

# A files

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# A Skyscraper for Mussolini

Dietrich Neumann

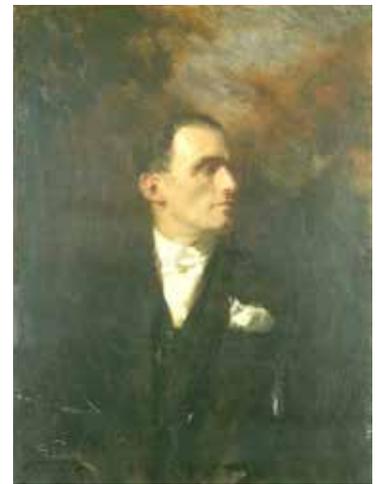
I am grateful to the American Academy for hosting me during the final phases of my research in 2012 and, as a resident, in 2014.

1. 'By-Products', *The New York Times*, 5 October 1924, p E4.
2. 'Mussolini's Plans to Outdo the Dreams of the Caesars', *ibid*, 26 October 1924, p RP3. The project has only been mentioned in passing in a few publications on Italian fascist architecture, such as Richard Etlin, *Modernism in Italian Architecture 1890-1940* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), Paolo Nicoloso, *Mussolini architetto: Propaganda e paesaggio urbano nell'Italia fascista* (Turin: Einaudi 2008), pp 131, 164. See also Dietrich Neumann, *Die Wolkenkratzer kommen: Deutsche Hochhäuser der Zwanziger Jahre* (Stuttgart: Vieweg, 1992). The most substantial recent publication about the project is Aristotle Kallis, "In miglior tempo...", 'What Fascism did not Build in Rome', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 16, 2011, pp 59-83 and 'La cantera de la historia: Mario Palanti y la construcción de una poética ecléctica en Argentina', *Cuaderno de historia* 8, June 1997, pp 125-53. Alejandro Machado is maintaining a website about Palanti (<http://mariopalanti.blogspot.it/>) and Fernando Aliata (University of La Plata) is working on a small book about him together with his student Virginia Bonicatto, who is finishing her PhD thesis on Palanti; see her 'Mario Palanti: Textos e ideas. Repercusiones e historiografía', *Arquitectos*, August 2010, and 'Mario Palanti and the Palacio Salvo: The Art of Constructing Skyscrapers', *Getty Research Journal*, 5, 2013, pp 183-88. John Beldon Scott at the University of Iowa is studying Palanti's urbanism, Austrian scholar Conny Cossa has uncovered much new information about Palanti's later work and Sara Coen is working on a PhD *tesi di laurea* in Rome, titled 'Mario Palanti 1885-1978'. I would like to thank Virginia Bonicatto in particular for many enjoyable discussions about Palanti, for her generosity and hospitality. I am also grateful to Mario Palanti's great nephew, Milan photographer Edoardo Romagnoli, who showed me several of Palanti's unpublished drawings and his Civic Mausoleo Palanti at the Milan Cemetery as well as the works of Giancarlo Palanti in Milan.

On 30 September 1924 the front page of *The New York Times* carried an astonishing headline: 'Mussolini to Build Highest Skyscraper; To Rise 88 Floors, 1,100 Feet, Above Rome'. The article went on to inform readers that 'Premier Mussolini today decided to erect in Rome the largest and tallest skyscraper in the world', two and a half times the height of St Peter's Basilica and filled with 4,500 rooms, 100 large halls, a huge theatre, a concert hall and a gymnasium for the training of Olympic athletes – a 'centre of Roman culture and athletic life'. The text also noted that 'its decoration follows vertical lines strongly reminiscent of the Woolworth Tower', then the tallest building in the world at 792 feet. According to the *Times*, the architect of this Roman skyscraper, Mario Palanti, had 'already erected several colossal buildings in Buenos Aires' and 'is a fascist'. Two weeks later the paper highlighted the project again and claimed that Mussolini had 'the firm intention to employ union labour only and not to leave office until the work is completed'.<sup>1</sup> Finally, after a further two weeks, a large image of the design appeared in the photogravure section of the magazine with the headline, 'Mussolini's Plans to Outdo the Dreams of the Caesars!'<sup>2</sup>

The architect of this particular dream, Mario Palanti, was born in Milan in 1885, studied at the Academia di Brera and graduated in 1909. His professor there, Gaetano Moretti, had won the competition for the Italian Pavilion at the 1910 Centenary Exhibition in Buenos Aires and had appointed Palanti as his site manager, together with his classmate Francisco Gianotti as construction supervisor. Palanti's older brother, the painter Giuseppe Palanti, was also employed to create murals for the building. Palanti ended up staying in Buenos Aires, opened an architectural firm, and over the following years designed a number of private homes, apartment houses and office buildings, several of them along major thoroughfares in the heart of the city, such as the Avenida de Mayo and the Avenida Rivadavia. Palanti's work is recognisably individualistic, even mannerist, due to his inclination towards heavy ornamentation and a deft handling of mass and proportions.

In a 1916 exhibition at the Palazzo delle Belle Arti in Buenos Aires Palanti presented a series of yet more visionary designs – large-scale, atmospheric, ink and watercolour sketches of cenotaphs and monuments, often in dramatic, mountainous settings, and with oversized, chiaroscuro baroque interiors. The drawings reveal the influence of his teacher Moretti and more generally, the dramatic formal language of both Italy's turn-of-the-century architecture and the contemporary Wagner school at the Viennese Academy. Drafted into the army during the First World War, Palanti published these



Giovanni Palanti, *Portrait of Mario Palanti*, 1926  
© Galleria di Arte Moderna, Milan



Mario Palanti, cinema, Via Rivadavia, Buenos Aires, 1914



Mario Palanti, exhibition at the Palazzo delle Belle Arti in Buenos Aires, 1916



Mario Palanti, Votive Temple for Universal Peace, 1916

Mario Palanti, design for a villa in San Isidro, 1913

drawings in a large volume in Milan in 1916, and sent out postcards embellished with signature details from his oeuvre.<sup>3</sup>

Back in Argentina after the war, Palanti built his most ambitious project to date – the Palacio Barolo, an office building with a complex internal and external layout and a 90m central tower (the highest in South America at the time). Completed in 1923, the building was designed for the Italian textile manufacturer Luigi Barolo and located on a prominent site on the Avenida de Mayo in close proximity to the city's parliament. Barolo and Palanti knew each other through the Italian Club in Buenos Aires.<sup>4</sup> In the spirit of this clandestine organisation, Palanti's early sketches for the central tower show rather ominous, vaguely anthropomorphic gothic forms, culminating in a steep pinnacle, but the built version, lower and domed, seems to have relied more on Indian temple architecture. This eclecticism, to say nothing of the complex spatial arrangement of the building's main stairwell, produces a powerful sculptural effect which contemporary scholars have interpreted – not entirely convincingly – as a homage to Dante's *Divine Comedy*.<sup>5</sup> In the same year as its opening, Palanti won further plaudits with a commemorative prize at the South American Exposition of Fine Arts in Buenos Aires and first place in the competition for a skyscraper hotel in Montevideo, Uruguay.

