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A PERVASIVE DRAWING: MARIO SIRONI META-DESIGNER OF A LICTORIAN STYLE

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What style do you use to study a design style?

I have long believed that the word "style" should be banned in a scientific text. But we cannot do without it, even though it is the most critical and least definable notion when dealing with the relationship between drawing, architecture and design. The term 'styling' refers to a practice of bad design or bad architecture, limited to the simple sketching of the external shapes of an object. Yet, for the rest of the field of design and architecture, the term 'drawing', in addition to understanding the forms of graphic representation, indicates the main tool for the imaginative elaboration of distinctive features that are often referred to as the "style of a project".

A "style" is an 'ideal object' (an abstract but concretely social object); it is easily recognised but is difficult (if not impossible) to explain because it is a concept that implies many contradictions.

    i) First of all, every 'style' is identifying, and the word "identity" has a very slippery signification, both from an extensive point of view (who does one identify with?) and from an intensive one (what does one identify with?).

    ii) Every style is always, at the same time, unique and diffuse, variant, and invariant.

We recognise a style only if it stands out in two ways: either as a specific and irreducible difference of the bearer, or, on the contrary, as a constancy, as a permanence of characters and values, of expressive traits in a vast class of objects and in the vital becoming of situations.

In short, defining in general 'what styles are' is too abstract and of little use. It is easier to make the history of a given stylistic label. Every style is born and dies with the bodies that bear it and the texts that narrate it; it has an epigenesis and a historical or anthropological course. A style can be

recognised *a posteriori*, retrospectively, as happens, for instance, with certain literary styles, or artistic, historical, national, existential, postural, nutritional, cognitive, etc. styles. But there are also styles that are deliberately invented (*a priori*), as happens, for example, with the stylistic identity of a corporate: Apple, Microsoft, or Olivetti in the heroic era of Made in Italy design.

These kinds of styles are easier to make history about. Especially corporate, or 'brand' identities are an example of 'style' understood in a very technical sense. Brands are 'styles' constructed *'a priori'* and have an ideational history circumscribed to a series of clear-cut decisions; they are made for practical, obvious reasons, and are elaborated with fairly explicit ideational techniques that have long been dealt with by a broad literature ranging from marketing to semiotics, especially visual semiotics in the Greimassian structuralist tradition (ex. Floch 1995).

By explaining the production structure and market positioning of a company, marketing draws the framework of the competing subjects within which that company can carve out its distinctive identity in the various social spheres, according to certain levels of the production chain and certain communication channels.

The theoretical contribution of semiotics may seem more abstract and schematic. In reality, semiotic analysis can also prove to be a practical method for studying how certain 'styles of objects' – or other communicative performances – can relate to particular cultural values connected to particular 'lifestyles'. The "semiotics of practices", through the so-called 'generative model of the plane of expression' (Fontanille 2008, 36–78) presents a clear scheme for identifying and analysing complex expressive facts by subdividing them into 'levels' of their constitution into signifiers: signs, texts, objects, practical scenes, strategies, 'forms of life'.

As an example, this model can highlight the construction of a corporate identity – such as that of Apple in the 1980s and 1990s or that of Olivetti in the mid-20th century – by analysing expressive facts that belong to very different levels and fields: e.g. certain sensorial (iconic and plastic) properties of the produced objects, the advertising communication strategies, the choice of the means of displaying, the corporate logo, packaging, pricing, etc.

In short, it allows us to trace the way in which, in a given practical scene, a produced object or an advertisement becomes an allegory or emblem of certain values to the detriment of others.

This theory proves precious in the study of very complex cases where a style emerges only *a posteriori*, showing traits of coherence with a certain line of research, even if it was never designed on the drawing board.

Here we will briefly discuss one of these cases: the way in which the painter Mario Sironi contributed to designing the main sculptural features of Italian architectural in the 1930s, a figural that he, among other protagonists of that affair, wanted to be profoundly allegorical (almost an exemplification) of the founding mythical values of the Fascist regime.

The design of an architectural style in progress

The stylistic stereotype of so-called "Fascist" architecture is too vague a category, confusing the expressive characteristics of very different buildings, sometimes ascribable to a simplified and massive neo-historicism, sometimes to a radical and iconoclastic rationalism, sometimes based on iterated and symmetrical spatial rhythms, sometimes on soft plastic configurations. In order to better define the 'family resemblance' common to many different Italian architectural works of the 1930s, historiography has compared genealogies of building constructions and positions in the coeval critical and theoretical debate.

In particular, it has circumscribed sequences of significant, figuratively heterogeneous but thematically comparable realisations: e.g. the series of postal palaces in Rome by Ridolfi, Libera, Samonà and Titta in 1933, and the one in Naples by Vaccaro (1936), and Mazzoni's similar constructions throughout the country between 1928 and 1942; or the set of projects presented in the competition for the Palazzo del Littorio at the *Fori Imperiali* in 1934; or the newly founded cities, etc.

