

# Modernist Schools in the New Rural Landscape of the Pontine Plain



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**Abstract** Based on a research and fieldwork carried out in the framework of the EU-funded research project MODSCAPES (Modernist Reinventions of the Rural Landscape, funded under HERA JRP III call “Uses of the Past”, Oct. 2016–2019), this contribution focuses on the case study of the Pontine Plain. In the 1930s, as part of Mussolini’s ruralization policy, the vast swampy area was converted into a neatly designed countryside hinged on a hierarchy of villages and medium-sized towns such as Littoria (1932), Sabaudia (1934), Pontinia (1935), Aprilia (1936) and Pomezia (1938). How did architecture contribute in shaping a new “place identity”? This chapter questions the role of schools as fundamental collective buildings, helping the settlers put down roots. School buildings offered architects scope to experiment with new spatial layouts and architectural expressions aimed at the widest possible understanding.

**Keywords** New towns · Civic centre · Rural and urban school · Architectural composition · Typological experimentation

## 1 The Schools in Agro Pontino: An Introduction

The history of the Agro Pontino in the Twenties and Thirties, extensively investigated by a multidisciplinary literature, is interesting for studying the modern relationship between city and countryside. Moreover, it is worth to be investigated to understand the typological and figurative characters of the public buildings which are organized in a highly hierarchical territorial system and to build the new civic centers where the inhabitants can start new social behaviors.

The school building plays a fundamental role within these new civic centers, conceived as spaces for the collectivity. Also the school is able to emphasize, through its own figuration, that particular relationship between cities, farms and countryside is created in Agro Pontino by the fascist urban policy. In the end, the school is also

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particularly interesting to study the territorial transformation of this area since it anticipates the strategy of Integral Reclamation. The school, in fact, since the early twentieth century, became the fundamental tool to fight malaria and to improve the living conditions of the population, thanks to the initiatives promoted by A. Celli, A. Fraentzel, G. Cena, S. Aleramo, A. Marcucci and D. Cambellotti.<sup>1</sup>

Following this line of thinking, the school building is here investigated by comparing two main architectural typologies built in the area. The first is the rural school, a forerunner of the concept of Integral Reclamation, and the other is the urban school, one of the main protagonist in the New Towns' civic center.

### 1.1 *The School in the National Debate During the Thirties*

To investigate the role of the school in the transformation of the Pontine territory, it is useful to contextualize the issue within the Italian debate started in those years concerning both for the improvement of education and the development of the architectural features of a modern school building. This debate is reflected first in the manuals dedicated to the construction of school buildings. One of the first manuals is the one written by L. Secchi published in 1923. The text is particularly interesting because the author, since the very introduction, well summarizes the condition of the Italian school, highlighting the state of degradation of school buildings in the middle and small urban centers. He wrote:

If the soul of people is formed and shaped through education, the importance of the building that welcomes youth is immense [...]. The new [modern] concepts were able to increase interest around the school. But although this impulse was strong and powerful, [it] was limited to large cities. So, while the big city had its own typical school building, the middle and small town continued to build without applying the new hygienic and pedagogical concepts (Secchi 1923).

At the beginning of the Twenties, the fundamental role played by education in the creation of new behaviors was recognized. It was also clear how architecture and figuration of space could positively contribute to the education of masses.

The role of school, understood as a tool to create a new society, is again highlighted by M. Piacentini in the preface of the catalogue entitled *Schools*, written by G. Minucci in 1936. The text, defined by Piacentini himself as a *School buildings "Code"* (Piacentini 1936), collects and analyzes "good examples" of modern school buildings in Italy and abroad.

