

Tracing rural pathways. Exchanges of modernity between Argentina and Italy around 1930s.

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Resumen

A través de una investigación comparativa-histórica, la contribución tiene la ambición de trazar los caracteres de la modernidad que conectan los proyectos rurales en Italia y Argentina en la década de los '30. Aunque el mundo rural podría considerarse un contexto esquivo para la arquitectura, la variedad de ejemplos encontrados en contextos geográficos y socioeconómicos distantes documenta los intercambios que el movimiento moderno tuvo en este contexto. Los casos de estudio seleccionados son la Llanura Pontina (Roma, 1926-1943) y el plan para la Colonia Balcarce (Buenos Aires, 1936). Estos dos ejemplos presentan características comparables: enfoque multi-escalar, importancia de la infraestructura, organización jerárquica de los asentamientos, esquemas funcionales y normas de funcionamiento. El carácter sistemático y eficiente del desarrollo rural sugiere su importancia en el intercambio entre los dos países. En términos cuantitativos y dimensionales, el territorio rural y sus centros habitados representan el grueso de la actividad de planificación moderna desarrollada en ese período.

Palabras clave: proyectos rurales; desarrollo rural; Llanura Pontina; Colonia Balcarce; intercambio

Abstract

Through a comparative-historical investigation, the contribution identifies the common features of rural colonization projects in Italy and Argentina around 1930s. Although the rural world might be considered an elusive context for architecture, it is the variety of examples in distant geographical and socio-economic contexts that provides insights about the exchanges of modern movement. The selected case studies are the Pontine Plain (Rome, 1926-1943) and the plan for Colonia Balcarce (Buenos Aires, 1936). These examples of rural planning share common modernist features: multi-scalar approach, a capillary presence of infrastructure, the hierarchical organization of settlements, and a functional organization of space. Evidences of the formal organization of territory and

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settlements indicate the exchange of expertise between the two countries. In quantitative and dimensional terms, these examples give evidence to the importance of the rural territory in the field of modern planning activity that unrolled in the first decades of the 20th century.

Keywords: rural projects; rural development; Pontine Plain; Colonia Balcarce; exchange

Introduction

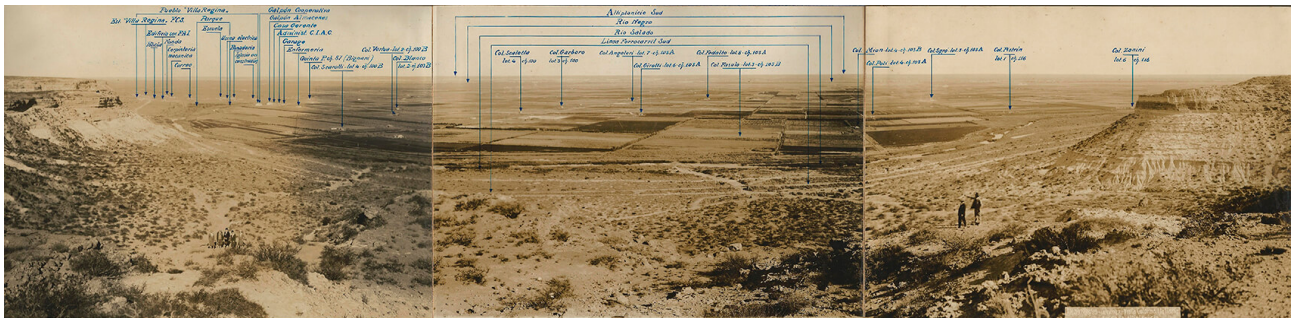


Fig.1. "Villa Regina (Río Negro), 1926/1929". Compañía Ítalo Argentina de Colonización. Courtesy Galería Hilario. Artes, Letras, Oficios. Unknow photographer.

In 1934, Le Corbusier and Norbert Bezar drafted a proposal for a modern farm, rooted into the agricultural cooperation and small family-run enterprises. As such, the farm and the village were to avoid "any romantic subjection" (Le Corbusier, 1934) and embrace modernisation just like cities. If we acknowledge the fact that agrarian reforms of the 20th century are a "simultaneous modification of production and new organisation of space" (Le Coz, 1974) we might find room for investigating the historical evolution of rural planning and architecture that set the scene for large-scale colonisation projects.

Although the rural world might be considered an elusive context for architecture - limited to farmhouses or productive ancillary buildings – it is the variety of examples in distant geographical and socio-economic contexts that provides insights about the exchanges of modern movement. Building on the results of the recent EU-funded research *Modscapes* which laid emphasis on the circulation of models limited to European examples (and their colonies) from the late 1920s to the mid 1940s, we seek to investigate the reverse transfer of models. In fact, we question if and how the agrarian colonization in Latin America sedimented comparable territorial and urban design examples, and how transatlantic transfers impacted rural planning.

If Le Corbusier's proposals for the *ferme radieuse* and the *village radieuse* sanctioned modernism as a means to overcome century-long antagonism of town and countryside (Arrendondo-Garrido,

2016; Bezard, 1934) we may well argue that European and Argentinian colonisation projects bear evidence of long-established tentative colonisation experiences.

The comparison between Italian Fascist ruralisation projects and the agrarian colonization in Argentina (1920-1946) sits on the basis of similar socio-political premises and certain formal assonances in the design of villages which might have taken root through a considerable Italian immigration.

It could be observed that the complexity of rural colonisation projects required a specialised technical cadre encompassing agronomists, economists, hydraulic engineers, as well as architects.

Such interdisciplinary projects led to an unprecedented multi-scalar design that overcome the specificity of the disciplines in order to address similar problems posed by the context such as climate, topography and rural production. Considered into a larger historical perspective, the impact of the disciplinary breath that rural colonisation broadening the first decades of the XX century it is arguable that it evolved into regional planning.

In parallel, the modernizing action had the ambition to re-shape the social role of peasants and grant them a lifestyle that could possibly compete with the urban one. Architects had the task to design buildings and collective spaces where such new behavioural patterns could be properly housed.

