

# Architectural Demodernization as Critical Pedagogy: Pathways for Undoing Colonial Fascist Architectural Legacies in Sicily

Part of [Architectural Dissonances](#)

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## The Southern question

In 1952, Danilo Dolci, a young architect living and working in industrial Milan, decided to leave the North – along with its dreams for Italy's economic boom and rapid modernization – behind, and move to Sicily. When he arrived, as he describes in his book *Banditi a Partinico* (The Outlaws of Partinico, 1956), he found vast swathes of rural land brutally scarred by the war, trapped in a systematic spiral of poverty, malnutrition and anomie. After twenty years of authoritarian rule, Italy's newly created democratic republic preserved the 'civilising' ethos established by the fascist regime, to develop and modernize Sicily. The effect of these plans was not to bridge the gap with the richer North, but rather, to usher in a slow and prolonged repression of the marginalised poor in the South. In his book, as well as in many other accounts, Dolci collected the testimonies of people in Partinico and Borgo di Trappeto near Trapani, western Sicily.<sup>1</sup> [Palermo: Sellerio Editore, 2009.] Living on the margins of society, they were rural labourers, unemployed fishermen, convicted criminals, prostitutes, widows and orphans – those who, in the aftermath of fascism, found themselves crushed by state violence and corruption, by the exploitation of local notables and landowners, and the growing power of the Mafia.

Dolci's activism, which consisted of campaigns and struggles with local communities and popular committees aimed at returning dignity to their villages, often resulted in confrontations with the state apparatus. Modernization, in this context, relied on a carceral approach of criminalisation, policing and imprisonment, as a form of domestication of the underprivileged. On the one hand, the South was urged to become like the North, yet on the other, the region was thrown further into social decay, which only accelerated its isolation from the rest of the country.

The radical economic and social divide between Italy's North and South has deep

roots in national history and in the colonial/modern paradigm. From 1922, Antonio Gramsci branded this divide as evidence of how fascism exploited the subaltern classes via the Italian northern elites and their capital. Identifying a connection with Italy's colonisation abroad, Gramsci read the exploitation of poverty and migrant labour in the colonial enterprise as one of 'the wealthy North extracting maximum economic advantage out of the impoverished South'.<sup>2</sup> Since the beginning of the colonisation of Libya in 1911, Italian nationalist movements had been selling the dream of a settler colonial/modern project that would benefit the underprivileged masses of southern rural laborers.

The South of Italy was already considered an internal colony in need of modernization. This set the premise of what Gramsci called Italy's 'Southern question', with the southern subalterns being excluded from the wider class struggle and pushed to migrate towards the colonies and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> By deprovincialising 'the Southern question' and connecting it to the colonial question, Gramsci showed that the struggle against racialised and class-based segregation meant thinking beyond colonially imposed geographies and the divide between North and South, cities and countryside, urban labourers and peasants.

Gramsci's gaze from the South can help us to visualise and spatialise the global question of colonial conquest and exploitation, and its legacy of an archipelago of colonies scattered across the North/South divide. Written in the early 1920s but left incomplete, Gramsci's *The Southern Question* anticipated the *colonizzazione interna* (internal colonization) of fascism, motivated by a capital-driven campaign for reclaiming arable land that mainly effected Italy's rural South. Through a synthesis of monumentalism, technological development and industrial planning, the fascist regime planned designs for urban and non-urban reclamation, in order to inaugurate a new style of living and to celebrate the fascist settler. This programme was launched in continuation of Italy's settler colonial ventures in Africa.

Two paths meet under the roof of the same project – that of modernization.

