

# ITALIAN MODERN ARCHITECTURE AN EUROPEAN ECHO IN ROMANIAN ARCHITECTURE

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Fig.1. Giovanni Guerrini, Ernesto Bruno La Padula and Mario Romano and The Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, E.U.R Rome, 1938 - 1943 - Picture taken by the author

**Abstract:** *The interwar period was characterized by a complex atmosphere, in which two major architectural trends prevailed, the trend of avant-garde and the one of return to order.*

*In the Italian world, a significantly modernist approach contributed through its futurism, to the universal modern culture, architecture played a major role, as a unique mythical expression of eternity. The Italian world found a mostly consistent response to the call of the "futurist" and M.I.A.R. (Italian Movement for Rational Architecture). Following this demand, genuine young architects undertook enthusiastically these new conditions, and provided Italy with a challenging architecture as a state art. The Romanian architects were faced with the same intricacies and, depending on their sensitivity and talent,*

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*expressed their support for a type of architecture in which the national element as a sign of tradition opting either for the “modernism” of the world of the so-called plutocratic Western democracies or for the “modernism” of the Italian rationalist classicism.*

*Interesting is the way in which the searches of the Italian architecture were reflected in our architecture, obsessed, like the Italian one, to find an original way to solve the dilemmas between the national forms and the international ones.*

*The Romanian architectural culture of the 1920s, thanks to the Romanian School in Rome now Academia di Romania, shared the tumultuous life of the Italian architecture in the interwar period.*

**Keywords:** *architecture, culture, interwar, Romanian, Italian, national, futurist, rationalist, fascist, modernism, state art.*

The interwar period was characterized by a complex atmosphere, in which two major architectural trends prevailed, the trend of avant-garde and the one of return to order. In the Romanian architecture these trends were enriched by a search for national tradition, generating the “neo-Romanian” style, in conjunction with the search for a new modernity, either via the iconoclast avant-garde or via the longing for a kind of “classicism,” avoiding the deviation of neoclassicism.

In the Italian world, which approached modernist issues via Liberty or Style loreale, as the national version of Art Nouveau, and significantly contributed, through its futurism, to the universal modern culture, architecture played a major role, as a unique mythical expression of eternity. The legitimacy through architecture has been an obsession of all political regimes, either democratic or fascist, Nazi or Bolshevik. The three versions of socialism resulted from revolutions: the corporatist, the national-socialist and the Bolshevik one, were characterized by the constant attempt at making from architecture “State Art” <sup>1</sup>.

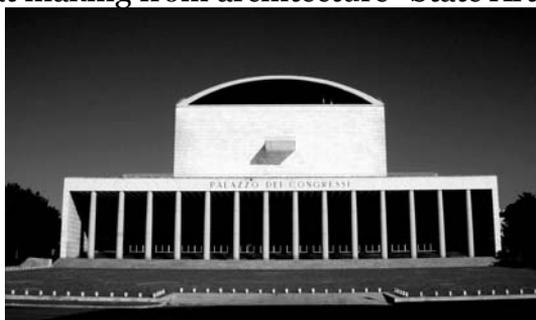


Fig. no.1. The “Palazzo dei Ricevimenti e dei Congressi”, Adalberto Libera, E.U.R. Rome 1938- 1954. Picture made by author

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<sup>1</sup> Vasilescu, Sorin, (1989), *History of Modern Architecture*. Bucharest: Ion Mincu Institute of Architecture, 34.

The Italian world found a mostly consistent response to the call of the “futurist”<sup>2</sup> Mussolini: “for a new fascist Italy, I need a modern architecture.”<sup>3</sup> Following this demand, a genuine constellation of young architects undertook enthusiastically to offer, under specific conditions, an often exceptional creation, avoiding, however, to completely surrender to the power that, like any other power, had - consciously and unconsciously - the obsession of architecture as state art. The most famous example is the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana or “Colosseo Quadrato”, that become the symbol par excellence of this architectural style.



Fig. no.2. Giovanni Guerrini, Ernesto Bruno La Padula and Mario Romano and The Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, E.U.R Rome, 1938 – 1943. Picture made by autor.- Award-sectional image of architecture - architectural photography category in 2013 at Bucharest Architecture Annual.

The Italian interwar architecture, of the “Fascist Era”<sup>4</sup> was obsessed with the idea of inner continuity, a continuity perceived as a bridge between an aggressive tradition and rationalism, which, notwithstanding any linguistic-formal similarities with the European movement, had a clear individuality. Essentially, the “linguistic” searches of Italian architecture had a deep layer, consisting then and now still of the attempt at finding

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<sup>2</sup> Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1909), “Futurist Manifesto,” *Le Figaro*, Paris, 20 February.