Despite an evident qualitative - referable mainly to size and geography of reclamation areas - and chronological discrepancy between Italian and Argentinian case studies, the empirical mapping of the physical features that bring together rural settlements could eventually set up the ground for future research. Based on historical evidence, we venture to say that the project of internal colonisation in the Pontine Plain had international impact and it promptly reached Argentina through Italian architects. By intertwining the historical evolution of the agrarian reform and the colonisation attempts in Argentina with the role of Italian immigrants in the inter-war period we might realise that the projects of new settlements and rural colonies set the scene for investigating mutual exchanges.

This becomes even more clear once we compare the Pontine Plain near Rome (1926-1943) and Colonia Balcarce (1946) near Buenos Aires as key examples of rural planning where the multi-scalar approach is at the very core of the territorial development as a modernizing factor. It will not come as a surprise that we identify as multi-scalar the hierarchical organisation of settlements, roads and rural houses thus considering them elements of a bigger planning and not isolated problems of architecture. Building the argument of round trip between Italy and Argentina as examples, we can detect a fulfilment after WWII when Natale Prampolini and Luigi Piccinato – exiled actors of the Italian internal colonisation - brought to Argentina accumulated experiences of rural planning to be implemented under Peron's government.

The Pontine plain: an affordable colonisation project

The year Le Corbusier elaborated his proposal for reshaping the rural world through the creation of regional clusters of *villages radieux* he visited Rome and in particular he went to visit the Pontine Plain³. The area was a newly reclaimed land and materialized as a landscape of orderly designed roads sided by rural houses, canals, and fields. Still a working site, the new towns of Littoria, today Latina (1932) and Sabaudia (1933) unfolded amid the fields and canals.

The overall reclamation project where these new towns were located extended on the former Pontine Marshes, an area of 76.000 hectares extending to the southeast of Rome in between the Volscian Mountains and the Tyrrhenian Sea. Due to its extent and the presence of large, landed estates owned by Papal aristocracy, vast marshy ponds and malaria ridden areas, the land was never exploited for agricultural purposes. The attempts to reclaim the Plain never ceased and the numerous drainage attempts carried out over the centuries sedimented a great deal of expertise in hydraulics.

Despite these attempts, none of the schemes envisaged the permanent settlement of rural population until the Fascist Party launched *Battaglia del Grano* (1925), a national agrarian policy meant to grant alimentary self-sufficiency and solve unemployment.

The Pontine Plain became the cutting-edge example of *bonifica integrale* (organic reclamation), a concept elaborated during the Fascist period (1928-1935) by the agrarian economist Arrigo Serpieri and meant to solve hydraulic, sanitary, and social transformation of areas that underwent colonisation projects (Serpieri, 1932).

When the Fascist regime took over the reclamation works starting in 1926, drainage was a problem that could be solved with the combined application of newest technology and the previously sedimented experiences yet internal colonisation challenged modern architecture to reinvent living and working environment for rural population. According to recent scholarly works by Veracini, the internal colonisation project was a return, or “brought-home” (Veracini, 2018) project hatched in the aftermath of a failed colonization in Abyssinia. He writes: “By the 1930s, the fascist regime was importing “Africa” into the Peninsula. In many ways, Italy settler-colonised itself during the twentieth century by targeting its “empty” lands. Because of its size and scope of the project, and because it aimed at the complete social and environmental transformation of an extended area, The Pontine Marshes became a veritable settler colony” (Veracini, 2018).

³ For a detailed description of the visit and the meetings between Le Corbusier and the leaders of the Fascist Party see, *Una mancata committenza a le Corbusier (Le Corbusier's missed commission)* (Ciucci, 2002).

The design and implementation of the reclamation project was entrusted to specialized engineering departments within newly established reclamation authorities (*ConSORZI di Bonifica*) which were in charge of financing and developing melioration works within the boundaries of their jurisdiction.

Conversely, the field of internal colonization which included the allotment division, the building of houses and the establishment of rural contracts with families was entrusted to the ONC (War Veterans' Organization) which operated at a national level. ONC in compliance with the Ministry of Migrations selected unemployed families mainly from Veneto and Emilia Romagna (Alfieri, 2018) to be-resettled and by providing them a loan which included a house and a field expected to turn them into small rural entrepreneurs (Todaro, 1935).

It was this Institution that entrusted the design of the territorial organization to Luigi Piccinato, who drafted the colonisation scheme starting from Sabaudia. This scheme was conceived in stark contrast to the established European models of decentralisation such as garden cities or *siedlungen* (Piccinato, 1934); the hierarchical system of centres with different importance and role within the territory sanctioned the interdependence between city (Rome) and the newly established agro-towns. The hierarchy was established within a catchment area of about 100 square kilometres and rural houses and agricultural holdings represented the smallest unit identified with the settlers' family. Measuring up to 30 hectares, fields and houses lined along roads and gravitate towards local communities or townships (*borghi rurali*) which acted as a middle level of interdependence between city and agro-town. The local communities (*borghi rurali*) clustered public activities such as the church, clinic, the school, the post office, the ONC office and ancillary buildings while new towns with their administrative and political buildings represented the background of modern rural life.

This rural colonisation scheme partially echoed Le Corbusier's prediction that "the era of the road will bring people back to the land" (Le Corbusier, 1934) by conceiving a road network that mirrored the hierarchy of relations established by the settlements; roads provided mobility - for rural goods and people - shaped the layout of new-towns and widened up the field of architectural design unlocking a multi-scalar approach to come to the fore.

Pontine Plain: an export settlement model?

Despite its complex interdependent relations, the scheme developed for Sabaudia was ambiguous. The diagrammatic contents and the hierarchical organisation could be ascribed as an intent of duplication thus making it a model; yet the fact that it was implemented only in the Pontine Plain makes it rather a demonstrative example of rural colonisation.

For their proximity to Rome, the accessibility granted by new roads and the geometrically defined squares, the new towns in the Pontine region became a popular place for Fascist party gatherings

where foreign visitors, in particular members of the diplomatic corps (Folchi, 2013) could provide first-hand impressions.