## Architectural colonial modernism

Architecture has always played a crucial role in representing the rationality of modernity, with all its hierarchies and fascist ramifications. In the Italian context, this meant a polymorphous and dispersed architecture of occupation – new settlements, redrawn agricultural plots and coerced migration – which was arranged and constructed according to modern zoning principles and a belief in the existence of a *tabula rasa*. As was the case with architectural modernism on a wider scale, this was implemented through segregation and erasure, under the principle that those deemed as non-modern should be modernized or upgraded to reach higher stages of civilisation. The separation in the African colonies of white settler enclaves from Indigenous inhabitants was mirrored in the separation between urban and rural laborers in the Italian South. These were yet another manifestation of the European colonial/modern project, which for centuries has divided the world into different races, classes and nations, constructing its identity in opposition to 'other' ways of life, considered 'traditional', or worse, 'backwards'. This relation, as unpacked by decolonial theories and practices, is at the core of the European

modernity complex – a construct of differentiations from other cultures, which depends upon colonial hegemony.

Taking the decolonial question to the shores of Europe today means recognising all those segregations that also continue to be perpetuated across the Northern Hemisphere, and that are the product of the unfinished modern and modernist project. Foregrounding the impact of the decolonial question in Europe calls for us to read it within the wider question of the 'de-modern', beyond colonially imposed geographical divides between North and South. We define 'demodernization' as a condition that wants to undo the rationality of zoning and compartmentalisation enforced by colonial modern architecture, territorialisation and urbanism. Bearing in mind what we have learned from Dolci and Gramsci, we will explain demodernization through architectural heritage; specifically, from the context of Sicily – the internal 'civilisational' front of the Italian fascist project.

## Sicily's fascist colonial settlements

In 1940, the Italian fascist regime founded the *Ente di Colonizzazione del Latifondo Siciliano* (ECLS, Entity for the Colonization of the Sicilian Latifondo),<sup>4</sup> following the model of the *Ente di Colonizzazione della Libia* and of colonial urban planning in Eritrea and Ethiopia. The entity was created to reform the *latifondo*, the predominant agricultural system in southern Italy for centuries. This consisted of large estates and agricultural plots owned by noble, mostly absentee, landlords. Living far from their holdings, these landowners used local middlemen and hired thugs to sublet to local peasants and farmers who needed plots of land for self-sustenance.<sup>5</sup> Fascism sought to transform this unproductive, outdated and exploitative system, forcing a wave of modernization. From 1940 to 1943, the Ente built more than 2,000 homesteads and completed eight settlements in Sicily. These replicated the structures and planimetries that were built throughout the 1930s in the earlier *bonifica integrale* (land reclamation) of the Pontine Marshes near Rome, in Libya and in the Horn of Africa; the same mix of piazzas, schools, churches, villas, leisure centres, monuments, and a Casa del Fascio (fascist party headquarters). In the name of imperial geographical unity, from the 'centre' to the 'periphery', many of the villages built in Sicily were named after fascist 'martyrs', soldiers and settlers who had died in the overseas colonies. For example, Borgo Bonsignore was named after a *carabiniere* (military officer) who died in the Battle of Guna Gadu in 1936, and Borgo Fazio and Borgo Giuliano after Italian settlers killed by freedom fighters in occupied Ethiopia.

The reform of the *latifondo* also sought to implement a larger strategy of oppression of political dissent in Italy. The construction of homesteads in the Sicilian countryside and the development of the land was accompanied by the state-driven migration of northern labourers, which also served the fascist regime as a form of social surveillance. The fascists wanted to displace and transform thousands of rural laborers from the North – who could otherwise potentially form a stronghold of dissent against the regime – into compliant settlers.<sup>6</sup> Simultaneously, and to complete the colonizing circle, many southern agricultural workers were sent to coastal Libya and the Horn of Africa to themselves become new settlers, at the expense of Indigenous populations.

All the Sicilian settlements were designed following rationalist principles to express the same political and social imperatives. Closed communities like the Pontine settlements were 'geometrically closed in the urban layout and administratively closed to farmers, workmen, and outside visitors as well'.<sup>7</sup> With the vision of turning waged agrarian laborers into small landowners, these *borghi* were typologically designed as similar to medieval city enclaves, which excluded those from the lower orders.

