

The dome as a symbol of architecture during the “Ventennio” in Italy between the two world wars

Alessandro Castagnaro

Abstract: The article seeks to highlight how Italian architecture remained anchored to historicist models for certain typologies, despite its familiarity with the techniques linked to the use of new materials (reinforced concrete, iron, and steel) and its awareness of the extent to which the Modern Movement had simplified and altered the new stylistic languages. In the period here, religious architecture was inspired by historical models of significant works of architecture created by the Catholic Church in Italy. Although their structure did occasionally follow “modern” trends and abandoned classical stylistic features, roofing and, in particular, domes remained firmly rooted to the historicist tradition. The reasons behind these choices should be sought in the cultural influence of the Catholic church in Italy as well as in the political strategies the regime which used classicism and monumentalism; the magnificence of the dome incontrovertibly evoked, the “grandeur of Rome”. Several buildings constructed during the “Ventennio” - the twenty year period of Fascist rule with which this article is concerned - by architects responsible for important religious works of architecture in Naples and Rome will be taken as case studies.

The article considers the architecture of Roberto Pane (1897-1987), famous for his work as a historian of architecture and a pupil of Gustavo Giovannoni, who built the Pavilion of Christian Civilisation in Africa (Padiglione della Civiltà Cristiana in Africa) at the Mostra d'Oltremare (1938) in Naples, subsequently transformed into the church of S. Maria Cabrini (1952). The building is a dome made with a double of bricks covered by a screed coat of lightened reinforced concrete, which has now partially collapsed following the state of abandonment into which the whole architectural complex has fallen. Other buildings discussed include works by Ferdinando Chiaromonte (1902-1985), one of the leading teachers of engineering at the faculty of architecture in Naples who was renowned as one of the most active designers in the city between the 1930s and the 1960s: the church of S. Vitale at Fuorigrotta built in 1938, which reflects the taste linked to the regime and the church of S. Maria dei Monti to Ponti Rossi (1939-1948) inspired by a historicist eclecticism of a seventeenth/eighteenth century origin. Parallels will also be made with the large dome, the expression of the “new Rome”, which formed part of the large-scale project of E42, later to become known as the EUR: the Church of SS. Pietro e Paolo, in Rome designed by Arnaldo Foschini (1884-1968) in 1939, was only completed in 1955 due to the interruption of the Second World War.

Keywords: symbolism, architecture, fascism