Back in Italy, Benito Mussolini had undertaken his celebrated 'March on Rome' and assumed power. His *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF) moved quickly to stabilise support both at home and among the many Italians living abroad. There had been a so-called *Fascio* in Buenos Aires since October 1922 – an organised collective of sympathisers all apparently sharing Mussolini's political goals. It was, however, not an entirely successful group: unable to agree on its orientation, it underwent two reorganisations in the following months.<sup>6</sup> Prompted no doubt by these internal divisions, Ottavio Dinale – a prominent fascist writer and politician and close friend and collaborator of Mussolini's – was dispatched to Buenos Aires in April 1923 to strengthen and encourage the local *Fascio* and establish a branch of the party.<sup>7</sup> Palanti had already developed a strong interest in Mussolini's fascist revolution and met Dinale in Buenos Aires at the founding of the PNF branch. At this meeting he asked Dinale to take a copy of his first book back to Rome as a present for Mussolini. Dinale responded by arranging for an autographed photocard of il Duce to be sent to Palanti, on which Mussolini added an inscription praising him as 'an architect who knows the Latin and Roman courage of construction'.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, Palanti was preparing a second published volume of his work presenting the Palacio Barolo and other recent buildings in Buenos Aires alongside a number of visionary projects. The book was clearly intended for an Italian, fascist audience – Palanti had asked Dinale to write the introduction – and was eventually published in Milan in 1924 under the title *Quattro Anni di Lavoro*. The political leanings of the volume are made plain in the appropriately bombastic way Palanti described his architectural mission: 'When the fatherland called its children, I came to serve – from Argentina. From the trenches I then returned to my host country, to work again in the Italian way.'<sup>9</sup> In his own introductory text Dinale praised Palanti's ability to 'surpass futurism, assimilate Indian art, Europeanise the east, aestheticise the American and regulate the grotesque'.

Clearly undeterred by the brutality of the *camice nere* and reports of countless fatalities among those opposed to the fascist regime, Palanti began work in early 1924 on what he saw as the crowning



Mario Palanti, Edificio Barolo, Avenida de Mayo, Buenos Aires, 1923

3. Mario Palanti, *Prima esposizione personale d'architettura nella Repubblica Argentina* (Milan: 1917).
4. Luis O Cortese, 'El Fascismo en el Club Italiano Buenos Aires (1922–1945)' in *RiMe* (*Rivista dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Europa Mediterranea*), n. 6, June 2011, pp 413–46.
5. Carlos Hilger, 'Mario Palanti: su Monumento al Genio Latino', *Summa* + no 3, November 1993; Carlos Hilger and Sandra I Sánchez, 'Macrocósmos y microcósmos en la obra de Mario Palanti', *ibid.*, no 95, September 2008, pp 144–49; Carlos Hilger, 'Capriccio italiano', in *Arquitectos europeos y Buenos Aires, 1860–1930* (Buenos Aires: Fundación TIAU, 1996).
6. David Aliano, 'Identity in Transatlantic Play: Il Duce's National Programme in Argentina', ProQuest, UMI Dissertation Publishing, 2 September 2011, p 94. See also Luca de Caprariis, 'Fascism for Export? The Rise and Eclipse of the Fasci Italiani all'Estero', *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no 2, April 2000, pp 151–83.
7. Ronald C Newton, 'Ducini, Prominenti, Antifascisti: Italian Fascism and the Italo-Argentine Collectivity, 1922–1945', *The Americas*, July 1994, pp 41–66.
8. 'All architetto Palanti, che conosce gli ardimenti latini e romani della costruzione', Rome, 9 August 1923, in Mario Palanti, *L'Eternale Mole Littoria* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1926), p 4.
9. Mario Palanti, *Quattro Anni di Lavoro* (Milan: Bestetti & Tumminelli, 1924).



Mario Palanti, Palacio Salvo, Montevideo, 1929

project of his career, a gigantic skyscraper. Designed to ‘eternalise for the centuries the work of the fascist government in the Eternal City’, Palanti described his project, which he modestly named L’Eternale, as a ‘grandiose galleria–teatro–hôtel of vast proportions’, roughly 70,000m<sup>2</sup> and 330m high. In scale the design was clearly part of an emerging skyscraper typology, but in its programmatic mix the tower was radically distinct – the building housed not only Italy’s new parliament, but lecture halls, meeting rooms, a hotel, library and enormous sports facilities. These were largely housed in the building’s 25-storey base, out of which rose the 50 storeys of the slender tower, crowned by an additional 13 floors receding towards its pointed tip, bringing the overall height to 88 floors. At the very top was a lighthouse, a motif Palanti had already employed at the Palacio Barolo and in his winning entry for the hotel competition in Montevideo, perhaps inspired by the lighthouse built on the Janiculum in 1911 by the architect Manfredo Manfredi, whom Palanti knew, as a gift to Rome from Italian emigrants to Argentina. In line with Palanti’s previous claim that he had developed a ‘Latin American skyscraper style’ for Buenos Aires and Uruguay, his design for Rome did not attempt a particularly Italian idiom, but seemed inspired instead by recent American high-rises such as the Equitable, City Services or Woolworth buildings in New York – references that would also have struck a chord with Mussolini, whose fascination with America, and in particular its engineering prowess and skyscrapers, was well known.

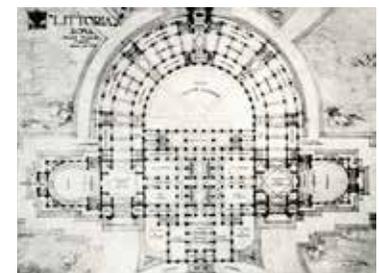
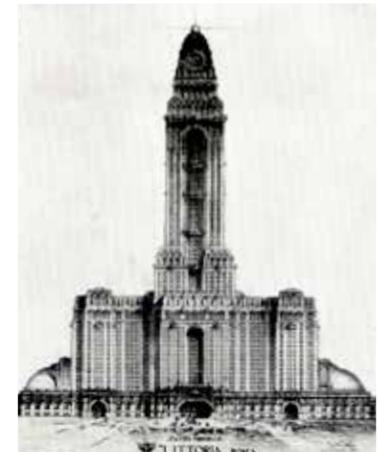
Following his meeting in Buenos Aires in 1923 Palanti hired Dinale to handle the ‘delicate task’ of introducing the project to il Duce and to the ‘governmental, political and social authorities who will be called upon to examine and judge it’. According to their contract of 5 May 1924, Dinale would be reimbursed the sum of 500,000 Lira if the building was realised (delivered in increments as it progressed). Acting in this capacity, Dinale soon arranged for Palanti to exhibit his project in the Salone della Vittoria of the Palazzo Chigi in the centre of Rome. This venue was significant because it was also the scene of receptions for foreign dignitaries and a meeting point for local fascist delegations from all over Italy. It also, not coincidentally, housed Mussolini’s office.<sup>10</sup>

Palanti arrived in Rome for the opening of his exhibition on 27 September 1924. To his great relief Mussolini came to see it: ‘The president stayed for a long time in order to familiarise himself with all the details of the magnificent building and he discussed their technical, artistic and financial aspects, finally expressing his full approval’.<sup>11</sup> Archival records note that Mussolini was charmed by a gift from Palanti of an Argentinean greyhound. And with his new puppy wagging its tail, Mussolini enthusiastically signed the visitor’s book by christening the project ‘Per La Mole Littoria, Alalà!’<sup>12</sup> It was this exhibition that attracted the attention of *The New York Times*: its subsequent profile of the project appeared two days before any Italian newspapers ran pieces on it and a week before the official press conference. In all likelihood Palanti had contacted the paper himself in an effort to demonstrate to Mussolini the building’s potential to garner global recognition. *The New York Times*, along with many other major American newspapers, businessmen and politicians, at that time saw Mussolini in a mostly favourable light, and followed his moves with considerable interest.<sup>13</sup> Palanti’s strategic press leak worked. While some Italian magazines merely reproduced the images he supplied, daily papers in particular were vocal in their support.<sup>14</sup>