These patterns of spatial separation and social exclusion were, unsurprisingly, followed by the racialisation of the Italian southerners. Referring to a bestiary, the propaganda journal *Civiltà Fascista* (Fascist Civilisation) described the Pontine Marshes as similar to 'certain zones of Africa and America', 'a totally wild region' whose inhabitants were 'desperate creatures living as wild animals'.<sup>8</sup> Mussolini's regime explicitly presented this model of modernization, cultivation and drainage to the Italian public as a form of warfare. The promise of arable land and reclaimed marshes shaped an epic narrative which depicted swamps and the 'unutilised' countryside as the battlefield where bare nature – and its 'backward inhabitants' – was the enemy to be tamed and transformed.

However, despite the fanfare of the regime, both the projects of settler colonialism in Africa and the plans for social engineering and modernization in the South of Italy were short-lived. As the war ended, Italy 'lost' its colonies and the many *Ente* were gradually reformed or shut down.<sup>9</sup> While most of the New Towns in the Pontine region developed into urban centres, most of the fascist villages built in rural Sicily were meanwhile abandoned to a slow decay.

Although that populationist model of modernization failed, the Sicilian countryside stayed at the centre of the Italian demographic question for decades to come. Since the 1960s, these territories have experienced a completely different kind of migration to that envisaged by the fascist regime. Local youth have fled unemployment in huge numbers, migrating to the North of Italy and abroad. With the end of the Second World War and the colonies' return to independence, it was an era of reversed postcolonial migration: no longer white European settlers moving southwards/eastwards, but rather a circulatory movement of people flowing in other directions, with those now freed from colonial oppression taking up the possibility to move globally. Since then, a large part of Sicily's agrarian sector has relied heavily on seasonal migrant labour from the Southern Hemisphere and, more recently, from Eastern Europe. Too often trapped in the exploitative and racist system of the Italian labour market, most migrants working in areas of intensive agriculture – in various Sicilian provinces near the towns of Cassibile, Vittoria, Campobello di Mazara, Caltanissetta and Paternò – have been forced out of cities and public life. They live isolated from the local population, socially segregated in tent cities or rural slums, and without basic services such as access to water and sanitation.

As such, rural Sicily – as well as vast swathes of southern Italy – remain stigmatised as 'insalubrious' spaces, conceived of in the public imagination as 'other', 'dangerous' and 'backward'. From the time of the fascist new settlements to the informal rural slums populated by migrants in the present, much of the Sicilian countryside epitomises a very modern trope: that the South is considered to be in

dire need of modernization. The rural world is seen to constitute an empty space as the urban centres are unable to deal with the social, economic, political and racial conflicts and inequalities that have been (and continue to be) produced through the North/South divides. This was the case at the time of fascist state-driven internal migration and overseas settler colonial projects. And it still holds true for the treatment of migrants from the ex-colonies, and their attempted resettlement on Italian land today.

Since 2007, Sicily's right-wing regional and municipal governments have tried repeatedly to attain public funding for the restoration of the fascist settlements. While this program has been promoted as a nostalgic celebration of the fascist past, in the last decade, some municipalities have also secured EU funding for architectural restoration under the guise of creating 'hubs' for unhoused and stranded migrants and refugees. None of these projects have ever materialised, although EU money has financed the restoration of what now look like clean, empty buildings. These plans for renovation and rehousing echo Italy's deepest populationist anxieties, which are concerned with managing and resettling 'other' people considered 'in excess'. While the ECLS was originally designed to implement agrarian reforms and enable a flow of migration from the north of the country, this time, the Sicilian villages were seen as instrumental to govern unwanted migrants, via forced settlement and (an illusion of) hospitality. This reinforces a typical modern hierarchical relationship between North and South, and with that, exploitative metropolitan presumptions over the rural world.