Between Secchi's 1923 publication and Minucci's publication in 1936 (Minucci 1936), the architectural research of a new typology for school buildings achieved an

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<sup>1</sup>Angelo Celli (1857–1914), hygienist; Anna Fraentzel (1878–1958), German nurse and philanthropist; Sibilla Aleramo (1876–1960), writer and poet; Giovanni Cena (1870–1917), poet and journalist; Alessandro Marcucci (1876–1968), educationalist; Duilio Cambellotti (1876–1960), artist. They were all members of the "Comitato per le scuole dell'Agro Romano e Pontino" (Committee for the farmers' schools of the Roman and Pontine Agro) founded in 1904.

important stage. Indeed, in 1933, at the *V Triennale* in Milan,<sup>2</sup> the pavilion by A. Annoni and U. Comolli called “*La Scuola 1933*” was presented. In this experimental building all the characteristics of the modern school were exhibited. The critic A. Pica wrote in 1933 about this topic:

The contact with nature, favoured by the width of the windows [...]; the variety of forms, realized in the furnishings; the order, reached and supported without the help of symmetries; the abstraction of forms, volumes and wall decorations; they are all elements ordered to awake and excite the imaginations of children’s intelligences (Pica 1933).

Among the afore mentioned, two other manuals should be pointed out: one by Del Debbio (1928) which investigates the new typology of the ONB<sup>3</sup>; the other one is the text by P. Carbonara published in 1946 where, once again, the typology of the school building evolves in order to adapt to new *methods of active learning* (Carbonara 1946).

Under the impulse of pedagogical research—Montessori method started to be applied in those years—paralleled by architectural research, numerous laws were issued to define the new educational system and the architectural configuration of the school (Mugnai 1984). The two main laws related to school building were issued between 1925 and 1939.<sup>4</sup> During this time the schools in Agro Pontino represent an important experimental laboratory around the theme of dualism between city and countryside, although being “minor” architectural examples if compared to the national architectural research on the subject.

## 1.2 *The Rural School from the “Hut-School” to the Masonry Building*

The long story of the reclamation in Agro Pontino is concluded in the Twenties and Thirties of the twentieth century by the fascist regime under the guideline of A. Serpieri’s “Integral Reclamation” strategy that finds its roots into the “Internal Colonization” process.

The whole territory was hierarchically organized following a triad system based on the relationship city–village–farm.<sup>5</sup> In the cities and villages, the public buildings constituted the *core* of the settlements, highlighting the relation both with city and with the countryside.

The school building, among other public buildings in the new settlement *core*, is certainly the typology that actually played a fundamental collective role, even before the start of the fascist project (an example is the Concordia village built around the

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<sup>2</sup>Esposizione internazionale delle arti decorative e industriali moderne e dell’architettura moderna (International exhibition of modern, decorative and industrial arts and modern architecture).

<sup>3</sup>Opera Nazionale Balilla (National Young fascist Organization).

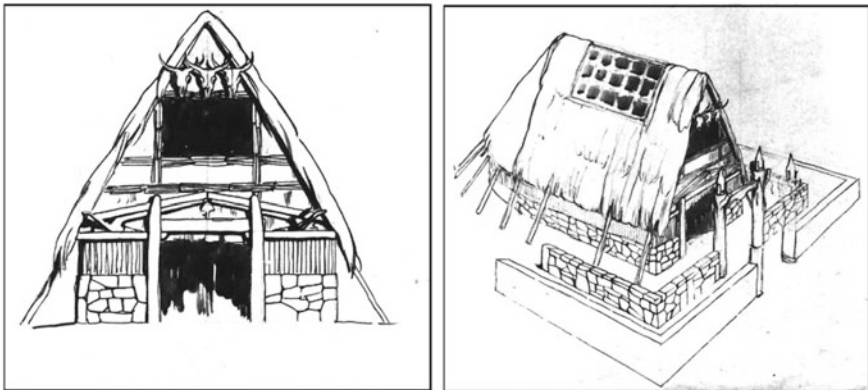
<sup>4</sup>D. M. May 4, 1925 “*Rules for the compilation of school building projects*” and R. D. L. May 27, 1939 n. 875 “*Bottai’s Law*”.

<sup>5</sup>See the Article by Piccinato “*Sabaudia Urban Meaning*”.