Ott. architetto Palanti che conosci  
gli interessi tuoi e romani alla colossale  
Roma 9 agosto 1923 Mussolini

Benito Mussolini, signed photocard for Palanti, 9 August 1913



Mario Palanti, main facade and floor plan, Mole Littoria project, Rome, 1924

10. See handwritten note from Ottavio Dinale to Palanti, 7 February 1925, in Angelo Oliviero Olivetti fundus, ‘Tassa successione, Mussolini, Barella, Bottai’, Segnatura provvisoria 153, Segnatura definitiva 58/3 at Archivio di Stato di Milano, Archivi Storici Lombardia. The relationship between Dinale and Palanti soured over the next two years, when Palanti refused to pay Dinale and accused him of hindering rather than supporting the project. Palanti lost the court case against Dinale in 1927. Dinale was represented by one of the most prominent fascist lawyers, Angelo Oliviero Olivetti. I would like to thank Giulia Nicita for translating the correspondence between Dinale and Palanti as well as Palanti’s handwritten notes.
11. ‘La Mole Littoria a Palazzo Chigi’, *L’Impero*, 2 October 1924, p 4; the same note appeared in *Il Messaggero*: ‘La Mole Littoria’, *Il Messaggero*, 2 October 1924, p 3.
12. The term *Littoria* referred to the Roman official who was carrying the symbolic fasces in front of the politicians in ceremonial processions. Mussolini would later name the first of his new towns Littoria. The ‘Alalà’ at the end was a short version of the fascist battle cry, ‘Eja, eja, eja, alalà’, which the writer Gabriele d’Annunzio had composed for Mussolini. Carlo Cresti, *Architettura e Fascismo* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1986), p 37.
13. John. P Diggins, ‘Mussolini and America: Hero-Worship, Charisma and the Vulgar Talent’, *Historian*, vol 28, no 4, August 1966, pp 559–85.
14. Artículos, ‘L’Eternale Mole Littoria’, *Architettura e arti Decorativa*, vol 1, 1924–25, p 58.

Among these, the fascist, futurist *L'Impero* printed a brief note on the exhibition on 2 October 1924. This publication was no stranger to art and architectural discussions, and the following day the futurist Virgilio Marchi, a regular contributor to the paper, chided the ideas and publications of De Stijl and Le Corbusier for what he saw as their poor imitations of Italian futurism.<sup>15</sup> A few days later still, *L'Impero* published an exuberant description of Palanti's project, providing further details. Apparently, a gigantic electrical clock and carillon was planned for the top of the tower, as well as an astronomical observatory, telegraph and telephone stations, in addition to the gigantic lighthouse. It also noted that the building would be executed in reinforced concrete with a cladding of Italian marble and all the work would be accomplished in 50 months, 'a celebration of Italy's greatness in space and time'.<sup>16</sup>

Despite Mussolini's tight control of the press, however, several other fascist papers were more outspoken in their criticism. *La Tribuna*, for example, diagnosed that the tower was 'not only plagued by memories of gothic and romanesque monuments, but also – rather strangely – by a double influence of Italian baroque and oriental art'. While the paper considered the proposal 'recklessly extravagant and ingeniously eccentric', it did concede 'that every detail has been studied conscientiously and that the project is feasible'. Although, in a somewhat damning summary, it wished its architect all the best in finding a European or American Croesus to help him realise his 'grandiose and somewhat convoluted visions of mausoleums and pilgrimage churches. After all, a bit of megalomania can be tolerated in a young artist with fertile imagination and a strong technical background. We hesitate, however, to give our approval to the "Mole Littoria" project with its tendency towards excessive pomp. The building also reminds us of New York City's infamous skyscrapers and we doubt that our city will be a suitable environment for it.'<sup>17</sup>

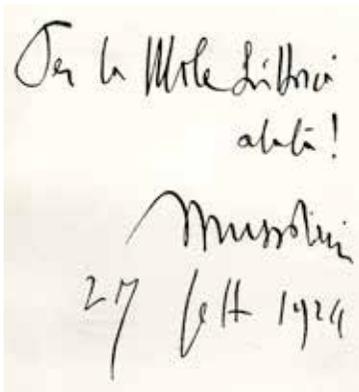
More pragmatically, for *Il Messaggero*, the project's enormous costs represented an 'insurmountable obstacle', precluding any serious appreciation of its artistic qualities,<sup>18</sup> while the *Giornale d'Italia* was the only daily paper to raise the not unimportant issue of the project's intended site:

*Apart from any artistic consideration we say immediately that the viability of the proposal depends on the location chosen for its execution. It should be placed outside of the centre, surrounded by enormous amounts of space and not offend the unique, inviolable and sacred character of Rome. If it were to be executed, this would be a sine qua non. The author of the project ... mentioned the area of the Castro Pretorio, which is currently destined to be used for manufacturing of some sort: this location is the only one inside the ancient walls which is wide open and available, and its choice responds to the author's concept of creating a new business centre by moving the city traffic away from the narrow streets of the current heart of the city.*<sup>19</sup>

In fact, not knowing Rome well, Palanti had been rather vague about the precise location of his tower. He had imagined it next to the Chigi Palace, the seat of Mussolini's government, in the heart of the city,<sup>20</sup> and the drawing of a bridge as part of the complex suggests that its enormous footprint would have reached all the way to the Tiber – and would have necessitated an extraordinary amount of demolition. After Palanti's visit for the opening of the exhibition he quickly floated other possible locations, such as the Castro Pretorio mentioned by the *Giornale d'Italia* and even the gardens of the Villa Borghese.



Mario Palanti at the opening of his exhibition at the Salone della Vittoria, 1924  
From *L'illustrazione Italiana*, 1924



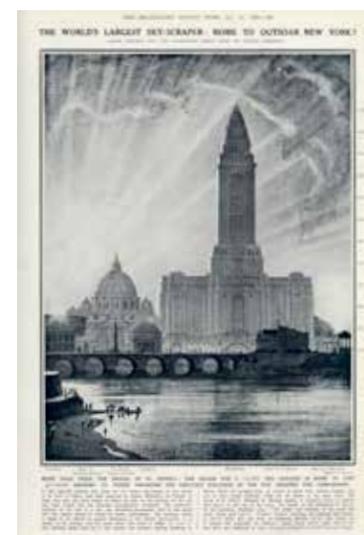
Benito Mussolini, note in the visitor's book on Mario Palanti's Mole Littoria project, Rome, 1924

15. Virgilio Marchi, 'Note d'Architettura: Stranierismo', *L'Impero*, 3 October 1924, p 3.
16. S.D., 'L'Eternale e la Mole Littoria', *L'Impero*, 7 October 1924, p 2.
17. A.G., 'La Mole Littoria dell'architetto Palanti', *La Tribuna*, 7 October 1924, p 4.
18. 'Il Progetto per la Mole Littoria', *Il Messaggero*, 7/8 October 1924, p 5.
19. 'Il progetto di un monumentale gigante in Roma: L'Eternale', *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 7 October 1924, p 4.
20. Two publications report on Palanti's initial choice of location: Gustav Adolf Platz, 'Ein römischer Wolkenkratzer?', *Deutsche Bauzeitung* no 28, 8 April 1925, pp 224–25, and *La Casa*, February 1925.