In the comparison between these series of exemplary buildings, at least one common figural character of Italian architecture emerges, even in the cases of the more abstract (iconoclastic) works of Terragni's mystical Lombard rationalism.

Suffice it, for example, to observe how the Casa del Fascio in Como (1932-'36) expresses a transfiguration of the image of the public building of the Italian communal era, only alluding to the figures of the "city Hall", "civic Tower" and the "courtyard with loggias", although its forms are far from the bourgeois neo-communal imagery of early 20th-century Italian cities, which was statistically dominant in the contemporary professional culture of our architects. The terms of this particular "figural" character of Italian architecture emerge in parallel with the contemporary aesthetic debate on architecture and cities. In particular, in the Italian debate on architecture as "State Art" (Ciucci 1982), the need for an allegorical sense

of architecture was argued and, in its name, opposing sides clashed, without being reducible only to an academic, historicist and figurative party opposed to scattered platoons of an iconoclastic rationalist avant-garde. In different ways, smug academics, rationalist mystics, futurists, neo-humanists, novecentists, ... competed for opposing versions of the same mythical ideal: that of a sort of meta-historical classicism that each considered as opposed to contingent stylistic classicisms and romanticisms.

Thus the imaginary ideal of a variegated and new architectural classicism emerged, made up of stone masses and transparencies, of solemn Roman or (more moderately) Romanesque tectonics, of Mediterranean sunlight reflected by sculptural volumetries, an exhibition of technology sometimes performed with futurist or, on the contrary, "*strapaese"* (vernacular) tones.

In such vagueness of image, the most important trait common to the twenty years of contrasting aesthetic statements is the one that sees architecture as the main means of mass identification. The communicative, expressive, mythopoietic power of architecture was emphasised above all. That is, the expressive features of buildings were asked to exemplify for a mass audience the qualities of strength, transparency and order, as qualities allegorically attributed to the regime.

Thus, the construction of architecture 'in the image of' values that were deemed 'of the regime', 'of the people' or 'of the nation' took place concretely through a montage of "images": images in the broadest sense of the term.

We conclude from this that the so-called "littorio style" (Stone 1998) was constructed as an image corresponding to the common denominator of the expressive characters of a vast array of visual artefacts: from architecture to design and graphics.

A salient episode in this construction was the exhibition on the tenth anniversary of the Fascist Revolution that took place in Rome from October 1932 to October 1934 at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Via Nazionale.

A total image: the exhibition of the Fascist Revolution

Organised under the direction of the promoter Dino Alfieri, in collaboration with Luigi Freddi, Cipriano Efisio Oppo, the contribution of Antonio Valente and the decisive presence of Mario Sironi, the exhibition – as Giorgio Ciucci writes –

"... was created to exalt the period of Mussolini's seizure of power and to give it a heroic, mythical connotation, the matrices of Fascism were re-proposed, identifying them with the impetuousness of the Futurists, the spirituality of the Rationalists, the order of the Novecento, the elementary nature of the *strapaesani* [...] With the exhibition in 1932, the aim was to show that the state was done, that it had its own strength and image" (Ciucci 1983).

The exhibition succeeded in producing the most concrete, complete, and coherent exemplification of the protean image of the regime according to the interpretation and "synthesis" given by some protagonists of the avant-garde art movements.

The technical and aesthetic theme was the one common to all the European avant-gardes: the realisation of a "synthesis of the arts" beyond the different social domains of artistic and technical practices. Therefore, as we said, the topic of the 'synthesis of the arts' was also embodied in the ideal of an "architecture" that was intended to be readable by the masses. To this end, the exhibition provided the construction of an image of the mass state-regime affirmed in terms that we would today call "visual identity".

It was a "total image" in a technical sense: using the term "style" as "visual identity" in the sense in which it is used in marketing, visual semiotics and "montage" theory.

Then, it was also a "total" image in terms of the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the exhibition's reception. In the two years of its opening "… almost four million people had visited the exhibition" (Schnapp 2003, 43): thus it was visited by 10.5% of the coeval Italian population. Moreover, the exhibition had such a media resonance that it became a mass phenomenon. The Exhibition catalogue alone (Alfieri e Freddi 1933) had a circulation of 250,000 copies which, added to the other variously distributed reproductions of the event, had led to the "… staggering total of 1,630,000 printed pieces" (Schnapp 2003, 37), not counting the filmed footage and newsreels that can still be reproduced today through the Istituto Luce website.