## The Entity of Decolonization

To imagine a counter-narrative about Sicily's, and Italy's, fascist heritage, we presented an installation for the 2020 Quadriennale d'arte – FUORI, as a Decolonizing Architecture Art Research (DAAR) project. This was held at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome, the venue of the *Prima mostra internazionale d'arte coloniale* (First International Exhibition of Colonial Art, 1931), as well as other propaganda exhibitions curated by the fascist regime. The installation aims to critically rethink the rural towns built by the ECLS. It marks the beginning of a longer-term collaborative project, the *Ente di Decolonizzazione* or Entity of Decolonization, which is conceived as a transformative process in history-telling. The installation builds on a photographic dossier of documentation produced by Luca Capuano, which reactivates a network of built heritage that is at risk of decay, abandonment and being forgotten. With the will to find new perspectives from which to consider and deconstruct the legacies of colonialism and fascism, the installation thinks beyond the perimeters of the fascist-built settlements to the different forms of segregations and division they represent. It moves from these contested spaces towards a process of reconstitution of the social, cultural and intimate fabrics that have been broken by modern splits and bifurcations. The project is about letting certain stories and subjectivities be reborn and reaffirmed, in line with Walter D. Mignolo's statement that 're-existing means using the imaginary of modernity rather than being used by it. Being used by modernity means that coloniality operates upon you, controls you, forms your emotions, your subjectivity, your desires. Delinking entails a shift towards using instead of being used.'<sup>10</sup> The Entity of Decolonization is a fluid and permanent process, that seeks perpetual

manifestations in architectural heritage, art practice and critical pedagogy. The Entity exists to actively question and contest the modernist structures under which we continue to live.



**Difficult Heritage Summer School in Borgo Rizza, Carlentini, Sicily – Instants, courtesy of Sara Pellegrini, 2021.**



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In Borgo Rizza, one of the eight villages built by the *Ente*, we launched the Difficult Heritage Summer School – a space for critical pedagogy and discussions around practices of reappropriation and re-narrativisation of the spaces and symbols of colonialism and fascism.<sup>11</sup> Given that the villages were built to symbolise fascist ideology, how far is it possible to subvert their founding principles? How to reuse these villages, built to celebrate fascist martyrs and settlers in the colonial wars in Africa? How to transform them into antidotes to fascism?

Borgo Rizza was built in 1940 by the architect Pietro Gramignani on a piece of land previously expropriated by the ECLS from the Caficis, a local family of landowners. It exhibits a mixed architectural style of rationalism and neoclassical monumentalism. The settlement is formed out of a perimeter of buildings around a central protected and secured piazza that was also the main access to the village. The main edifices representing temporal power (the fascist party, the ECLS, the military and the school) and spiritual power (the church) surround the centre of the

piazza. To display the undisputed authority of the regime, the Casa del Fascio took centre stage. The village is surrounded on all sides by eucalyptus trees planted by the ECLS and the settlers. The planting of eucalyptus, often to the detriment of indigenous trees, was a hallmark of settler colonialism in Libya and the Horn of Africa, dubiously justified because their extensive roots dry out swamps and so were said to reduce risks of malaria.

With the end of the Second World War, Borgo Rizza, along with all the other Sicilian settlements, went through rapid decay and decline. It first became a military outpost, before being temporarily abandoned in the war's aftermath. In 1975, the ownership and management of the cluster of buildings comprising the village was officially transferred to the municipality of Carlentini, which has since made several attempts to revive it. In 2006, the edifices of the *Ente di Colonizzazione* and the post office were rehabilitated with the intent of creating a garden centre amid the lush vegetation. However, the garden centre was never realised, while the buildings and the rest of the settlement remain empty.