Mario Palanti, Mole Littoria project, Rome, 1924; view from St Peter's of its envisioned site between the Palazzo Chigi and the Tiber river  
Digital reconstruction by Henry Harding

The foreign press was considerably less polite than the Italian newspapers. *The Washington Post*, for example, quoting the *Providence Journal*, found it 'strange news' that Mussolini had decided to erect such a building.<sup>21</sup> 'Rome's architectural fame in the great days of old never depended on height', it continued, 'The Forum, the Pantheon and the Coliseum did not achieve their stateliness by the perpendicular. But fascism obviously has its own ideas.' Similarly, the *Los Angeles Times* feared that the skyscraper would be 'chafing Rome', envisioning a 'monster building towering against the sky', and warned that this 'American development' could not be 'casually transported to other lands'.<sup>22</sup> German reviews were equally scathing. Berlin's *Deutsche Bauzeitung* published a long essay by architect and critic Gustav Adolf Platz warning that this skyscraper in the heart of Rome would present an 'urbanistic catastrophe'. In his review Platz referred to the destruction already wrought by the lack of scale in the Vittorio Emanuele monument – but that would be 'child's play' compared with this new 'horrible danger', this 'alien monster', this 'tower of Babel'. Ultimately invoking a theological rejection, Platz concluded that the design represented a 'deadly sin, against which the world's Christianity should revolt'.<sup>23</sup> The German magazine *Städtebau* also spoke of Rome's 'rape' by this skyscraper,<sup>24</sup> while many other international magazines reported on the scheme – and none of them were supportive. Even *Boys' Life*, the magazine of the Boy Scouts of America, stated that 'it probably will turn out that the money for this suggested building will be spent in other ways to benefit the country'<sup>25</sup> and *Popular Mechanics* noted the 'storm of criticism from artists and architects, who say the grandeur of the ruins of ancient Rome will be dwarfed and spoiled by such a skyscraper'.<sup>26</sup> In England, the *Illustrated London News* simply headlined, 'Rome to Outsoar New York?' and commissioned a dramatic illustration from their prominent American graphic designer Chesley Bonestell, showing the proposal dwarfing St Peter's, the Coliseum, Pantheon and Castello Sant'Angelo, while also reporting additional facts, such as the estimated price of not more than £10 million and its financing through subscription.<sup>27</sup>



*Illustrated London News*, 24 January 1925  
Visualisation by Chesley Bonestell

It seems that Mussolini's initial enthusiasm for the project was genuine, and that these attacks, both at home and abroad, took him by surprise. His backing of Palanti had a certain logic to it – he was not only a dedicated fascist but had experience with the tall office buildings in Buenos Aires, and was therefore probably the only Italian architect with a similar record. His future career looked promising, with another high-rise building for Montevideo on the drawing

21. 'Rome's Skyscraper', *Washington Post*, 6 October 1924, p 6.  
 22. Frederick J Haskin, 'Skyscraper is Chafing Rome', *Los Angeles Times*, 17 November 1924, p 7. For another critical review see 'The World's Great Capitals: The Week in Rome', *Christian Science Monitor*, 4 November 1924, p 18.  
 23. Gustav Adolf Platz, *op cit*.  
 24. Otto Büinz, 'Städtebauliche Studien in Rom', *Städtebau* 20, 1925, pp 10–21.  
 25. I W Wilson, 'What the World is Doing: Hitting the Moon', *Boys' Life*, January 1925, p 15.  
 26. 'World's Tallest Building Planned for Rome', *Popular Mechanics*, February 1925, p 81.  
 27. 'The World's Largest Skyscraper: Rome to Outsoar New York?', *Illustrated London News*, 24 January 1925, p 139.

board. He deserved to be taken seriously. The context for the project was also important, for the city of Rome had not immediately been loved by Mussolini's supporters – it had a significant anti-fascist history and was considered by many northern Italians to be backward, slow, ruinous. The planting of an enormous skyscraper might have seemed to Mussolini as a fitting symbol for the economically prosperous, technologically advanced north bringing progress to the less developed centre and south of the country.<sup>28</sup> Of course, by 1924 Mussolini was still new to Rome and, more importantly, also new to questions of architecture, urbanism and historic preservation. It was only when he awarded himself an honorary citizenship of the city that he finally addressed his urbanistic ambitions, announcing on 1 April 1924 his plan to build a new 'monumental Rome of the twentieth century', and to liberate the city's ancient and medieval monuments from the 'mediocre contaminations' of later centuries.<sup>29</sup>

Compared to other parts of Europe, Italian interest in skyscrapers had been somewhat subdued and confined to the northwest of the country, with projects in Milan, Turin and Genoa. The best known, of course, were by futurists such as Antonio Sant'Elia and Mario Chiattone, but these were of a purely visionary nature, shown only in evocative perspectives and conceived without a particular site or programme. A notable exception, however, was Achille Manfredini's unexecuted skyscraper project in Milan of 1910, much discussed in the local press. Another proposed skyscraper in Milan, from just a year before Palanti's Rome tower, seemed concrete enough for Mussolini to declare that he intended to occupy an apartment on its top floor<sup>30</sup> – though the building never materialised. Eight Italian architects had taken part in the International Chicago Tribune competition of 1922 – resulting in eight rather awkward historicist designs, each showing their utter unfamiliarity with the building type. Marcello Piacentini, one of the eight, and on his way to becoming the premier architect and urbanist of the fascist regime, reviewed the results of the competition in detail in 1923. While he claimed that skyscrapers had in fact been invented in Italy (as proof he showed Filarete's fifteenth-century tower designs), he made it clear that they simply did not fit into Italian cities. There was not the same economic rationale for building them as there was in America. There was also the question of historical context. 'The same sky', he wrote, 'into which Milan Cathedral reaches or Michelangelo's dome at St Peter's, cannot be shared with a skyscraper'. And thus 'no skyscrapers anywhere in Italy'.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to all the press attention, Mussolini received a number of personal letters regarding the tower. For example, Lee Thompson Smith, president of the National Association of Building Owners and Managers in New York, and a great booster of skyscrapers, offered assistance: 'The announcement of your decision to construct in Rome the world's largest office building is received in America with great interest, not only by the public at large, but in particular by the building managers of the nation.'<sup>32</sup> Somewhat predictably, he went on to offer the services of his own organisation in managing the building and enclosed a booklet for il Duce. Another fawning letter came from the prominent American architect Cass Gilbert, designer of the Woolworth Building.<sup>33</sup> 'I have followed your career with the greatest admiration', he wrote, 'and I believe in you and what you do. No one has arisen in our time, and especially since the war, whom I so greatly admire. I do not say this to flatter you but in all sincerity so that you may realise that it is in no spirit of criticism that I write this letter.' Gilbert added that he had not yet



Antonio Sant'Elia, La Città Nuova, Electric Power Station, 1914



Mario Chiattone, Urban Vision, 1914

28. See Emilio Gentile, *Fascism di Pietra* (Rome: Editione Laterza, 2010), pp 3–31.
29. 'Per la cittadinanza di Roma', 21 April 1924, in Edoardo and Duilio Susmel (eds), *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini* (Florence: La Fenice, 1951–62), vol xx, pp 234–36.
30. See Javier Quintana da Una, *Suena y Frustración: El Rascacielos en Europa, 1900–1939* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2006), pp 429–30. 'Italy's First Skyscraper: Mussolini Reserves Top Apartment in Projected Milan Building', *The Washington Post*, 18 February 1923, p 42.
31. Marcello Piacentini, 'In Tema di Grattacieli', *Architettura e Arte Decorative*, 1922/23, pp 311–17.
32. Lee T Smith, letter to Benito Mussolini, November 1924, Archivio di Stato, EUR Roma, Palanti file (Segreteria Particolare del Duce). For Lee T Smith see also 'Says Skyscrapers Speed up Business', *The New York Times*, 19 January 1927, p 11.
33. Letter from Cass Gilbert to Mussolini, 16 October 1924, Cass Gilbert Collection of the New York Historical Society. I would like to thank Gail Fenske at Roger Williams University for providing me with a copy of this letter.