The visible shift from marshes to an organised and orderly inhabited countryside with stabilised farmers underpinned the argument that Italy succeeded in overcoming the rural/urban antagonism.

The political, economic, and spatial goal of breaking the landed estates was taking shape at a fast pace and eventually in the Pontine Plain “the new urban centres were meant to service a rural area, not the other way around” (Veracini, 2018).

Despite the evident uniqueness of the context – owed to century-long attempts of reclamation and a natural fertility of the soil - both *bonifica integrale* and inner colonisation became subject of national and international exhibitions and were promoted by the Fascist Party as a new form of colonisation.

But the dissemination was a two-way exchange. Through a selection of international articles and reports, we could conclude that the agrarian modernisation of the Pontine Plain circulated among different countries and within different scientific fields⁴.

In refining our selection and limit it to architecture and urban design we can argue that the Pontine Plain yielded a relative success in Portugal and Spain despite the fact the colonisation schemes discarded the dispersed settlement of farms, *borghi rurali* and towns in favour of a single rural settlement surrounded by fields.

The exchange between Spain and Italy during the 1930s and the reception of Italian colonisation schemes (Monclus and Oyon, 1988) has been recently considered as decisive for the Spanish internal colonisation (Tordesillas, 2010). It regarded the implementation of a specific subject for areas under colonization in Spain. The “urbanism of rural areas” became a subject taught by Jose Fonseca at the University of Madrid which ultimately paved the way to regional planning.

The project of the Pontine Plain reclamation and colonisation reached Argentina as early as 1934. Months before Le Corbusier’s visited the Pontine Plain, Pietro Maria Bardi published an article on Sabaudia in the Argentine architectural journal “*Revista de Arquitectura*”. In this text (Bardi, 1934) he pointed out the uniqueness of the Pontine new towns as examples of settlements that adhere to an agrarian productive programme as opposed to industrial towns where new settlements became urban suburbs as a consequence of a decentralization of factories.

⁴ The American artist Sterling-Frost (1934, p. 590), for example, published a travel journal in *Geographical Review* describing how the Fascist government faced problems concerning agriculture, hydraulics, sanitation, and irrigation with an unprecedented magnitude. The same year, *The National Geographic* published an article about the ‘Promised Land’ created by Gelasio Caetani (1934, pp.200-217) on his own estate near Latina (Littoria). The German engineer Friedrich Vöchting (1960) wrote essays about the reclamation of the Pontine Plain and its impact on the socio-economic conditions of Italian peasants. Architectural journals were more reluctant. The article *The Town Planning Review* by Wesley Dougill (1936) described the general features of the new-towns, pointing out that Sabaudia was more successful than Latina but did not voiced-out any adherence to the modern movement. In 1938, the renewed Italian architect and publisher, Giuseppe Pagano criticised the newly built Pontinia and labelled it as a formalistic interplay of monumental facades and few elements from the modern movement, essentially a failure to impart rural character to the architecture (Pagano, 1935).

In particular, Bardi claims the definition of both “a city and agricultural centre” that comprehends just very few repeatable dwelling typologies and essential collective and representative buildings thus making it a distinctive subject of modern architects and urbanists.

He wrote: “[...] Sabaudia must be a model and an example. In this sense, we have had the will and the certainty to work to compose an absolutely modern plan, which makes the urban centre of Sabaudia a complete example of what our technique can give today.”⁵

Rural colonisation in Argentina and the role of Italian immigrants

The article published by Bardi in 1934 bears evidence to the fact that the urban plan of Sabaudia and the rural modernisation dovetailed inner colonisation. But is that enough to affirm that Italian agrarian and settlement of 1930s policies served as a model for inner colonisation projects in Argentina after 1940s?

To answer this question, it is necessary to widen-up the perspective on the exchanges between Italy and Argentina and include the *longue durèe* of Atlantic migrations as a decisive factor in shaping that exchange. According to Goebel (2017), Italians referred to their emigrated communities in Argentina as “our colony”. This perception clashed with the limited political influence Italian state had in the independent and economically rampant Argentina at the beginning of the XX century and as a result, could have propelled colonization of Africa at first and internal colonization afterwards.

Libya and with no ambition of crossing the disciplinary line, we believe some cultural and spatial precedents that could be found in the colonial studies tie together Italian emigration to Latin America and the fascist colonization of Libya (Capresi, 2009) and Eastern Africa (Canali, 2013).

The scholarly work carried out by Veracini, tries to delve into the different Italian colonization projects - including overseas colonization and inner one – in order to understand to what point it could fall under the settler colonialism definition. Since XIX century Italian migration has been frequently assimilated with colonization and according to Veracini (2018) it could be identified with the concept of “colonizer-settler”, representing individuals who migrated from the motherland to permanently settle in another country.

In the 1874 study entitled “Delle Colonie e delle emigrazioni d’italiani all’estero” (Carpi, 1874), the Italian term *colonia* (colony) referred equally to foreign possession and to expatriate communities of emigrants and may have instilled the perception of Argentina’s belonging to an Italian colonial

⁵ [...] Sabaudia debe ser un modelo y un ejemplo. En este sentido se ha tenido la voluntad y la certeza de trabajar para componer un plano absolutamente moderno, que haga del centro urbano de Sabaudia un ejemplo completo de cuanto hoy puede dar nuestra técnica.

project. Veracini described the Italian Fascist colonial Empire (1936) as “an empire of labor, not a labor-seeking empire” (Veracini, 2018); in contrast with the established European colonial models. According to Giglioli (1918) the community of Italian defined *italianità* (italianness) as a way to halt the assimilation of Italian community by means of segregation from autochthonous population.

In the long history of Italian emigration to the Americas, we can identify several phases and each of them marked by different magnitude for the rural settlement.