Finally, it was also a "total image" because it was technically conceived as a "synthesis of the arts" used in a propagandist sense and in a spatial ("immersive") dimension completely analogous to the one experienced by the "total" constructivist environments and, originally, by the exhibition spaces elaborated during the Russian-European abstractionist avant-gardes of the 1920s – from Tatlin's counter-reliefs, Puni's Berlin exhibitions, Lissitzky's spatial Prouns and exhibition halls, to the interiors of

Mondrian, De Stijl and Bauhaus, ... – which configured an interior space as a particular visual and performative artefact, with the confluence of expressive forms coming from abstractionist painting and graphics, plastic lettering, polymateric collage and Dadaist photomontage, Lettrism, kinetic art (the rotating paddles in Room O), visual poetry, infographics, ...

However, unlike the competing modernist-abstractionist prototypes, the rooms of the Decennial's "shrine-exhibition" were marked by an intensely figurative character, anchored in the popular imagination, explicitly referring to the archetypes of the church, the mausoleum, the factory, the tomb, the courtroom, ... , pushed up to the use of relics, findings, authentic documents, theatre of performances – military ceremonies – visited according to the most deeply rooted protocols of the practices of pilgrimage, of the *ex voto*, of the *via crucis*, ...

The 1932 exhibition – very often redescribed in its exposition development (Fogu, 2003, Capanna 2004), in its documentary masses (Fioravanti 1990) and in its photographic resonance (Russo 1999) – was characterised by its concrete anthropological roots and its intensely "figural" character, due above all to Sironi's hand.

This "figural character" is the most essential one for understanding what exactly was meant by "image" in architecture, in the arts and in interior design; an issue that the Volta convention (Fondazione Volta 1937) had (unsuccessfully) faced in 1936.

This notion of "image" was at the same time shared and contested by the many different artists and architects involved, and was at the basis of their own room design process that was – typically – conducted from "sketches" analogous to those practised in scenography.

The backbone of the shrine

The neoclassical Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Via Nazionale designed by Pio Piacentini was transformed into a modern shrine of the regime (fig. 2). It was completely clad inside and outside, transfigured – according to Mussolini's dictate (Alfieri e Freddi 1933, 8–9) – into "… a thing of today, therefore very modern and daring, without melancholic reminders of the decorative styles of the past".

Externally – based on the drawings by Libera and De Renzi – it was reduced to an axial string of two interpenetrating volumes: a prominent thirty-metre dark red cube and an underlying, wide parallelepiped on whose ends two six-metre "X"s stood out.

This abstract mass was figuratively guarded by the prodrome of four 25-metre-high metal lictorian fasces piercing the virtual stylobate marked by a low canopy on which ran, for 38 metres, the cubital inscription signalling the exhibition.

All that remained of the concealed façade was the staircase stretching out on Via Nazionale, while all that remained of its neoclassical triumphal arch were the slots carved out of the red cube.

Inside, the central axis of the building masses became the most sacred part of the exhibition, the one of halls R, S, T and U, the only one that could be travelled back and forth, once the mystical and theatrical acme had been reached in hall U: the cylindrical *martyrion* 14 metres wide and raised 2.5 metres around a massive seven-metre copper cross bearing the inscription "for the immortal homeland" like a *titulus crucis*.

The façade, vestibule and *martyrion* – designed by Libera, De Renzi and Valente – transfigured the entire exhibition building, stylising it into the pure volumes of a temple made of stone, "blood" and metal, with luminescent bands and fasces, torches and a large guardhouse under the perennial soundtrack of the hymn *Giovinezza*.

The access to this axial section between halls R and U – as its sacred character obliged – was not immediate. Visitors could only reach it after the entire historical initiation unfolded in the perimeter path from halls A to Q, entering Room R (fig. 2. 2), which – shaped on a flared plan like the portal of a cathedral – constituted the temple's actual narthex.

Sironi gave it the shape of a cavern hollowed out in the rock with clean flat cuts, having the effigy of the military duce carved in bas-relief (by Ruggeri) on the cubital inscription DUX in the wall that turned its back to the outside.

At the foot of that wall (an exclusive caesura) he placed a cubic sentry box of steel and glass containing the reconstruction and relics of the first little room from which Benito Mussolini had directed *Il Popolo d'Italia*, using the actual printing rolls of the newspaper's printing presses as the four corner columns of the canopy-reliquary.

That reliquary was thus placed as the starting point of the visit to the *martyrion* and the destination of the return from the *martyrion*. That exhibition axis between the reliquary and the *martyrion* was also marked by the *Galleria dei fasci* (room S) and then by the reconstruction of Mussolini's last room at the *Popolo d'Italia* (Room T) located before the Shrine.

Undoubtedly that axis entrusted to Sironi's design expressed a fundamental narrative meaning in the exhibition: it celebrated the achieved historical passage of Fascism from "movement" to "regime" (Fogu 2003).