seen the tower (its image in *The New York Times* would appear a week later), but politely expressed his concerns regarding its impact on Rome's 'beauty and distinction'. 'As the architect of the Woolworth Building, which with the exception of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, is the highest building in the world, and having built many other high structures, I can perhaps claim to have a little knowledge of them.' His recommendation was to 'reconsider the whole subject', and that perhaps its architect could instead design 'some other type of structure, not excessively high, but in harmony with the beauty of Rome', such as 'a majestic colonnade or the completion of the approach to St Peter's, for example, so that the vista may be obtained from the river bank at the Ponte Sant'Angelo straight up to the facade of the cathedral – a greatly needed improvement which would really embellish Rome. If you will do this or something like it, you will leave a great memorial of public service which will lend distinction to your time and shed glory upon your administration, and incidentally be far more useful to the city.'<sup>34</sup>

This was an interesting – but not entirely new – idea. The area between St Peter's and the river with the Castello Sant'Angelo was a sequence of small squares and houses, the so-called Borgo Nuovo. Gian Lorenzo Bernini himself, and later Carlo Fontana in 1694 and Cosimo Morelli in 1776, amongst others, had sketched out similar urban interventions, but nothing like this had been suggested since the Roman masterplan of 1873.<sup>35</sup> Gilbert spoke with the voice of a foreign authority, and we cannot rule out that his letter did indeed present the idea to Mussolini for the first time and set in motion its realisation years later. Gilbert himself certainly had reasons to think so. In a rather sycophantic essay, celebrating his election to the presidency of the National Academy of Design in August 1926, *Architectural Record* cited an unnamed source from Rome who claimed 'that Mussolini, in directing the development of the city improvements, gave the officials a letter from a New York architect with instructions to follow its suggestions. If the suggestions of Gilbert have prevented the skyscraper in Rome and will open a view from the bridge of Saint Angelo to Saint Peter's, he will have performed an international service to art.'<sup>36</sup>

The author of this article, Glenn Brown – secretary to the American Institute of Architects in Washington – was a close friend of Gilbert's, and it is not unlikely that Gilbert had a hand in its writing. But in any event, the news from Rome encouraged Gilbert to request an audience with il Duce, which was granted for 18 May 1927. Gilbert later described this meeting in great detail (and with brutal honesty) in his unpublished diaries. The short visit turned out to be both exhilarating and deeply disappointing. He had brought some drawings of his work (among them, 90 West Street in Manhattan and sketches for the George Washington Bridge) and spread them out across the table in anticipation of Mussolini's entrance. But when il Duce did appear Gilbert was in such awe that he became tongue-tied and timid. But this timidity did not stop him responding to Mussolini's own fascist salute with the same raised-arm greeting – 'It is the most dignified, the most natural, the most graceful and the most noble salutation I know.' Mussolini went on to compliment Gilbert on his drawings and even confided that 'I would love to live in a skyscraper'. Gilbert, flattered – and perhaps sensing future opportunities for himself – did not have the courage to bring up his letter and its cause. The conversation was much shorter than he had expected, and after he had been escorted out, Gilbert felt a pang of regret about his lack of resolve and gave a copy of his original letter to the



Cass Gilbert (1859–1934)  
Photo Pach Brothers, c 1907

34. *Ibid.*, box 10, Gilbert Papers, Library of Congress.

35. Terry Kirk, 'Framing St Peter's: Urban Planning in Fascist Rome', *The Art Bulletin*, vol 88, no 4, December 2006, pp 756–76. Donald Clinton and Karen Wilkin mention one exception, namely a drawing in Armando Brasini's 1917 'L'Urbe Massima' album. See Donald Clinton and Karen Wilkin, *Armando Brasini: Roma Imperiale* (Edmonton: Edmonton Art Gallery, 1978), p 8.

36. Glenn Brown, 'International Service', *Architectural Record*, August 1926, pp 184–85.



Marcello Piacentini, aerial view,  
Mole Littoria, Grande Roma, 1925

translator, Ms Lillian Gibson, urging her to pass it on to Mussolini. She promised to do this personally at their next English lesson.<sup>37</sup>

Gilbert had worried unnecessarily. He could not have known that Mussolini had cooled on Palanti's skyscraper idea: the widespread attacks on the project probably played a part in this. A year after Palanti's first visit, Mussolini announced a more detailed urban programme when he installed Filippo Cremonesi as Rome's first *governatore* – a new, powerful position that replaced that of the mayor. As he explained at the City Hall on 31 December 1925, his 'Nuova Roma' would focus on a celebration of the past through the isolation of historic buildings, the widening of streets and the creation of long perspectival vistas:

*In five years Rome shall shine triumphantly for all peoples of the earth: gigantic, orderly, powerful as it was at the time of Emperor Augustus. The shaft of this gigantic oak tree shall be freed from anything in its way. The urban space around the theatre of Marcellus will be opened, as well as that around the Pantheon and the Capitol. What has grown during centuries of decadence shall vanish again. Within five years a new axis starting from Piazza Colonna will make the Pantheon visible. Similarly, the majestic buildings of Christian Rome will be freed from parasitic and profane buildings. The 1,000-year-old monuments of our history have to impress us from isolated positions.*<sup>38</sup>

Of course, the concept of a street from the Castello Sant'Angelo to St Peter's was a perfect fit with this vision of great vistas, liberated monuments and a new order. It could only be realised, however, after the Lateran Treaties of 1929 had regulated the fascist government's relationship with the Vatican and clarified the geographic boundaries. Appropriately named Via dell Conciliazione, and built from 1938 to 1950, it became the most visible symbol of the rapprochement between the fascists and the Catholic church.

Responding to Mussolini's new initiative for the city, Roman architects and planners such as Armando Brasini, Marcello Piacentini and Gustavo Giovannoni immediately began to sketch out ideas, hoping always for the opportunity to make their proposals real. Piacentini – who was quickly becoming Mussolini's favourite architect and planner – was particularly keen on redeveloping the area behind the Termini railway station, which he wanted to push further back and fill the space taken up by the tracks with a monumental street lined with equally grand buildings. On the site of the station itself he proposed a large open square with a central building featuring assembly halls and offices for fascist institutions. He not only adopted Palanti's concept on a small scale, he also called the building Mole Littoria (much to Palanti's chagrin) and printed postcards of the design for wide distribution – again following Palanti's own favourite method of self-promotion.