Yet despite the village's depopulation, over the years the wider community of Carlentini have found an informal way to reuse the settlement's spaces. The void of the piazza, left empty since the fall of fascism, became a natural spot for socialising. The piazza was originally designed by the ECLS for party gatherings and to convey order and hierarchy to the local population. But many locals remember a time, in the early 1980s, before the advent of air-conditioned malls that offered new leisure spaces to those living in peri-urban and rural areas, when people would gather in the piazza for fresh air amid summer heatwaves. The summer school builds on these memories, to return the piazza to its full public function and reinvent it as a place for both hospitality and critical pedagogy.

Let's not forget that the village was first used as a pedagogical tool in the hands of the regime. The school building was built by the ECLS and was the key institution to reflect the principles of neo-idealism promoted by the fascist and neo-Hegelian philosophers Giovanni Gentile and Giuseppe Lombardo Radice. Radice was a pedagogue and theoretician who contributed significantly to the fascist reforms of the Italian school system in the 1930s. Under the influence of Gentile, his pedagogy celebrated the modern principle of a transcendental knowledge that is never individual but rather embodied by society, its culture, the party, the state and the nation. In the fascist ideal, the classroom was designed to be the space where students would strive to transcend themselves through acquired knowledge. A fascist education was meant to make pupils merge with the 'universal' embodied by the teacher, de facto the carrier of fascist national values. In relation to the countryside context, the role of pedagogy was to glorify the value of rurality as opposed to the decadence wrought by liberal bourgeois cultures and urban lifestyles. The social order of fascism revolved around this opposition, grounded in the alienation of the subaltern from social and political life, via the splitting of the urban and rural working class, the celebration of masculinity and patriarchy, and the traditionalist nuclear family of settlers.

Against this historical background, our summer school wants to inspire a spatial, architectural and political divorce from this past. We want to engage with decolonial pedagogies and encourage others to do the same, towards an epistemic

reorganisation of the building's architecture. In this, we share the assertion of Danilo Dolci, given in relation to the example of elementary schools built in the fascist era, of the necessity for a liberation from the physical and mental cages erected by fascism:

**These seemed designed (and to a large extent their principles and legacies are still felt today) to let young individuals get lost from an early age. So that they would lose the sense of their own existence, by feeling the heavy weight of the institution that dominates them. These buildings were specifically made to prevent children from looking out, to make them feel like grains of sand, dispersed in these grey, empty, boundless spaces.<sup>12</sup>**

This is the mode of demodernization we seek in this project: to come to terms with, confront, and deactivate the tools and symbols of modern fascist colonization and authoritarian ideologies, pedagogy and urbanism. It is an attempt to fix the social fabric that fascism broke, to heal the histories of spatial, social and political isolation in which the village originates. Further, it is an attempt to heal pedagogy itself, from within a space first created as the pedagogical hammer in the hands of the regime's propagandists.

This means that when we look at the forms of this rationalist architecture, we do not feel any aesthetic pleasure in or satisfaction with the original version. This suggests the need to imagine forms of public preservation outside of the idea of saving the village via restoration, which would limit the intervention to returning the buildings to their 'authentic' rationalist design. Instead, the school wants to introduce the public to alternative modes of heritage-making.





Difficult Heritage Summer School in Borgo Rizza,  
Carlentini, Sicily – Instants, courtesy of Sara  
Pellegrini, 2021.



Difficult Heritage Summer School in Borgo Rizza,  
Carlentini, Sicily – Instants, courtesy of Jens  
Haendeler, 2021.

## Architectural demodernization

In the epoch in which we write and speak from the southern shores of Europe, the entanglement of demodernization with decolonization is not a given, and certainly does not imply an equation. While decolonization originates in – and is only genealogically possible as the outcome of – *anti-colonialist* struggles and liberation movements from imperial theft and yoke, demodernization does not relate to *anti-modernism*, which was an expression of reactionary, anti-technological and nationalist sentiment, stirred at the verge of Europe's liberal collapse in the interwar period. As Dolci explained for the Italian and Sicilian context, there is no shelter to be found in any anachronistic escape to the (unreal and fictional) splendours of the

past. Or, following Gramsci's refusal to believe that the Italian South would find the solutions to its problems through *meridionalism*, a form of southern identitarian and essentialist regionalism, which further detaches 'the Southern question' from possible alliances with the North.