With the *Galleria dei fasci* Sironi (figg. 1-2) gave the most antonomastic expression of the figurative strategy he had managed to impose on the entire exhibition. For example, in the square pillar-fasces placed on parade in room S, he synthesised the figures of the "axe" and the "Roman salute" in the single outstretched projection of the pillar capital, inclining the overhang with the visual angle of the "X"s sculpted in the previous room.

This figurative dictate, which Sironi – in various ways and degrees – also extended to the rooms set up by the variegated group of other authors, consisted in moulding each architectural component with a hybrid and anthropomorphic figurality that synthesised – with a minimum of common determinatives and configurative gestures – the figures of the "column", the *"fascio littorio"*, the "sword", the "cross", the "broken chain", the "torch" and the "arms extended in the Roman salute". This "vocabulary" of figures – thanks to the intense peremptoriness expressed in Sironi's four rooms – was effectively declined in the entire exhibition and in its entire propaganda graphics, in the most diverse forms of expression – from the gigantic photomontage to the slightest relic – with an expressive effect capable of blurring the great difference in tones and expressive registers of the exhibition, which, in reality, passed from room to room between the categories of the visceral grotesque, the historiographic-chronological, the epic, or the mythical.

The whirlwind of history

The axial section between rooms R and U, which we have described in its sacral character, could only be accessed after having walked around the perimeter of the building. It was the entire exhibition that wanted to teach a history mythicised in an epic with the addition of some lyrical satellites of high and low culture. It did so by means of a perimeter initiatory route that linked differently configured and arranged rooms, thus of very different expressive character, which on the whole had a wide range of expressive tones and genres: from the grotesque (satirical) to the sacred, from the anecdotal to the monumental, from chronology to epic, ... The "chain" of interior spaces was thus to "remedy" (trans-mediate) salient images coming from the most diverse *media* by translating them into an "interior".

It was from cinema – in a sort of "documentary turned into a room" – that Room A and Room B began, where Esodo Pratelli mounted gigantic close-ups (relief collages) that narrated the chronology and geography of Italy's

entry into the Great War. These cut-out images in gigantic relief formed the backdrop to the showcases with documents and relics.

From this jolted, cinematic space, one moved on, in contrast, (fig. 3) to the composed symmetries of two silent war shrines, and then through the noisy and grotesque (goliardic) mockery of internal and external enemies.

The shattering dynamics then found a new rigour (fig. 4) in the interiors made of Nizzoli's orthogonal layouts, configured as energy fields of a typographically disciplined futurism that Prampolini also put to good use in Room IV, on the upper floor (fig. 8), where he transformed celebratory infographics into constructivist decoration.

A little further on, the sense of other rooms was posed as "*strapaese"* re-enactment of the interior of fascist headquarters (fig. 5) with didactic panels and display cases rigidly arranged on parade.

Then the rooms became holographic panoramas (fig. 6) with real-life relics-*souvenirs*, up to the room set up by Terragni (fig. 7) that subsumed in its configuration the two most essential figures of the exhibition: the grapheme "X" and the spiral vortex of turbines.

Conclusions

It may seem that Terragni's (abstractionist) architectural aesthetics are foreign to the figurative character of Sironi's painting, yet Room O conceived by Tarregni fully achieves the values with which Sironi intended to give unity and expressive efficacy to the exhibition of the fascist revolution.

Most of the reviews of that exhibition describe the Room O as a decomposed, dynamic, crowded, fragmented space; Edoardo Persico read there the outcome of an "earthquake fantasy". But, on a closer look, the opposite is true: Terragni creates a formally controlled and dynamically composed installation.

The space is configured above all by the two crossed signs of the "X" logo that mark the diagonals of the ceiling of the parallelepiped room (9 x 19 x 10 m), space then cut by the powerful diagonal wall space then cut by the powerful and composite diagonal. This diagonal wall seems to rotate around the vertical axis of the room in a vortex described by the perimeter walls in the form of segments of a spiral cylinder covered with images, rotating blades, writings, ... Therefore, the setting up of the space of room O manages to communicate three sculptural parasynonyms (intersemiotic transmutation) linked to the historical facts that it wants to narrate: i) the "clean cut", ii) the "spriral of events" and iii) the "teeming crowd of popular masses".

In developing the explicitly communicative aspect of an architecture, Terragni always resorted to his experiences of drawing and painting. It must be remembered that Giuseppe Terragni was also a painter close to the "*novecento*" group and from the very beginning of his career as an architect he tried to keep the two labels together: "Rationalism" and "*Novecento*" (Ciucci 1996).

Sironi was among the founders - and the leading personality - of the "*Novecento*" group which, in 1926 under the leadership of Margherita Sarfatti, had become a very influential lobby on Italian artistic culture.