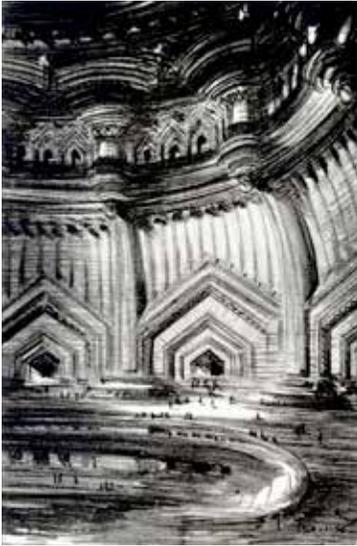
Palanti himself had stayed in Rome until December 1924, hoping for more developments regarding his tower. He filled his time designing the family mausoleum at the Cimitero Monumentale in Milan, which became his only executed building in Italy (and which houses, apart from Palanti and his parents, the mortal remains of several local dignitaries such as Virgilio Ferrari, mayor of Milan, Hermann Einstein, the father of Albert Einstein, and Luigi Berlusconi, father of Silvio Berlusconi).<sup>39</sup>

Back in Buenos Aires, Palanti supervised ongoing projects such as the Hotel Excelsior and the skyscraper in Montevideo while continuing to revise his tower for Mussolini. His resolve was rewarded when he returned to Rome in June 1926 for the opening of a second exhibition, again at the Salone della Vittoria. Mussolini even came



Marcello Piacentini, postcard of his  
Mole Littoria, Grande Roma, 1925

37. Cass Gilbert, 'Memorandum', 18 May 1927, box 12, Gilbert Papers, *op cit*; Cass Gilbert to Emily Gilbert, 25 May 1927, box 11, *ibid*. I would like to thank Gail Fenske for sharing a copy of this document with me. Lillian Gibson acted as Mussolini's translator and English teacher. She was the Rome correspondent of the *New York Herald Tribune*. 'Stories of Mussolini', *The Montreal Gazette*, 8 February 1929. Mussolini remained interested in skyscrapers and American engineering achievements. In 1928 a group of Italian-American businessmen proposed to build a 'Mussolini Tower' in Times Square, New York. See 'Mussolini Tower Planned in Times Square; Cost of 10,000,000', *The New York Times*, 9 March 1928, p. 1. Mussolini also expressed an interest in visiting America several times.
38. Edward Alden Jewell, 'Il Duce decrees a new imperial Rome', *The New York Times*, Sunday magazine, 17 January 1926, p. 3.
39. The name plate for Luigi Berlusconi at the Civico Mausoleo Palanti has recently been removed.



Mario Palanti, steam bath for the senators, Mole Littoria, Rome, 1924

to see the drawings of this revised project and, according to Palanti, spoke passionately about the ‘impressive and formidable’ new design.<sup>40</sup> Immediately afterwards Palanti published a book with the second design that also documented its evolution – from the first 350m project (now called Progetto Primitivo) to successively lower versions: 300m, 145m, 130m and finally 80m. Interestingly, this book, *Eternale Mole Littoria*, was the very first publication under the new Rizzoli imprint.

The book also contained explanatory essays and endorsements by a number of prominent politicians, scholars and aristocrats.<sup>41</sup> Palanti wrote that the ‘renewed contact with the architectural and artistic reality of Rome’ had led to a ‘radical modification’, while still maintaining its ‘two basic characteristics: monumentality and profitability’.<sup>42</sup> He also continued to employ the full bombast of fascist rhetoric. The Mole Littoria, he wrote, would ‘eternalise the fascist revolution, the epic of the black shirts and the great work of il Duce in the profound renewal of the moral, political and economic development of the nation’. It would also, he suggested, give a new stylistic direction to architecture, ‘meeting the basic criteria of futurism understood and expressed as a real dynamism in the relationship with the political evolution and as a logical and healthy reaction against classicism’.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, the building would complete the triad of urban symbols with St Peter’s (catholicism) and the monument to Vittorio Emmanuele (nationalism). While the book presented the lowest, 80m version first (vaguely inspired perhaps by H P Berlage’s Peace Palace design of 1907, and responding to Piacentini’s Mole Littoria project for the 1925 Grande Roma plan), Palanti’s heart clearly belonged to the skyscraper. He included a particularly elegant first alternative 300m version which showed the influence of Hugh Ferriss’s skyscraper drawings, and then devoted most of his darkly evocative sketches to a mid-size version of 130m or 145m with vast interior spaces (for example a gigantic, vaulted steam bath for the senators). Ever attentive to architectural patronage, he even presented this same elevated scheme to Pope Pius XI in a private audience on 11 June 1926.<sup>44</sup>

Mussolini took Palanti’s second project seriously enough to ask the opinion of the *governatore* of Rome: Filippo Cremonesi responded politely on 3 July 1926 that he was obliged by law to consult with the building commission, which had acknowledged the proposal’s importance and ideals, but warned that it would create ‘very harmful ... aesthetic problems for the panorama of the city’. Clearly not wanting to upset Mussolini, he also apologised for his inability to deliver a favourable opinion, and said he hoped that the ‘illustrious architect’ would be able to achieve his goals with another building.<sup>45</sup> Palanti was probably never informed of this decision, as he had immediately returned to Montevideo to oversee the completion of his enormous Palacio Salvo tower – which opened to great fanfare in 1928 and surpassed his Argentinean *palacio* as the tallest reinforced concrete building in all of the Americas. However, when Le Corbusier came to Montevideo that same year he publicly ridiculed the building’s formal exuberance. During a visit to Independence Square, he entertained his hosts by walking demonstratively around the front of the Salvo tower, positioning himself repeatedly with a view to the building and, when finally asked what he was doing, he said, ‘I am finding the best place to position the canon’. Le Corbusier later called the building an ‘unbearable hodge-podge’, a ‘monstrous copulation of American and Italian pastry ... with delicatessen as ornament and fat dripping from its edges’; a ‘public calamity’, in short, but at the same time also ‘very funny’.<sup>46</sup>



Mario Palanti, Mole Littoria, alternative versions, 300m (top), 145m (middle), 80m (bottom), Rome, 1926

40. Mario Palanti, *L'Eternale Mole Littoria, Roma MCMXXVI* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1926), p 31.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*, p 33.

44. ‘44-Storey Building for Rome’, *The Washington Post*, 12 June 1926. Palanti was a devout catholic, and had enjoyed a particularly good relationship with the bishop of Buenos Aires. His brother, the painter and illustrator Giuseppe Palanti, had painted Pope Pius XI in 1924 and Mussolini on horseback in 1928.

45. Filippo Cremonesi to Mussolini, 2 July 1926, in Angelo Oliviero Olivetti fundus, *op cit.*

46. Guillot Muñoz and Gervasio y Álvaro, ‘Le Corbusier en Montevideo’, *La Cruz del Sur* 27, Montevideo, January/February 1930.

Despite this disdain, Palanti stubbornly continued work on the mid-size version of the Mole Littoria, which he distributed in a new version of his signature postcards in 1931.<sup>47</sup> In 1924 and 1926 he had already established scholarships in his name for architecture students, and he followed these up in 1931 with the funding of a Concorso Internazionale Palanti di Architettura at the Italian Academy, to be awarded every four years for the design of a religious structure.<sup>48</sup> Palanti had clearly not abandoned hope that he would regain Mussolini's attention and good will, or even that someone else might build his tower. To this end, in June 1932, he sent a copy of his latest book to Adolf Hitler with the dedication, 'To the distinguished Dottore Adolfo Hitler with revering admiration'.<sup>49</sup> But while Hitler shared Mussolini's interest in the US as both a model and competitor, skyscrapers played almost no role in his plans for the future of Berlin.