Demodernization does not mean eschewing electricity and wiring, mortar and beams, or technology and infrastructure, nor the consequent welfare that they provide, channel and distribute. By opposing modernity's aggressive universalism, demodernization is a means of opening up societal, collective and communal advancement, change and transformation. Precisely as Dolci explains, the question it is not about the negation of progress but about choosing which progress you want.<sup>13</sup>

In the context in which we exist and work, imagining the possibility of an architectural demodernization is an attempt to redraw the contours of colonial architectural heritage, and specifically, to raise questions of access, ownership and critical reuse. We want to think of demodernization as a method of epistemic desegregation, which applies to both *discourse* and *praxis*: to reorient and liberate historical narratives on fascist architectural heritage from the inherited whiteness and ideas of civilisation instilled by colonial modernity, *and* to invent forms of architectural reappropriation and reuse. We hold one final aim in mind: that the remaking of (post)colonial geographies of knowledge and relations means turning such fascist designs against themselves.

1.

Danilo Dolci, *Banditi a Partinico* [1956], Palermo: Sellerio Editore, 2009.

2.

Neelam Srivastava, *Italian Colonialism and Resistances to Empire, 1930–1970*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018, p. 2.

3.

Antonio Gramsci, *The Southern Question*, Ontario: Guernica Editions, 2015.

4.

The *Ente di Colonizzazione* is often translated into English as 'agency' or 'body'. Here we suggest 'entity' as an alternative option. The Latin origin of 'entity' from medieval Christian theology suggests a spiritual dimension; namely, a formal, absolute and immanent presence that absorbs, encompasses and supersedes the individual sphere. Later secularised into a juridical body, the ente indicates institutions or legal bodies that vouch for supra-individual interests. In our translation, 'entity' is a presence in itself, which can manifest equally as supernatural or immanent and bodily or material.

5.

Joshua Samuels, 'Difficult Heritage: Coming "to Terms" with Sicily's Fascist Past', in *Heritage Keywords, Rhetoric and Redescription in Cultural Heritage* (ed. K. Lafrenz Samuels and T. Rico), Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015.

6.

Maria Rosa Protasi and Eugenio Sonnino, 'Politiche di popolamento: colonizzazione

interna e colonizzazione demografica nell'Italia liberale e fascista', *Popolazione e Storia*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2003, pp. 91–138.

7.

Diane Y. Ghirardo, 'Italian Architects and Fascist Politics: An Evaluation of the Rationalist's Role in Regime Building', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 39, no. 2, 1980, p. 124.

8.

Mario M. Morandi, 'L'introduzione all'Agro Pontino', *Civiltà Fascista*, vol. II, 1935, pp. 1009–10. Translation by the authors.

9.

The *Ente* in Libya was only formally abolished in 1961, ten years after Libya's independence, while the ECLS was reformed in 1950 and renamed the *Ente per la Riforma Agraria in Sicilia* (Body for Sicilian Agrarian Reform). This was followed by the creation of a new institution, the *Ente di Sviluppo Agricolo* (Body for Agricultural Development, ESA) in 1965.

10.

Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018, p. 147.

11.

The Summer School is a collaborative project between DAAS – Decolonizing Architecture Advanced Studies at the Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm, the Critical Urbanisms program at the University of Basel, and the municipality and local community of Carlentini, Sicily.

12.

Giuseppe Casarrubea, 'Danilo Dolci: sul filo della memoria', *Pratica della Libertà*, no. 7, July–September 1998, p. 16. Translation by the authors.

13.

Giuseppe Barone, *La forza della nonviolenza. Bibliografia e profilo biografico di Danilo Dolci*, Napoli: Dante & Descartes, 2004.

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