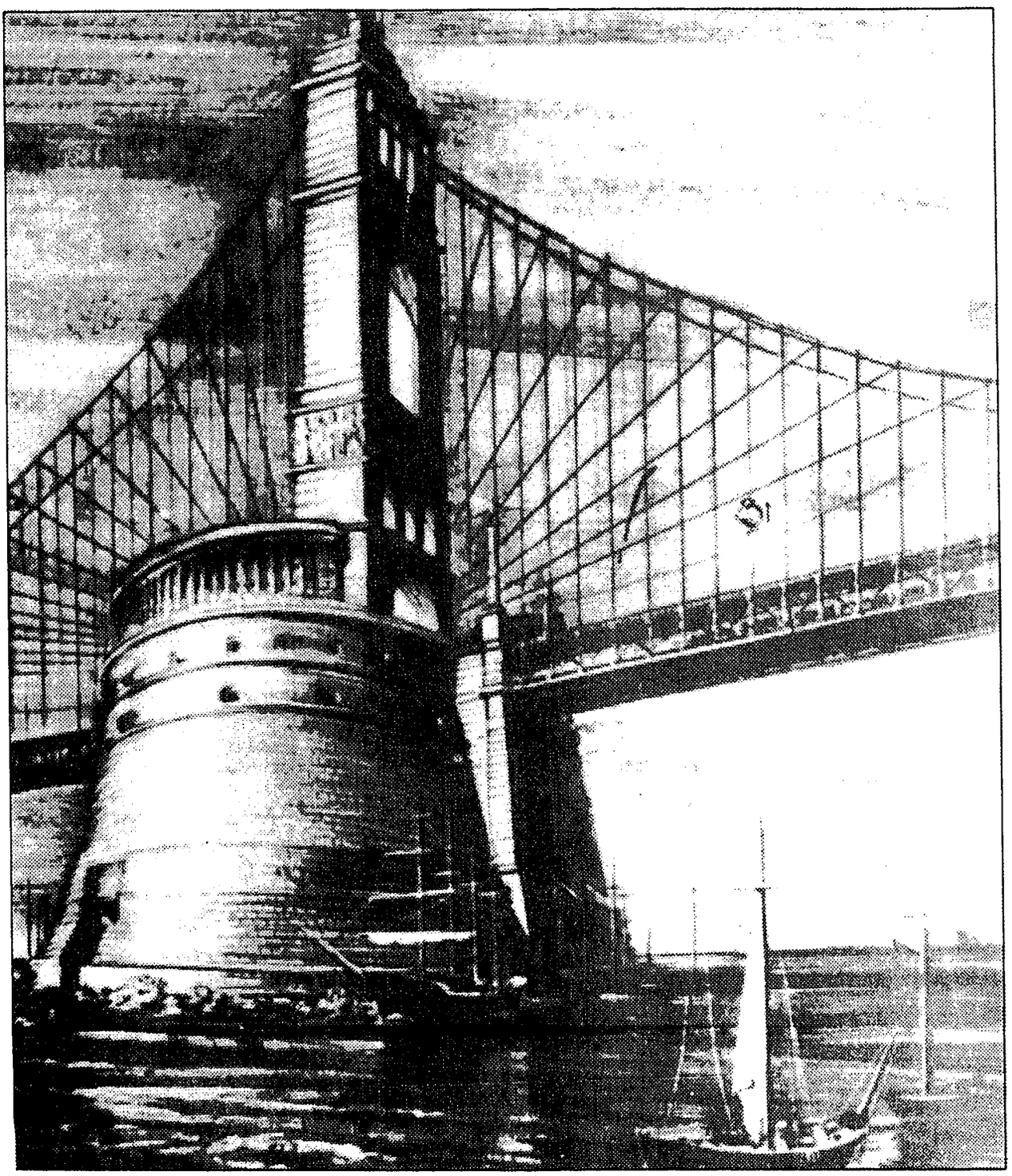
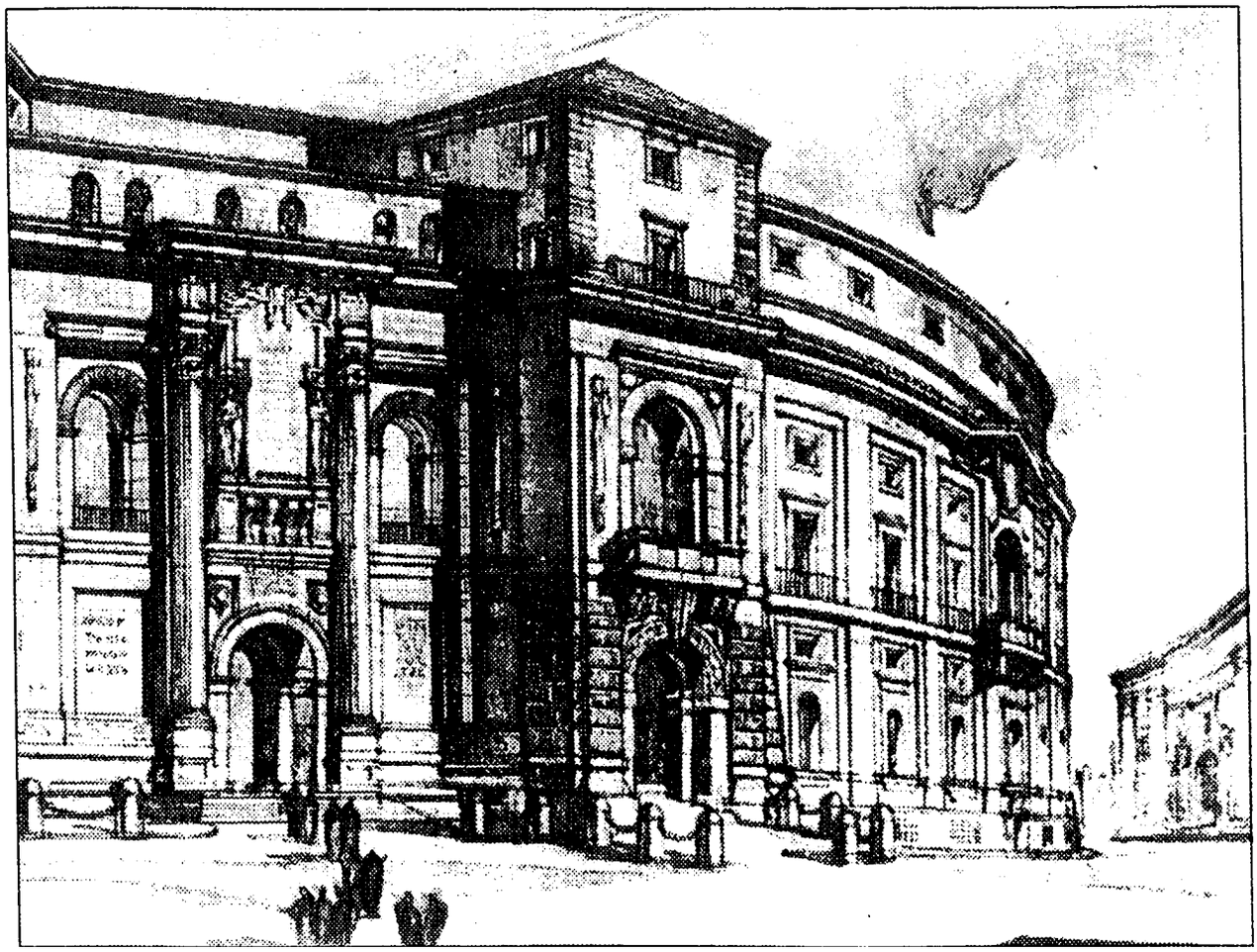
Albert Speer, for example, understood the uses of scale, sightlines and drama for more than creating a setting; his plans actually established the sequence of climactic moments of those public ceremonies that induced frenzied illusions of an all-powerful master race. At the Nuremburg parade grounds, for example, the regimented stone columns and the regimented columns of men together equated obedience and order.

However, it does not follow that anything that resembled Speer's stripped classicism was necessarily fascistic architecture. As Bernard Leitner pointed out at the Columbia symposium, the very similar romantic classicism of Scandinavia in the 1920's, as in the work of Gunnar Asplund or in American "modern" classicism of the 1930's, do not serve or evoke totalitarianism. On the other hand, Giuseppe Terragni's masterpiece of Italian "rationalism" — one of the memorable buildings of the early modern movement — was designed as the Casa del Fascio in Como, for the local headquarters of the Fascist party.

In sum, forms in themselves are innocent. But that they can be used to seduce the spirit has been understood by every age of builders. The benign expression of this truth is part of any great structure that moves us through its art. The point is that architecture has this power to an extraordinary degree, and it is an enormous and frightening power. Building is therefore one of the most effective and dangerous of totalitarian tools, which is why dictators have always used it so extravagantly. That is the lesson to be learned, and that is the knowledge to be carried in the conscience of the architect. ■



A detail from a Brasini design for a bridge over the Straits of Messina.



A Brasini building for Mussolini's Roma Imperiale—"used to seduce the spirit"