Further opportunities, however, would soon appear. On 27 December 1932 the competition for a Palazzo del Littorio in Rome was announced – an enormous, symbolic building on a triangular site close to the Coliseum along the newly created Via dell'Impero, designed to house the fascist party headquarters as well as the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista. The competition brought together the most prominent contemporary Italian architects – both classicists and rationalists – and initiated a debate about the direction of Italian architecture under fascism. In recognition of the importance of the commission, the competition deadline of 15 April 1934 gave participants more than a year to prepare. Marcello Piacentini chaired the jury, in which, among others, the architect Armando Brasini and the new governor of Rome, Francesco Boncompagni Ludovisi, served. The competition was open to all Italian architects who were members of the fascist party and the height of the proposed building was limited to that of the ruin of the Maxentius Basilica, which demolition had recently freed from the medieval buildings surrounding it.<sup>50</sup>

Palanti was convinced that he was destined to win this competition, as its programme and concept closely resembled that of his Mole Littoria, only on a smaller scale. He therefore decided to undertake an all-out (and shockingly ill-considered) effort to force his success. He had recently married Maria Helena Castagnino, who came from a wealthy family in the Argentinean city of Rosario. Shortly before the competition entry was due, in March 1934, Palanti was vacationing with his wife in Mar de la Plata, about five hours south of Buenos Aires. Leaving one night, ostensibly to take care of some urgent business in the city, he promised to be back by morning but



Mario Palanti, postcard of his L'Eternale, Mole Littoria, Rome, 1931



'Campeon', an Argentinean stallion, 1934

47. I would like to thank Michael Waters for letting me reproduce this image of Palanti's 1931 postcard from his collection.
48. The prize was awarded in 1931, 1935, 1939 and 1943. Paola Cagianò de Azevedo and Elvira Gerardi, *Reale Accademia d'Italia: pubblicazioni degli archive di stato strumenti CLXVII* (Ministero per I beni culturali e ambientali Dipartimento per I beni archivistici e library direzione generale per gli archive, 2005), pp 121, 136, 371, 373, 376, 392.
49. The book was retrieved from Hitler's library by American troops and is now held in the Nazi collection at the Library of Congress. It is worth noting that Palanti sent it to Hitler almost a year before Hitler became chancellor and several years before a strongly established Italian-German alliance.
50. Flavia Marcello, 'The Politics of Place: Citing and Re-siting the *Palazzo Littorio*, Mussolini's New Fascist Party Headquarters in Rome', *Architectural Theory Review*, 1 December 2007, pp 146–72; *Il nuovo stile littorio: I progetti per il Palazzo del Littorio e della Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista in Via dell'Impero* (Milan: Bertarelli, 1936). See also Harald Bodenschatz, *Städtebau für Mussolini: Auf dem Weg zu einem neuen Rom* (Berlin: DOM, 2013), pp 113–19.



Mario Palanti, Palazzo del Littorio competition, Rome, 1934

instead boarded a steamer to Italy, taking with him two stallions that he had recently received from his wife and considerable amounts of her money. Once in Italy, and shortly after submitting his design for the competition, he wrote to Mussolini saying that he was delighted to present to him the black stallion, 'Campeon'. In the meantime, news of Palanti's hasty departure and the consternation it had caused his wife had reached Italy via the ambassador in Buenos Aires and the prefect of Genoa, where Palanti had arrived. A note was quickly sent to il Duce's secretary, asking him not to accept Palanti's gift, as it was not entirely clear who rightfully owned the horse.<sup>51</sup> Soon afterwards, Campeon was returned to Palanti.

Undeterred, while the jury was deliberating (and in a rather transparent effort to force its hand), Palanti produced a lavish volume (again with Rizzoli in Milan) with additional drawings as well as sketches and maquettes and a lengthy text relating the project to his previous Mole Littoria but emphasising its stylistic difference, now closer to rationalism. Palanti had chosen to call his entry *Navigare Necessè*, adopting Mussolini's motto of 1920 from the beginning of his fascist revolution. The building's horizontal layout had been forced by the site and the competition's limitations, but Palanti – defying the height restrictions in Piacentini's competition brief – added a tall, windowless tower adorned by rich figural relief and supposedly sending vertical beams of light into the night sky. Pointing towards the Coliseum, the building formed a four-storey bow of a ship, next to a longitudinal reflecting pool.

The results of the competition were announced in September 1934. No clear winner was found, but 14 projects received an honourable mention and an invitation for a second round. Palanti was among those selected, but found proceedings too slow for his liking. He wrote an angry letter to the jury's administrator, complaining bitterly about 'Piacentini's arrogance, with which he had infiltrated all of Italy', and continued, 'While I was crossing the oceans in 1924 and 1926, and presented to il Duce a grandiose project, that he gave the dedication "Per la Mole Littoria, Alala" ... Piacentini, who wasn't even a real fascist, obstructs the way for those who have a sacred right to it.'<sup>52</sup> With few exceptions, critics either ignored or rejected Palanti's proposal.<sup>53</sup> In particular, the rationalist Giuseppe Pagano, who had not participated in the competition, heaped scorn on his project, dismissing it as a 'carnavalesque cake' and 'shark-like South American snobbery'.<sup>54</sup>

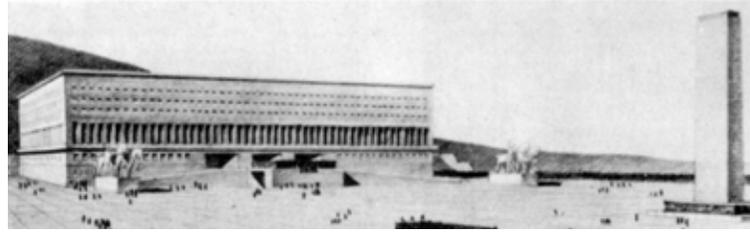
The other entries could roughly be divided into two groups, those of the rationalists, who employed the vocabulary of the

51. There is plenty of material about this deplorable incident. See letter from Osvaldo Sebastiani (Segretario Particolare del Capo del Governo) to Arturo Marpicati, 1 May 1934; and letter from the Prefect of Genoa to Mussolini's secretary, 23 April 1934, Archivio di Stato, Palanti File 509.519, Segreteria Particolare del Duce.
52. Mario Palanti to Radice Fossati, 14 October 1935, Palanti papers, Archivio di Stato, Rome, EUR.
53. R.C., 'L'esposizione dei progetti del Palazzo del Littorio e della Mostra della Rivoluzione fascista in Via dell'Impero', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 23 September 1934, pp 3, 5. Palanti's design is mentioned as a 'daring' concept. Giuseppe Pagano, 'Il Concorso per il Palazzo del Littorio', *Casabella*, October 1934, pp 6–41; Mario Palanti's nephew, Giancarlo Palanti, the son of his brother Giovanni, had become a decidedly modern architect and had been one of the editors at Pagano's *Casabella*. Perhaps unrelated, he stepped down just at the moment when Pagano's harsh critique of his uncle's design appeared. See also Cesare de Seta (ed), *Giuseppe Pagano, Architettura e Città durante il Fascismo* (Milan: Jaca, 2008), pp 24, 26.
54. Quoted in Cesare de Seta (ed), *Giuseppe Pagano, Architettura e Città durante il Fascismo* (Milan: Jaca, 2008), pp 24, 26.