The first phase was mainly directed towards Latin America (from 1876 to 1900) and emigrants there settled both in the urban and in the rural areas where they worked as wage workers in monoculture. By comparing some data, Goebel (2017) notes: “[...] a very conservative estimate suggests that at least 55 per cent of net immigrants to Argentina between 1869 and 1895 settled in cities rather than in the countryside, and more than 75 per cent did so in 1895–1914. The percentage surely rose further thereafter, while the onset of internal migration to cities brought second-generation rural immigrants to urban centers.”

The second phase, from 1900 to the beginning of First World War, coincides with the beginning of the Italian industrialization process. Despite the economic growth industrialization assessed, it was the uneven distribution of rural labor force on national territory that paved the way to massive migration from Southern Italian regions to overseas countries.

According to the data from the Ministry's migratory registers, this second phase represented a real exodus, skyrocketing to 9 million Italians moving to the Americas. Italians who emigrated to Argentina between 1857 and 1915 were 2.295.019 million.

Despite the growing numbers, in the largest rural area of the country⁶, the southern province of Buenos Aires, in the period between 1895 and 1914 the rural population did not increase significantly⁷ indicating that for immigrants' rural life was not as appealing as that in the city.

The fact that Italians represented the majority of rural immigrants calls into play the hypothesis that rural settlements in Argentina represented the embryo of a policy to build-up rural identities through the physical definition of a center, where representative and logistic buildings converged.

Between the 1910s and 1920s of the XX century, Italian farmers began to spread in the provinces of Argentina and in 1925, 65% of the inhabitants of the Argentine countryside had Italian background being them either newly emigrated or second-generation (Marzocca, 1995).

During the first phase, the distribution of the Italian peasants was variable and marked by concentrations of people from the same region in single provinces of Argentina.

⁶ Almost one third of the entire national territory.

⁷ 1.2% of the national population in 1895, rising to a still modest 2.8% per cent in 1914 (Goebel, 2017, p.142).

For instance, in the area of Cordoba Italian farmers originated mainly from Friuli and were 79.1% of the total rural population. In The province of Santa Fè immigrants from Piedmont were more than half of the total population while in the province of Entre-Rios in 1914 Italians were 70.000 out of a population of 425.373 individuals. (Giglioli 1918). The Italian agronomist Giglioli pictured this patchy distribution stating that: "More than in the cities, the Argentine countryside is, in its scarce population, saturated with Italianness"⁸ (Marzocca,1995). The concept of Italianness evoked by Giglioli sanctioned the shift from the 19th century identification of immigrants with the regions they came from to a national narrative; the concept of Italianness paved the way to a state-building process carried out abroad as it expressed immigrants' need to rebuild social relations in a physical and cultural environment similar to the one of their homelands.

Italianness, as imagined by Giglioli, was more of a means against assimilation loaded with 'imagined' values (Veracini, 2018) rather than a concrete project as a matter of fact the few isolated colonisation attempts which unrolled in Latin American countries which were marked by different and diverging agendas⁹ could hardly be considered organized attempts of colonization. Worth to be noted is that in comparison with other European immigrants, Italian and Spanish were the labour surplus originated in impoverished and estate-run countryside (Goebel, 2017) rather than financially or technically equipped expatriates. Giglioli (1919) dramatically stated: "the mark of Italianness preserved in the Argentine countryside does not correspond to the memory of a few intelligent or fortunate entrepreneurs, rather to the sweat of hundreds of thousands of anonymous workers who transformed the countryside, an untamed desert, into fields of extraordinary production, thus building a living monument to their new nationality"¹⁰

Establishing colonial settlement precedents. Villa Regina as a watershed.

The juncture of the massive Italian rural migration coupled with the presence of few successful technicians involved in reclamation projects in Argentina might have set the scene for big rural colonization projects. After being educated in Italy, technically skilled emigrants set sail to Argentina with the ambition of building up an international reputation that would eventually grant them financial support from the motherland to undertake new and more ambitious projects (Hermann, 1930).

⁸ "más que en las ciudades, el campo argentino está, en su escasa población, saturado de italianidad"

⁹ For example, the settlements developed through the transfer of thousands of Italian proletarians in the Argentinian Pampa Gringa or in Patagonia thanks to the initiative of the Salesian missionaries who contributed to the foundation of mixed agricultural colonies (Nicoletti and Navarro Floria, 1904, pp. 327-361). A short-lived military and agrarian colony called Nuova Roma led by Silvino Olivieri. The situation was similar in other Latin American states. In the Brazilian fazendas or in some experimental colonies such as the anarchist community of *Colonia Cecilia*, founded in 1890 in the state of Paraná (Brazil) by the Italian agronomist Giovanni Rossi (*Felici*, 1998, pp. 9-64; *Boccardo*, 1886, pp. 23-36).

¹⁰ "la impronta de italianidad que conserva el campo argentino no corresponde a la mención memoriosa de unos pocos inteligentes o afortunados emprendedores, sino al sudor regado por centenas de miles de trabajadores anónimos que llegaron a transformar nuestra campaña, un desierto indómito, en campos de ex traordinaria producción, construyendo así un monumento vivo a su nueva nacionalidad".

The presence of engineers, architects and agronomists could be detected in Argentina since the end of 19th century in particular in the aftermath the military campaign called *Conquista del Desierto* (1884).

Italian engineers were famous for their knowledge of hydraulics, in particular in developing irrigation schemes and reclamation projects along the Rio Negro in northeastern Patagonia.

In 1898 the Argentine government commissioned this hydraulic scheme to the Italian engineer Cesare Cipolletti (1899), who at the time was known for his vast regulation projects for different rivers in Argentina (Rio Colorado, Limay and Neuquen). For his ditching works along the rivers in the provinces of Mendoza¹¹ and Tunuyan (1889-1890) which sustained the agricultural development of the areas he was entrusted the analysis works along Rio Negro.

The report which accompanied the project of regulation of Rio Negro by Cipolletti was a meticulous description integrated by dry data stemming out from the survey of the region. He was convinced that by ditching and reshaping the riverbanks, seasonal flooding could be used for agriculture and navigation.