“Hut-school”). As a matter of fact, the history of school buildings in Agro Pontino begins in the first years of the twentieth century with the “Committee for the schools for the farmers in Agro Romano and Pontine marshes” activities. The Committee started a work of alphabetization, leading the “Cabin-school” and the “Hut-schools” to be housed in the first masonry buildings, thus adapting teaching spaces to the different needs of the farmers (Campagna 2001).

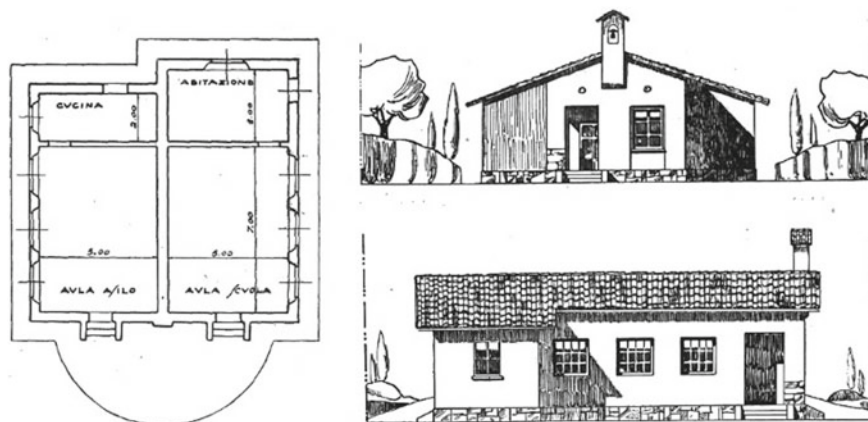
This evolution yielded a great national success leading the Committee to exhibit their activity in 1911 at the “Esposizione internazionale delle Industrie e del Lavoro” (International Exhibition of Industries and Labor) organized to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Unification of Italy. Here the Hut-School and the Cabin-School both designed by D. Cambellotti were exhibited. The Hut-School (Fig. 1) built mainly in wood, following the tradition of the *lestra*<sup>6</sup> in Agro Romano, was a traditional hut with a circular central plan to be adapted to the needs of education. The Cabin-School, an itinerant structure suited to the continuous movement of the marshes inhabitants, was made in wood but covered with impermeable cloth. Both the structures served as facilities for the teaching of new agricultural techniques in order to create a renewed culture of the land.

The first two rural schools in masonry, that “constituted the models for the school buildings that arose in the surrounding villages” (Secchi 1923), were built in the villages of Colle di Fuori and Casale delle Palme. The school in Colle di Fuori (Fig. 2), built between 1912 and 1914, according to a project by A. Marcucci, D. Cambellotti and F. Pierpaoli, consists of two classrooms: one for elementary school, the other for kindergarten; a kitchen and a small teachers’ apartment (Secchi 1923). The same typology was developed in 1933 for the school in Casale delle Palme (Fig. 3). The building was made of two parts: the first was a single floor volume with two classrooms, and a porch in the front end used for outdoor activities; the second



**Fig. 1** D. Cambellotti, Project for the Hut-School, International Exhibition of Industries and Labor (Agro Romano Exhibition), 1911 (Cardano 1980)

<sup>6</sup>Typical temporary hut in Agro Romano and Pontino.



**Fig. 2** A. Marcucci, D. Cambellotti, F. Pierpaoli, One room school typology: plan of the prototype; elevation of the school in Colle di Fuori, 1912–1914 (Secchi 1923)



**Fig. 3** Rural school, Casale delle Palme, 1922. Redrawing based on the image published in Secchi (1923)

part was a two-storey volume with, on the ground floor, the kitchen, the pantry and the principal’s office and, on the first floor, the teachers’ apartment.