Carminati, Lingeri, Saliva, Terragni and Vietti, Palazzo Littorio competition, project B, 1934

Del Debbio, Foschini, Morpurgo, Casa Littoria for the Foro Mussolini, 1937



international style, and the more conservative approach by followers of the *romanità* style of the recent Città Universitaria. Of the first group, Alberto Libera designed a curved slab with ribbon windows and a stylised tower at the centre. Luigi Moretti also employed a convincing modernist style with an extended, horizontal building along the street and ellipsoid office tower in the back. Also in the rationalist camp were entries by teams that included Giuseppe Terragni and Pietro Lingeri, and another one with Luigi Figini, Gino Pollini and Ernesto Rogers. Among the more conservative entries were those by Enrico Del Debbio and Vittorio Morpurgo, of Torres, Vaccaro and de Renzi. Palanti's project occupied something of a middle ground, merging the horizontal lines of rationalism with a figural and sculptural programme closer to Piacentini's approach at the Città Universitaria or Foro Mussolini.<sup>55</sup>

The second competition was held in 1937, now for a 'Casa Littoria' and for a different location on the Viale Aventino, close to the Pyramid of Cestius. Twelve of the architects selected after the first round participated. Again, these architects could be divided roughly into traditionalist and modernist camps – among the latter was an exciting design with glass enclosed tower slabs by Giuseppe Terragni with Pietro Lingeri and others.<sup>56</sup> Palanti's project was restrained and conventional – clearly trying to avoid any critique of 'snobbism'. However, he had played an important role as a catalyst. Among the 14 selected projects, Palanti's had been the only one to defy Piacentini's height restrictions and include a tower. Now, for the new site, Piacentini reversed course and actually asked for a tower – ostensibly for air defence and protection purposes – but also to force an element of monumentality on both conservatives and modernists. In response, some separated the tower entirely, others fully integrated it, many added a speaker's balcony. All participants adorned the tower with sculptural and relief applications. Del Debbio, Foschini and Morpurgo won this round with a design that employed the heavy-handed language of stripped down classicism increasingly favoured by Piacentini. Their design was finally executed in a modified form at the Foro Mussolini (today Foro Italico) in the north of the city.

Mario Palanti was by no means the only architect who would be both charmed and disappointed by Mussolini. A case in point is the architect, sculptor and urban planner Hendrik Christian Andersen, who had developed plans for a World Centre of Communication together with French planner Ernest M Hébrard and others. When he presented the plans to Mussolini in 1926 he received 'the warmest approval of the scheme' and even the offer of a tract of land between Ostia and Fregene, 15 miles from Rome.<sup>57</sup> Although nothing came of this ambitious project in the end, it is credited with having contributed to the concept of the EUR.

Even closer to Palanti's experience is that of Vittorio Viganó, an architect from Milan, who also in 1926 had suggested to Mussolini a *trinità monumentale* in which the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele and Milan Cathedral would be complemented by a 164m gothic clock tower.<sup>58</sup> The architect described the encounter with Mussolini in great detail, recalling the dictator's enthusiastic suggestions for



Mario Palanti, Casa Littoria competition, 1937

55. See *Il Nuovo Stile Littorio, I progetti per il Palazzo del Littorio e della Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista in Via dell'Impero* (Milan-Rome: Arti grafiche Bertarelli, 1936); Fabrizio Brunetti, *Architetti e Fascismo* (Milan: Alinea, 1993), pp 253–76; Richard A Etlin, *op cit*, pp 430–34.

56. Marcello Piacentini, 'La Casa Littoria a Roma: Progetto Definitivo al Foro Mussolini e secondo concorso', *Architettura XII*, December 1937, pp 699–752.

57. Richard A Etlin, *ibid*, p 396.

how to drum up support for it. However, the cathedral's master builder, senator De Capitani d'Arzago, finally intervened and made sure the project was thoroughly forgotten.

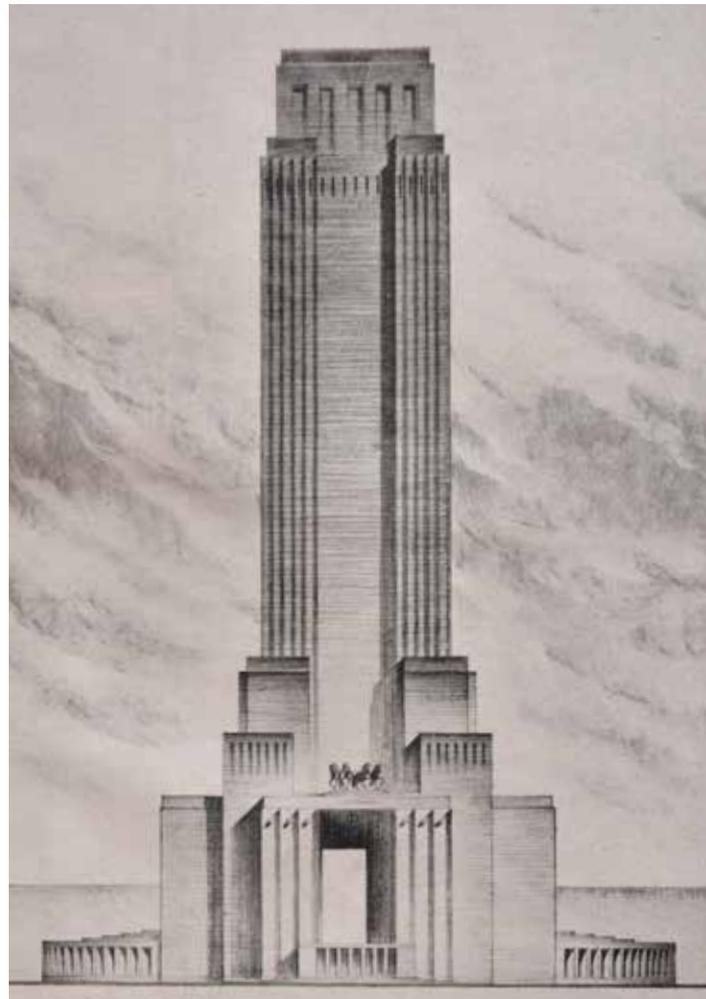
Ultimately, the fascist legacy in Rome's urban fabric would consist mostly of substantial demolitions, the so called *sventramenti*, road building and, of course, a number of major individual projects such as the university campus, the Foro Mussolini and the EUR quarter.<sup>59</sup> Palanti had probably been the first to put forward the idea of an enormous, multi-functional monument to the fascist revolution, which lived on in the Palazzo Littorio competition of 1934/37 and inspired projects by Piacentini, Brasini and others.

Palanti never received another commission, but continued to produce volumes of visionary projects during the 1930s (such as a design for a Torre Littoria in Milan – based on the letter M).<sup>60</sup> In 1946, a year after Mussolini's body had been strung upside down from the girder of an Esso petrol station in northern Italy, Palanti's last book was published. In an obvious nod to the new Italian democracy it was called *Architettura per Tutti* and contained 300 plates with designs for housing projects, schools, factories, court houses, hotels and university buildings. But Palanti could not help himself. At the end of the book we find a 1945 design for a gigantic skyscraper. Instead of Mole Littoria, it was called Mole Vittoria, celebrating, we assume, the Italian victory over Germany and the end of the war.<sup>61</sup> Palanti explained that at 600m it was meant to be 'the tallest tower in the world', almost twice the height of its predecessor, and easily surpassing the 381m Empire State Building. Mario Palanti lived on for another three decades. He died poor, lonesome and embittered in a small flat in Milan in 1978.



Mario Palanti, Torre Littoria project, Milan, 1937

Mario Palanti, Mole Vittoria, 1945



- 58. I am grateful for Hans-Georg Lippert's help, in particular for making available to me his *Historismus und Kulturkritik: Der Kölner Dom 1920–1960* (Cologne: Verlag Kölner Dom), pp 297–304.
- 59. See Paul Baxa, *Roads and Ruins: The Symbolic Landscape of Fascist Rome* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010) and Antonio Cederna, *Mussolini urbanista: lo sventramento di roma* (Rome: Corte del Fontego, 1980).
- 60. Mario Palanti, *Palazzo del Littorio: progetto* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1934); *Auditorium: progetti, Roma, anno XIII* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1935), *The Temple of the Universal Peace* (Milan: Emilio Bestetti, 1945);
- 61. Mario Palanti, *Architettura per Tutti* (Milan: E Bestetti, 1946), p 277.

# Contributors

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