One of the highlights of this survey was the description of few rural impoverished and abandoned colonies due to adverse climatic conditions which led to the conclusion that a new irrigation system would have granted a permanent agricultural production (Herrera, 2017).

In this sense, the establishment of a permanent agrarian settlement in the Rio Negra Region coupled with the political aim to control remote areas taken from indigenous populations and secure the eastern borders between Argentina and Chile (Herrera, 2017).

When Cipolletti surveyed the Rio Negro valley was not a virgin land, rather it was a system of dispersed military and grazing colonies with the railway line that he envisioned in his project as the spine to link the valley with the rest of the country. In fact, in the development of a successful agrarian colonization, a fast and efficient infrastructure that could distribute agricultural products to the big ports of Bahia Blanca or Buenos Aires was crucial to account for the initial investment.

According to Alvarez Palau (2012) it was the overlapping of different infrastructures - chiefly the railway - that shaped the territorial dynamics of the Rio Negro valley equally impacting the development of rural production and the localization of new-towns. The towns that were erected were part of the development of an economic system which gravitated towards Bahia Blanca so that the agrarian productions could reach the ports for exportation.

¹¹ In 1888 he signed a contract with Eng. Guillermo Villanova for the irrigation works of the province of Mendoza. The ditch in Mendoza was the first one in Argentina.

More interestingly it is here argued that the pattern of settlement was shaped by the infrastructure as the railyard and the station are the spatially dominant element onto which a gridiron scheme of roads was grafted.

This model of colonization provided the ownership of the land in addition to the technical improvement land reclamation provided such as canals for irrigation and a water distribution network in the newly established villages, thus bridging land melioration and colonization as an asset. The interest into this area revamped during 1920s and on the spur of Italianness as a cultural construct it yielded a rural colonization fever that culminated in the foundation of a new town.

Villa Regina was founded in the Upper Rio Negro Valley between 1923 and 1924 on an area of 5.000 hectares on the former property of Manuel Zorrilla along the railway *Grand Ferrocarril del Sud* which linked the port of Bahia Blanca with the Andean regions of Patagonia. Villa Regina could well be considered the first new town founded by Mussolini (Sergi, 2012) because it was conceived just for Italian immigrants (mainly from northeastern regions) and was backed by the Italian government. The construction of the town was the result of the coming together of economic interest from the CIAC (*Compagnia Italo-Argentina di Colonizzazione* or *Compañía Ítalo Argentina de Colonización*) chaired by the engineer Filippo Bonoli (and Emilio Bignami) and the Italian government program of an organized rural emigration (Conti, 1928). The scope of the company was to make colonizers *owners of the land they toiled* – as stated in their charter – yet it appears clear that it was an attempt to mark the experiment with Fascist connotation as in that period in Argentina the concept of *italianidad* was disputed between fascist and antifascists.

From the point of view of rural colonization, CIAC in Argentina and ONC in Italy undertook similar activities in transforming the landscape through logging, tracing of the allotments, the building of farmhouses and fences for animals. In the early years CIAC granted loans to the Italian peasants according to the extension of the plots which varied between 10-15 hectares.

According to some interviews that voiced the memories of local population (Zanini, 2000), CIAC and local population contributed to the buildings that defined the public core of the new town; the national school, the Church and the cemetery along with places for social gatherings like the *Sociedad de Socorros Mutuos* which after became the *Dopolavoro*¹². The collective activities that extolled Italianness were housed in an ad-hoc building facing the main square and as much as in the motherland *Dopolavoro* represented the gathering place for the Italian community. Its multifunctionality was declined in many ways and from 1927 to 1928 the space was used as *Doposcuola* where children would receive an Italian education after the official Argentinian one

¹² *Dopolavoro*, which could be translated as Worker's Club was a recreational building in Fascist Italy where many collective activities provided the social control people needed.

(Newton, 1995). The presence of a *Dopolavoro* building echoed the activities that same buildings house in the motherland, materializing abroad the staples of modern life. As recently argued by Bernhard (2016) once Nazi Germany searched for models of colonization, the Italian settlements in Africa served as a model. The “social integration” (including organized emigration) they seek for labourers was considered a modern achievement and the spreading of villages and towns with their own cores which clustered collective activities and essential facilities in each village.

Sergi, who studied the case of Villa Regina is persuaded that Argentina served as a good testing ground for the Fascist colonization which at the beginning did not embrace enthusiastically the establishment of colonies under direct control (Sergi, 2013).

Between the two World Wars, a sudden stop in the migration flows opened the third phase of the Italian migration to Argentina which could be described as the phase when the internal colonization experiences from Italy served as a model for the agrarian reforms in Argentina.

In comparison to other countries, Latin American economies experienced setbacks, which could possibly explain why European migration to Latin America dropped considerably after 1930 (Goebel, 2017). The reasons for that decreasing trend included factors such as the legislative restrictions adopted by certain Latin American states in order to prevent the immigration flow, and partially the policies of the fascist government regarding inner colonization.

During the period 1930-1943 there is a growing closure of foreign trade which drops from 24% to 19% of GDP in exports; from 25% to 15% in imports compared to the period 1925-1929, the last years of the economy oriented by the external market (Gómez and Ruiz, 2016).

The urbanization process that developed within the framework of the agro-export model provided a vibrant domestic market when the crisis of 1930 and the pronounced deterioration of trade triggered the transformation of Argentina’s productive structure. The economy finds its fulfilment in the supply of the domestic market and, from that moment, the import substitution industrialization set the course of the economy. In these years Argentina experienced a closure that had never happened until then. This unique condition and the simultaneous strengthening of the national identity will bring to a fast-paced change that will modernise culture, architecture and construction techniques eventually reaching experimentation in the rural world. We argue that when during the 1930s the issue of rural modernisation triggered architectural and urban debate when Argentina was at the conjuncture of autarchic economic policies and a growing interest in agriculture. Given a prominent presence of the Italian community in Argentina, we question if and how the ongoing internal colonisation in Italy has inspired such policies?