So, what technique or design principle did the painter and the architect share?

The occasion of the exhibition of the fascist revolution was seized by Sironi and Terragni as a demonstration of the expressive possibilities of spatial configurations that, potentially, could be invested in architectural design. In the previous twelve years Sironi had dealt with the relationship between painting and architecture in the course of the personal ideological elaboration of his own pictorial research. At the beginning of his activity, Sironi does not refer his pictorial research to a specific trend of contemporary Italian architecture; he outlines the need to conform his pictorial space to the abstract ideal of an architectural constructiveness.

In his desire to create a painting with a clear architectural character, Sironi, in fact, responds to the fundamental intent of the artistic movement of the "call to order" [*rappel à l'ordre*]: the ideal of advancing the futurist and cubist avant-gardes towards forms of more popular, structured, communicative, and legible art. But, in responding to the themes of "*rappel à l'ordre*", Sironi supports continuity with the research of the futurist avant-garde and does not adhere to the trends of neoclassical figuration.

In January 1920, close to the reactions to his first solo exhibition, Sironi, with Achille Funi, Luigi Russolo and Leonardo Dudreville, signed the "Manifesto Against All Returns in Painting" [*contro tutti I ritorni in pittura*]: a peremptory declaration of continuity with the research for the first futurist avant-gardes, in controversy against the positions of the group of artists of "Valori Plastici" from them accused of supporting a bourgeois, elitist and literary painting. Their controversy is directed against the literary ways of contemporary Italian painting, the metaphysical one of De Chirico which they consider linked to an intellectualistic iconography, encrypted, judged ineffective with respect to the much more urgent theme: the rediscovery of the craft of painting, the exaltation of the practice of a "pure painting", more legible and symbolic. The manifesto "against all returns" states that painting must arrive at a more modern and profound

expressiveness and a strong formal fulfillment of the painting – the architectural nature of the painting – explained almost in the terms expressed by the aesthetics of pure visibility: above all eidetic and chromatic rhythms.

At a later stage of his career, Sironi faces a more direct relationship with concrete architectural practice; but that's another story.

Taking the exhibition of the fascist revolution as the main opportunity to reconstruct the imagery of the regime (Vander 2001), Sironi proposes a clear expressive task for the next architecture and outlines a processing technique based on the graphical transduction between images. An ever-present question, beyond any ideological framework.