As anticipated, these schools were used as a model by the ONC,<sup>7</sup> not only for the construction of the rural schools in the villages but also for the construction of the so-called *Farm-Schools*, strategically located within the territory outside the urban centre.<sup>8</sup>

The elementary unit of the first masonry schools is recognizable in the rural schools in villages (Fig. 4). Here the typological experimentation of rural schools

<sup>7</sup>Opera Nazionale Combattenti (Veterans’ National Organization established in 1917).

<sup>8</sup>It is worth mentioning as Farm-Schools: Murillo (Littoria-Scalo); Santa Feticicola (Piscinara); Uccellara (Tor Tre Ponti).



**Fig. 4** A. Pappalardo: above, Rural school in Borgo Hermada, 1934. (Redrawing based on the materials stored at ACS, Opera Nazionale Combattenti, fondo progetti, 19/24 *Componenti dei progetti*: 3. *Scuola rurale*, Roma.); below, Rural school in Borgo Montenero, 1935 (Redrawing based on the materials stored at ACS, Opera Nazionale Combattenti, 32/2 *Borgo Montenero. Disegni*, Roma) (1. Classroom; 2. Changing room; 3. Teachers' room; 4. Library; 5. Teachers' apartment)

led to the organization of the space for outdoor activities mainly dedicated for agronomy practice. In fact, since 1914 most rural schools started to be equipped with “experimental fields” and “model school gardens”.

### 1.3 *The Urban School and the Opera Nazionale Balilla*

In addition to the rural villages, five new towns were built in Agro Pontino: Littoria—in the present-day Latina—(1932), Sabaudia (1934), Pontinia (1935), Aprilia (1936) and Pomezia (1937–1938). Here the public buildings, playing a fundamental representative role, were “*commensurate with the entire population of the open city (urban nucleus and dependent rural area)*” (Frezzotti and Pasqualinucci 1937). These buildings were specifically arranged in order to give life to the main urban cores: the political and administrative centre was surrounded by the city hall, the party house—Casa del Fascio—the workers’ club—OND—and the cinema-theatre; the handouts centre was surrounded by the church, the maternity and childhood institution and the ONB; and the agricultural core was surrounded by the market and the headquarters of the ONC (Piccinato 1934). The articulated system of the squares was abandoned for the last two new towns—Arilia and Pomezia—where the 2PTS group—C. Petrucci, M. L. Tufaroli, E. F. Paolini and R. Silenzi—developed the rural villages “urban typology” with all the public services of representation organized around a single centre. The urban projects for the Agro Pontino are therefore an important laboratory on one hand for the development of a “technical-scientific” method related to urban planning and, on the other hand, for the typological and figurative experimentation. We can easily say that the territory in Agro Pontino shows the contradictions between “old” and “new” and between different possible architectural languages, through all its complexity and articulation.

The school localization changed according to the settlement type. In the villages the school overlooked the central square, directly contributing with the other public buildings in the creation of the unitary civic centre, whereas in the cities, the school building is adapted to the different experiments in urban planning. Moreover, the typological variations, adhering to the laws’ activity program,<sup>9</sup> depended on the proximity between the school and ONB, an institution which from 1926 to 1937 was in charge of the youth physical education (Teja 2005). Indeed, a characteristic that combines and distinguishes urban schools is the space of the physical education. Therefore, the gym can be used as one of the interpretation keys in understanding the typological evolution of the school building. In Littoria, built few years after the birth of the ONB, the building of the “Casa del Balilla” is a self-standing building, set aside from the school (Todaro 1932). On the contrary in Sabaudia, Pontinia and Aprilia the school cluster is built in physical proximity and architectural design affinity with the building of the ONB. Two examples by O. Frezzotti, are useful to

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<sup>9</sup>According to the D.M. May 4, 1925 the schools in the urban centers had to be equipped with: 10 classrooms, medical room, director’s house and library.

understand this relationship. Built following the first master plan—designed by the same Frezzotti—the school in Littoria is built around the edges of a block according to a vision still linked to the urban tradition of the nineteenth century. In Sabaudia instead, the ONB–school cluster is located in the site designated by the master plan designed by G. Cancellotti, E. Muntuori, L. Piccinato and A. Scalpelli, setting an urban system independent from the two main squares of the town hall and the church. The school complex is clearly one of the largest blocks within the urban centre, equipped with all the outdoor spaces necessary for open-air activities.