The different professionals and technicians involved in the rural development understood the problem of the design of colonies was technical, but also social-economic, and finally, physical-territorial associated with the urban.

In 1934, the CEA - Conferencia Económico-Agraria (Economic-Agrarian Conference) of the Province of Buenos Aires was held. The Conference had different sections that collected all the presented projects of national and regional colonization and several proposals for rural or urban-rural organization made up to that time. A few years later the conservative governor Manuel Fresco promised to give farmers the property of the land (Hora, 2018) and announced the foundation of the Autarchic Institute of Colonization of the Province of Buenos Aires to ensure compliance and enforcement of this initiative.

Modernisation started by downscaling the dimensions of big estates which lead to field allotments to be traced according to environmental and climatic conditions while for the construction of settlements feasibility and construction represented guiding criteria. In fact, different topographic and soil conditions, the need for efficient productive units (farms) depending on the type of cultivation and mobility contributed to outline the structure of colonies and villages more than any abstract scheme. The structural transformation of the rural landscape mainly targeted landed estates and tenant agriculture, but in parallel it raised farmer's preparation, improved his working conditions, and optimized the way for placing the products on the market. Mazza (2019) reports that, according to the Italian agronomist Campolieti, it is necessary "to form a new rural life, [...] a new mentality, a new agrarian class; technical applications are the accessory and will come second" (Campolieti, 1929). The Law 12636 of 1940 established the creation of the National Agrarian Council (CAN). The arguments that support its future actions coincide with those developed in the Economic-Agrarian Conference of 1934: highlighting the social function of property, improving rural production through its rationalization, establishing the rural population by making them owners of the land, subdivide large areas of land, and provide better living conditions for farm workers.

The period between 1934 and 1946 was one of the most significant for the development of rural Argentina, and According to Mazza (2019), architects and engineers were actively engaged in the physical reshaping of the rural territory. For instance, when in 1946 Antonio Manuel Molinari became the President of the CAN, the architect Julio Villalobos, Director of Planning within CAN, proposed the implementation of a plan for the colonization of 16,150 hectares closed to the city of Balcarce (Villalobos, 1946). Compared with its antecedents, the contents of this plan were really innovative, mainly by incorporating lifetime possession as a form of adjudication of the colony's lots, but also by proposing a system of self-government and self-administration of the same (Mazza, 2019).

Furthermore, this project by Villalobos is indicative of an increasing incorporation of the physical, organizational, and building problems of the rural territory into the disciplinary field of architecture. If in the case of the Institute of Colonization of the Province of Buenos Aires the architects' work within the institutional framework was limited to the design of buildings; conversely in the Plan for Balcarce, architect planned the rural space at territorial scale, and made it fully incorporated into the direction of promoting rural living conditions.

Mapping the cultural exchange between Italy and Argentina on rural modernization Colonia Balcarce and Pontine Plain.

In the previous paragraphs we have tried to highlight those projects of new settlements and rural colonies in the inter-war period defined one the main fields of exchange between Italy and Argentina. To chart the perimeter of this exchange and the main elements of affinity, we chose to compare two important examples of internal colonisation plans: the Pontine Plain near Rome (1926-1943) and the Colonia Balcarce (1946) near Buenos Aires. These two examples of territorial rural planning explore the multi-scalar approach and have some comparable features such as the importance of infrastructure, the hierarchical organisation of settlements, the functional schemes and the operating rules are the main terms of comparison.

Balcarce colony is located in the southeast of the Province of Buenos Aires, in a roughly 17 km long and 9,5 km wide territory. It is crossed lengthwise by National Route 226, an asphalted road that links Mar del Plata to Balcarce and continues towards Tandil.

The National State expropriated land in this area around 1944 and started to outline future allocation and use by building roads and tracing plots. As soon as the expropriations proceeded, technicians started to carry out studies to determine the most profitable use of the land.

In 1946, architect Julio Villalobos proposed the implementation of a plan for the colonization of approx. 16,000 hectares closed to the city of Balcarce. Based on favorable agrological conditions and its proximity and accessibility to large centers of consumption, Villalobos envisioned a project that embraced the different design scales, including the division into plots to be used for farming, the architectural proposal for farmhouses and the identification of public cores along the roads.

In his scheme, the land was not given as property to the grantees but as a lease for life. The type of farming planned did not correspond to the usual livestock-agricultural farming in the region.

Subdivision of plots was based on a system of radial grouping, with triangular-shaped plots and at the tip of each wedge clustered farmhouses and villages around an infrastructural crossing.

The position and organisation of rural cores identified with grouped farmhouses, and it changed according to the topography of the terrain and the type of road crossing by; equally important was the irrigation scheme which led the cores to be located on highest point in order to exploited natural

runoff and avoid flooding of buildings and farms. The layout of local roads allowed the access from each farm to the main roads but also to the town or to other villages.

The radial shape of the roads was designed to set within each district a hierarchy of traffic going to its own village. Villalobos believed the social impact of this layout was great as the farms located in converging wedges would have facilitated settler's contact with close neighbours and with people from other villages that would have inevitably crossed the new cores once moving along the roads. The grouping and easy intercommunication provided a natural opportunity for such spontaneous cooperation during production and sale, which was not common for the isolated settler.

The expectations that accompanied this Project were very ambitious. In the words of Villalobos: "The application of these new principles to the State's colonisation work will make it possible to successfully implement plans for rational demographic redistribution by making the permanent settlement of large numbers of permanent settlement of a large and prosperous peasant population and the consolidation of the family, thus opening up a broad and natural channel for the relief of the congested big cities and the productive development of the countryside" (Villalobos, 1946).¹³

Despite this innovative character the project by Villalobos was never implemented, and in 1947 another project by the engineer Hugo Acquaroni was definitively approved. This project envisaged the division into 186 rectangular lots of land of varying surface area to be used for agricultural farms. Thanks to the publication of Villalobos' project in the magazine *Arquitectura* (issue 306, 1946) with an article written by the architect, it's possible to analyse the main features of the project for the Colonia Balcarce and relate them to those identified in the Pontine Plain.