Figures
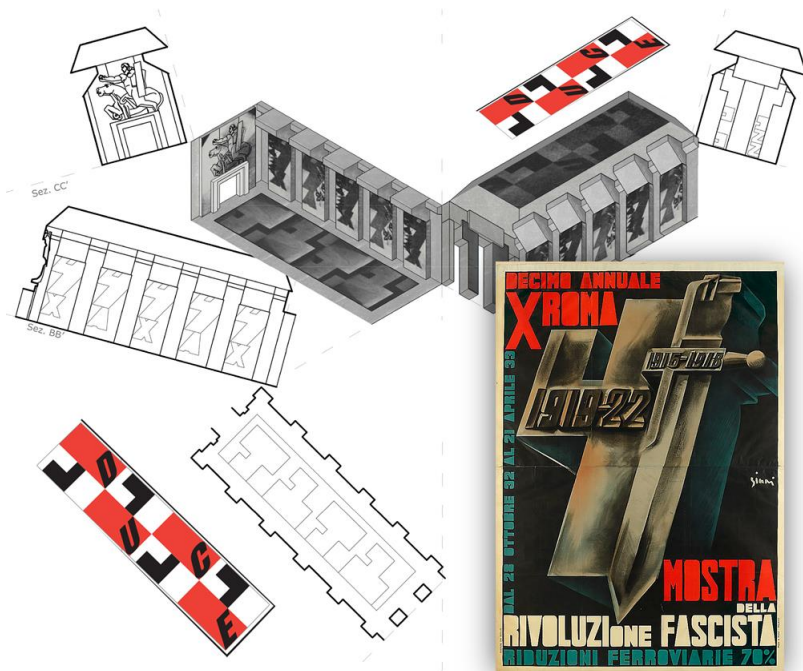
Figure 1 - Mario Sironi, "Galleria dei Fasci" (developed isometrical axonometry) and one of the wall posters of the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution, 1932.
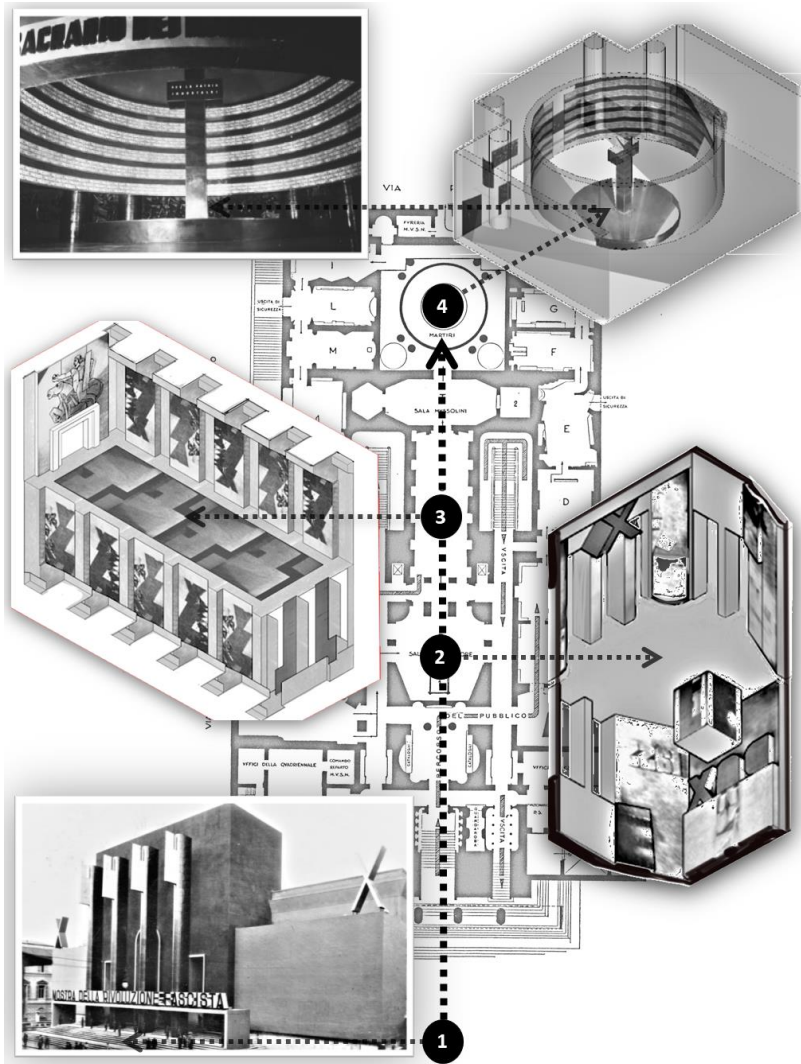
Figure 2 - Sacral axis of the exhibition: 1) Facade towards via Nazionale, 2) Room R (hall of honor), 3) Galleria dei Fasci, 4) Shrine of the martyrs.
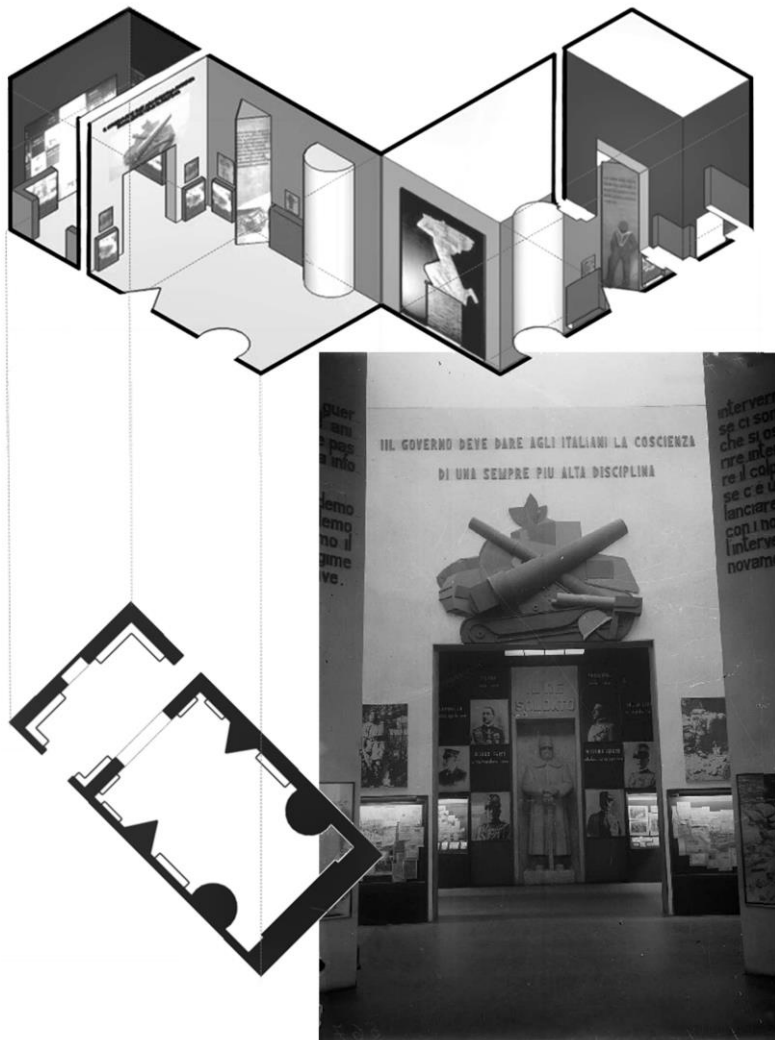
Figure 3 - Rooms C and D (The First World War: the welded king and the victorious infantryman) on the program of Antonio Monti, installation by Achille Funi and sculptural reliefs by Marino Marini and Domenico Rambelli.