The school building of Aprilia (Fig. 5), designed by architect C. Petrucci, is another emblematic case. Here the school complex consists of pre-school, elementary school and ONB, and with the church it builds one of the main blocks of the urban centre.

The pre-school finds its roots in the rural school typology: the two classrooms on the ground floor are sided by the body of services that houses on the lower level, the kitchen, the refectory and the principal's office, and on the upper level, teacher's apartment. The elementary school, organized with an L-shaped plan, has two levels. On the ground floor there are five classrooms—arranged along the main axes and overlooking two gardens edged by the refectory and the church—the principal's office and the canteen; on the upper floor there are five other classrooms and the library. The ONB volume, accessible from the school only on the ground level, is distributed on two floors: on the lower floor there are the changing room, the clinics and the gym, from where it is possible to reach the garden organized according to the guidelines described by E. Del Debbio; the upper floor, accessible by an independent stair, housed the administrative offices, the conference room and the terraces overlooking the gym.

In Pomezia, after the end of the ONB as an institution in 1937, the school complex will again find its own independence, albeit associated with the building of the GIL (Italian Youth of Littorio), an organization that would have replaced the ONB.



**Fig. 5** C. Petrucci, Project for the Aprilia school building, 1936. On the left: Ground floor plan. (1 gym, 2 lobby, 3 clinics, 4 offices, 5 changing rooms, 6 showers, 7 classrooms, 8 refectory, 9 pantry, 10–11 managing offices, 12 guardian apartment, 13 dormitories, 14 kindergarten classroom). On the right: First floor plan: (1 gym, 2 secretariat, 3 presidency, 4 administration, 5 conference hall, 6 classrooms, 7 library, 8 management offices, 9 teachers, 10 bedroom, 11 living room) (Carbonara 1946)



### ***1.4 The Schools in Agro Pontino: For a Possible Future***

Studies over the last decade start to pay attention to the renovation of the existing school buildings considering that more than 50% of schools were built before the Seventies. The Italian draft budgetary law of 2019 for its part provides, for the Provinces in Regions with ordinary statute, specific financial funds (from 2019 to 2033) in order to improve safety and quality of space in school buildings. According to the good maintenance practices of public and private buildings, before applying the law it is necessary to collect data and start a survey with a deep analysis of the artifacts. Particularly, for the schools in Agro Pontino, taken into account in this paper, it is important to remember that the buildings were built both before and after the reclamation process according to the social needs related to specific moment of the Italian history (for instance, after the Italian Unity, the schools were built to spread the Italian language and during the Thirties the autarchy gives priority to national materials). Furthermore, the schools in Agro Pontino, from the smallest—spread on the territory and nowadays almost abandoned—to the medium-size buildings—built in villages and new towns—are important documents to be preserved. The schools, in fact, belong to a cultural heritage able to highlight the historical value of the events that have followed over the time in this area, from the ancient times till nowadays.

The different dimensions and localizations of the schools buildings in Agro Pontino require a single-case re-use approach, knowing that the conservation of the rural school is more complicated. Indeed, the original urban schools building, despite some expansions and transformations remained practically intact, unlike to what happened to rural schools which are today in ruins and abandoned, scattered all over the countryside. Two exceptions are represented by the rural school in Casale delle Palme and the one in Latina Scalo. These two examples have been either restored or transformed—as in the case of the school in Latina Scalo—into municipal library.

Today, these buildings spread around the Pontine territory could recover new educational and training purposes for very localized residential settlements. In a territory, where public mobility is marginal, these buildings can be possible places to re-create a network of primary schools or spaces where training the new rural classes for (immigrants or not). This network would make it possible to recover these buildings that are now archaeological traces of an original alternative urban system in contrast with the cities development.

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