We know that the project of the Pontine Plain reclamation and colonisation reached Argentina as early as 1934 and that, from that moment, other references reached-out Argentine countryside.¹⁴

It is plausible that Villalobos was familiar with the Pontine Plain and that he had studied its main characteristics. At the same time, thanks to the collected documents, we also know that the same plan for the Pontine defined some of its management and organisational characteristics based on the experiences of internal colonisation prior to the 1930s (the case of Villa Regina among others) in a constant back and forth movement between the two countries.

In the attempt to compare these two plans, we have identified some recurring features that allowed us to highlight similarities and differences.

¹³ "La aplicación de estos nuevos principios a la obra colonizadora del Estado, permitirá abordar con éxito planes de redistribución demográfica racional, al convertir en efectivamente realizable el afincamiento permanente de numerosa y próspera población campesina y la consolidación de la familia, abriendo así cauce amplio y natural para el desahogo de las grandes ciudades congestionadas y el desarrollo productivo del campo".

¹⁴ For example see "Austral 2: Plan Regional, Urbanismo Rural y Vivienda" where Grupo Austral published the Fermè Radieusse project by Le Corbusier.

A first element of similarity concerns the engineering approach to the colonisation of the rural territory. In the case of the Pontine Plain, it is well known that land reclamation project dating back to 18th century was both a premise and an integral part of the whole operation.

The land transformation aimed to make former marshes habitable and productive and guarantee people who live there the possibility of farming a land rendered productive through the division into fields and irrigation. The project for the Balcarce colony is based on the same functional assumptions, and Villalobos's division into triangular plots responds to requirements relating to the efficiency and productivity of the fields: "The triangular-based layouts I propose have sufficient elasticity to allow the parcel to fit the terrain, while producing easily measurable plots that are easy to enclose and use"¹⁵ (Villalobos, 1946). We find the same approach in previous projects and in the colonisation of the Rio Negro region where Cipolletti's land reclamation work is the foundation for the development of the entire region.

The second aspect concerns the position of the settlement, which is always close to the main infrastructures. The conformation of the settlement may vary, but the presence of the infrastructure remains an element of territorial configuration. Alvarez Palau writes about the importance of infrastructure in the Rio Negro region: "The construction of the railway line linearly articulated a group of localities that grew by building plots of land adjacent to the stations. This growth was limited by the characteristics of the terrain and the adverse climate. As a result, small-scale irrigation works were started around the main towns to increase the irrigated area. The infrastructure networks were ultimately the instruments of territorial configuration"¹⁶. In the case of both the Pontines and Balcarce, infrastructure played a fundamental role. It is a supportive infrastructure that links the various centres in a network of relations that guarantees the survival of the entire rural region from both a productive and a social point of view. One of the features that Bardi (1934) underlined about the Pontine Plain was the importance of the roads and the hierarchical rationale they set for organization of the agro-urban settlement and the overall territory. The colonisation scheme made of roads, appeared to be superimposed to the network of canals and ditches representing the hydraulic system. In the Pontine Plain pre-existing roads, called *migliare*, were integrated and prolonged in order to connect the new-settlement cores with bigger regional roads (Appin Way, Pedemontana and Litoranea) stretching in-between big cities such as Rome and Terracina.

The interesting aspect that the two cases have in common is the use of roads as element that bridge private and public functions, link different rural centres, and eventually shape the core of settlements.

¹⁵ "Los trazados sobre base triangular que propongo poseen suficiente elasticidad para permitir el ajuste del parcelamiento al terreno, a la vez que producen predios fácilmente mensurables y de cómodo cercamiento y utilización"

¹⁶ "La construcción de la línea férrea articuló linealmente un conjunto de localidades que crecían al lotear los terrenos anejos a las estaciones. Crecimiento que se vio limitado por las características del terreno y la climatología adversa. Por ello se iniciaron a pequeña escala obras de irrigación entorno las principales localidades que tenían por objeto incrementar la superficie de riego. Las redes de infraestructura fueron en definitiva los instrumentos de configuración territorial" (Palau, 2012).

Unlike Spanish examples, where roads were used by the farmers to go to work in the fields, here home and workplace are overlapped so that farmers can manage his private life and work with more freedom. This aspect is strongly linked to the adoption of private property (in Balcarce's case life tenancy) which establishes a much more direct relationship between the worker and the fruits of his labour. As Villalobos states in 1946: "In the case of the concession holder for life, production may be directed primarily to the production of his own livelihood, and, in addition, he may trade in a variety of more valuable products than can be obtained from seasonal crops".¹⁷

The third interesting element that emerges from this comparison between the Pontine Plain and Colonia Balcarce projects (again Villalobos' project) deals with two different urban structures: a rectangular grid in the Italian case and a triangular, radial grid in the Argentine case.

These are two different configurations that respond to territories with different topographical characteristics. According to Villalobos "the habit of practising rectangular layouts start in our country, as in others, from the ease with which the land discovered and dominated by the conquerors could be divided up, without any visible concern for the characteristics of the soil itself or for the functionalism of the resulting grid".¹⁸

As mentioned, Villalobos chose to adapt the settlement structure to the physical characteristics of the area to make it as functional as possible for the needs of the working population.

In spite of the difference between Pontine plain and Balcarce concerning the division of the plots, the type of soil and cropping, in both cases the settlement is the key for the stabilisation of rural population; modern farms and above all the creation of centres where the productive units (house and fields) converged to fulfil collective and social needs impacted the participation in public life of its inhabitants thus representing a modernising factor¹⁹.

It is interesting to note that variations in Balcarce's urban structure could be considered an evolution of the 'Italian model' or a different version of it, which therefore develops and enriches the imported model.