Figure 4 - Room F (1919) based on a program by Dante Dini, installation by Marcello Nizzoli and pictorial panels by Enrico Prampolini.
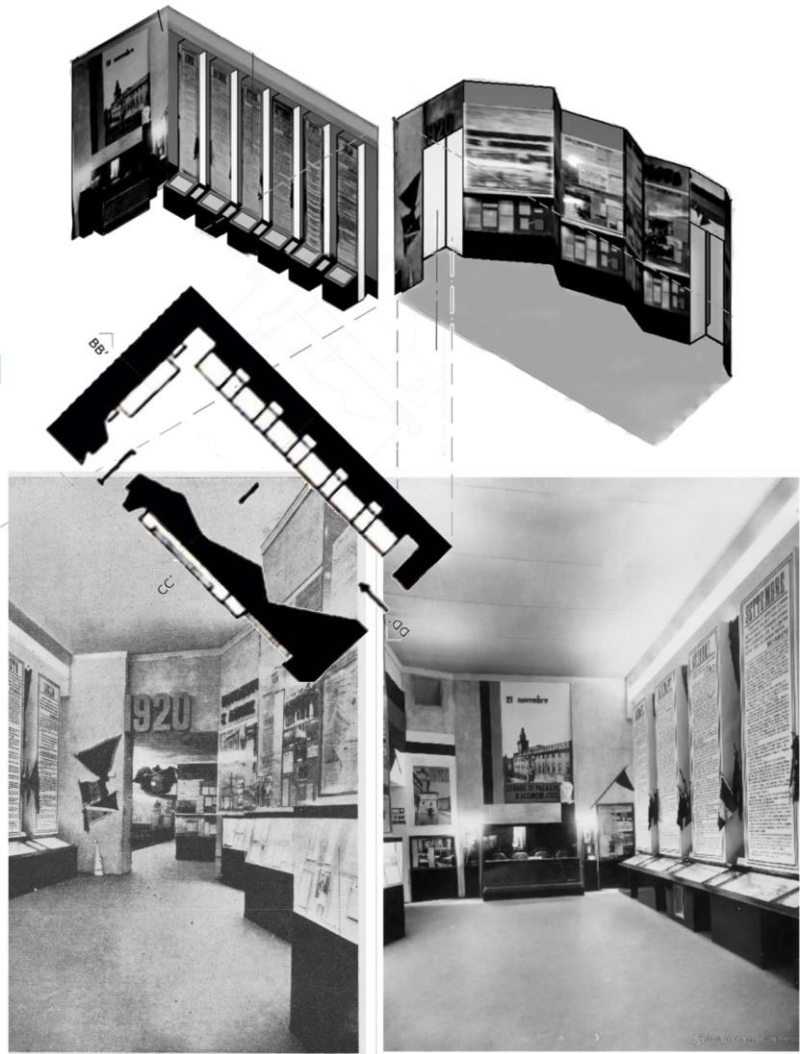
Figure 5 – Room I (1920) set up by Gigi Maino, Amerigo Bartoli and Mino Maccari.

Figure 6 – Room L (The River Enterprise and Dalmatia) program by Riccardo Gigante, staging by Giannino Marchìg.
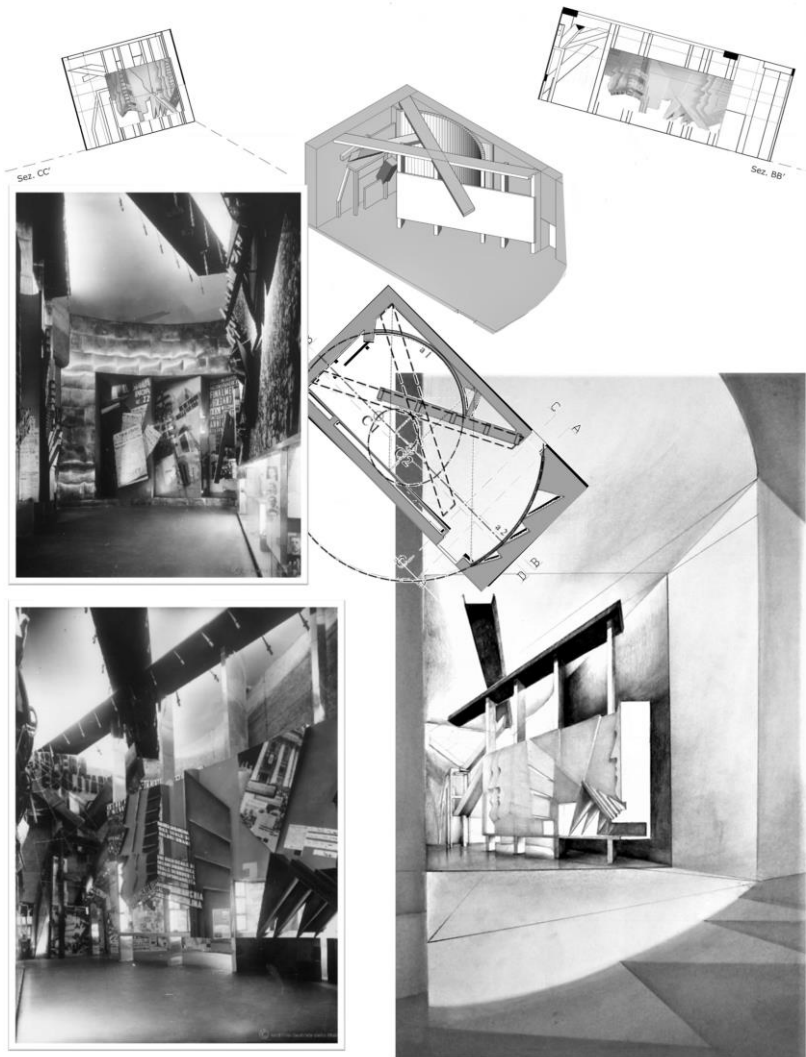
Figure 7 - Room O (1922: the eve of the march on Rome) program by Enrico Arrigoni, staging by Giuseppe Terragni.
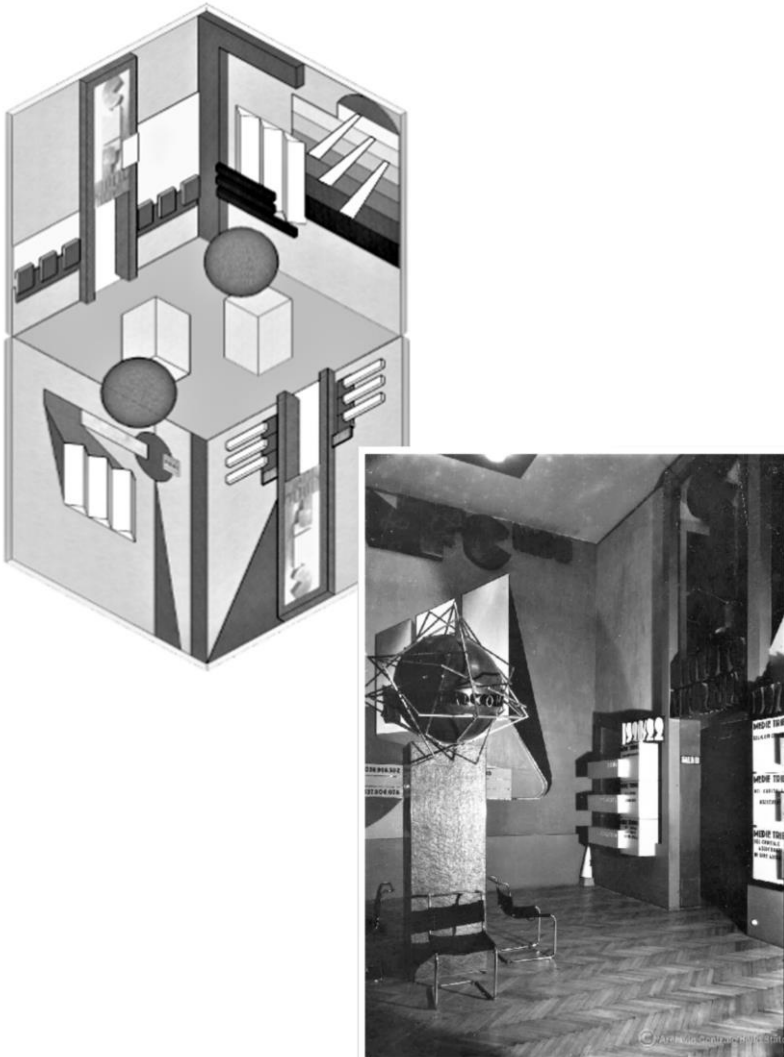
Figure 8 - Room III (fascist creations of the first decade) set up by Enrico Prampolini.

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