The projects we analysed both addressed rural depopulation from the point of view of ownership considering the emigration to cities a consequence of negative land tenure. Rural tenants, who depended on a lease contract fixed according to the interest of the owner of the land, had very little interest in improving housing and this limited possibility of settling permanently in a place, making the redistribution of land through contracts the starting point for a permanently populated countryside able to compete with the city. In the case of Balcarce we are faced with management through a life

¹⁷ "En el caso del concesionario vitalicio, la producción podrá encaminarse ante todo a la producción del propio sustento y, además, podrá comerciar variados productos más valiosos que los que es posible obtener en cultivos estacionales." (Villalobos, 1946)

¹⁸ "El hábito de practicar trazados rectangulares surgió en nuestro país, como en otros, de la facilidad con que podían dividirse los terrenos descubiertos y dominados por los conquistadores, sin preocupación visible por las características propias del suelo ni por el funcionalismo del reticulado resultante". (idem)

¹⁹ This kind of participation would not have been conceivable in a settlement based on latifundium, because the inhabitant were usually excluded from social and public life as they seasonally migrated.

tenure concept in which the state retains ownership of the land. It was believed that a land-owning rural middle class was a kind of guarantee of progress for the region and for the country. The idea was to stimulate medium-sized farms that could constitute an economic unit, understood as the amount of land that could support a family and be fully exploited with family labour dedicated to various activities, generally more intensive than those of the family. In the case of the Pontine Plains, the situation evolved in a different way. In parallel with the land reclamation operations, Fascism continued to expropriate the land of large landowners, who owned thousands of hectares that were mostly uncultivated either because marshy or wooded areas or large grazing fields.

Conversely, In Italy ONC provided settlers with houses and allotments as part of a contract that meant a loan to be paid-back over time through the agricultural work (money and agricultural products).

Again, these are two different approaches that, while maintaining their own principles and peculiarities, find their point of contact in the desire to reform and improve the living conditions of the inhabitants of the colonies by giving them the ability to invest in their own future and in the growth of their families and their activities: "If the life tenant settler uses this money for productive plantations or facilities, he will prosper much more and, in addition, he will leave his heirs with much more capital than he invested" ²⁰(Villalobos, 1946).

Conclusion

Despite the lack of a clear-cut evidence, a document or a report, the hypothesis that the pioneering experiences of agrarian colonisation, hydraulic reclamation, and settlement organisation sedimented in Argentina influenced the project of Italian internal colonisation may be plausible.

Starting from the assumption that colonization of rural areas in the 20th century represented the testing ground for the application of modernist urban planning principles, we identified in the replicable settlement model a clue to follow in order to better understand the exchanges between Argentina in Italy. By disentangling the complex - and not linear - network of exchanges we selected those features that identified the existence of a settlement model by comparing the physical evidence of projects and built settlements; in particular we understood that the exchanges led to implementation or transformations to adapt to a specific context.

In Argentina, the big extension of land, the varied landscape, the poorly inhabited mainland and the presence of different European communities yielded an experimentation in the rural colonisation

²⁰ "Si el colono concesionario vitalicio emplea ese dinero en plantaciones o instalaciones productivas prosperará mucho más y, de añadidura, dejará habilitados a sus herederos con un capital muy superior al que invirtió."

projects; we argue that Villa Regina in the Rio Negro Valley represented a forerunning experiment where the settlement core contributed to the building of identity.

By narrowing down our research to the Pontine Plain and the area of Balcarce, both designed by architects, we identified the Pontine Plain as a model for territorialisation made to underpin the Italian ruralization and Balcarce an implementation. In the Pontine Plain, reclamation created a homogeneous artificial landscape which partially favoured the implementation of a scheme starting from an abstract layout²¹. In Argentina, on the contrary, the variable conditions of topography, climate, and a virtually virgin territory to call for a more adaptive scheme and for different architectural typologies within the same colonisation area.

The new rural centres encompassed essential technical and collective needs by installing the essential traits of modern life into distant or reclaimed areas. The unbuilt project for Balcarce and the built colonies in the Rio Negro valley provided an unprecedented and modern kind of life for rural contexts, very similar to that Italians could find in the new-towns or villages in Agro Pontino.

A common feature between the two examples is the layout and its operating scheme which rely on infrastructure. The settlement developed usually in between a centre, where the main public functions could be found located in close proximity to long-distance routes and outside areas dedicated to agricultural production and farmers' houses. In reshaping the living conditions of peasants to modernise the rural world at large-scale, architects advocated for principles such as hygiene, standardisation, adaptability to a mechanized agricultural production and a harmonization to the environmental condition of each context. It was a model based on clear principles: it was functional, economical, modifiable, and exportable.

Through this comparative work we concluded that is crucial to reconsider agrarian modernisation in the first half of the 20th century as junctures which sanctioned the multidisciplinary approach of architecture and planning. In these projects the roles of technicians such as engineers and agronomists were combined with that of architects in a manner that the disciplinary boundaries are rather blurred. In the search for efficiency and modernity, these projects impacted the social fabric of the time, bringing to the fore the issue of social engineering as a key aspect of the change.

Incidentally, the social aspect was tied to the issue of land ownership. Driven mainly by changes in the field of agrarian policies and economy, land redistribution influenced the planning and architectural design.

Given the multidisciplinary trait of rural modernisation we question if other disciplines could possibly fill the gap in documenting more effectively the round trip between Argentina and Italy; we believe

²¹ The Fascist reclamation scheme grafted onto the pre-existing scheme designed by Rappini in 1777 as a reformist project guided by Pope Pius VI. The grid-network of roads and drains (*migliare*) followed a regular span which stemmed from the roman milestones excavated along the Appian Road.

that by analysing other projects of internal colonization in Argentina we could find stronger evidence to reaffirm our hypothesis.

Still many questions remain open but through the documents and projects we analysed and within the disciplinary boundaries of architecture and urban design, we can assume that the phenomenon of rural colonisation and territorial development represented one of the most important elements of modern planning after First World War. The systematic and efficient nature of this phenomenon suggests that modernity developed in parallel outside big cities and in the shadow of famous modernist architects. In quantitative and dimensional terms, the transformation of the rural territory and rural settlements represented at once experimentation and concrete implementation of territorial schemes applied to different contexts.

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