<sup>3</sup> Duilio Susmel and Giorgio Pini (1973), *Mussolini, l'uomo e l'opera: Dall'impero alla repubblica (1938-1945)*. Venice: La Fenice, 1973, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Vasilescu, Sorin (2011), *Italiana Fascist Architecture*. Bucharest: Design Arhitext Foundation, 45

some satisfactory, quantitative-qualitative proportions between the terms: Italian, national, futurist, rationalist and fascist.

From a stylistic point of view, this attempt of the Italian interwar architecture may be characterized as an attempt at reaching not the neoclassicism, “the sole coherent architectural language,”<sup>5</sup> as Zevi called it, but classicism. The classic simplifies in an essential manner or a proletarian Doric manner, but not like the Lunacearski’s obsession: “the Soviet people have a right to columns,”<sup>6</sup> but based on a legitimate metaphysical longing for the act of creation, that is, for “classicism.” There were serious attempts, resulting in major Italian achievements, modest German ones and asymptomatic ones, leaning towards kitsch, in the Soviet world.

The Romanian architects were faced with the same intricacies and, depending on their sensitivity and talent or ideology, expressed their support via words and sometimes deeds for a type of architecture in which the national element as a sign of tradition is present more or less, opting either for the “modernism” of the world of the so-called plutocratic Western democracies or for the “modernism” of the Italian rationalist classicism and rather rarely for the German one, but never for the Soviet model.

What is particularly interesting is the way in which the searches of the Italian architecture were reflected in our architecture, obsessed, like the Italian one, by finding an original way to solve the dilemmas between the national forms and the international ones, as the predecessors sought for and sometimes succeeded in finding, within the complex relation between Art Nouveau and the neo-Romanian style. Some architects chose the French rationalism, others got close to the German one, promoted by Bauhaus, while others to the Italian one.

In the Romanian architectural culture of the 1920s, thanks to the Romanian School in Rome – which became Accademia di Romania, founded by Vasile Parvan – a genuine intellectual constellation appeared, formed of, among others, the architects Grigore Ionescu, Nicolae Lupu, Richard Bordenache, Nicolae Cucu, Horia Teodoru, as well as the sculptor Mac Constantinescu, sharing the tumultuous life of the Italian architecture in the interwar period. These people had witnessed the fierce “ideological” disputes taking place in the Italian world and, when returning to our country, they were imbued with the spirit of these searches, which in the 1930s were not only Italian searches, but also searches of an entire world passing through a “crisis” from almost all the points of view.

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<sup>5</sup> Zevi, Bruno (1950), *Storia dell'architettura moderna*. Torino, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Lunacearski, Anatoli (1932), *Sobornik Architektura SSSR*. no. 1-2, Moscow.

Some leading representatives of the Romanian culture noticed the realities of the Italian interwar art. Among them was Petru Comarnescu, who stated in “The Ideas of the Age and Spirituality” that: “*The style starting to develop requires an agreement between culture and politics (...) The complete balance, reflecting the joy arising from activity and the joy of living a continuously developing life. This élan can be found in neoclassic creations – which, via art, anticipate the style of the future culture – through the achievements of the Italian politics*” (*Action and Reaction*, no. 1, Bucharest 1929).<sup>7</sup> Vintila Horia in “The Fascist Miracle” stated: “*It is impossible to separate these days the notion of art from the one of fascism (...) the fascist order is foremost a spiritual one*” (*Thinking*, XVI, no. 8, Bucharest 1938).<sup>8</sup>

If Paris was the pole for orientation, with the modernization of all the sectors of the Romanian physical and spiritual life, the presence of Italy among the interests of the Romanian architects led to a number of remarkable achievements, unfortunately not sufficiently capitalized on, because of the stifling over half a century of all the expressions of Romanian life, either physical or spiritual, in the name of socialist realism.

In spite of the premature “severance of relations” with the “cosmopolite” architecture of the “putrid” Western world, a series of works of the former students of the Romanian School stand witness to a victory in a field in which failure is a rule.

Besides the old Duiliu Marcu, that wished to play a similar role to that of Piacentini as regards the king Carol 2<sup>nd</sup>, there were a number of young architects, who, immediately after returning from Rome, started a prestigious career, both professionally and academically.

Grigore Ionescu, Richard Bordenache, Nicolae Cucu and Nicolae Lupu promoted a new architecture, in which one may hear the echo of their Romanian “adventure,” a new modern architecture perceiving the neo-Romanian style, which ended its glorious life cycle, as a different intellectual preoccupation. The works of these architects stand living proof of a high quality approach, within which the architectural product is by no means inferior to the source and the images of their works are edifying on these lines.

One of the most interesting achievements was the Toria sanatorium in Covasna (1933-1934), the work of the architect Grigore Ionescu, who, after war, had built less and less, his style not observing the vision promoted by the communist regime. This modernist architect became a great professor, the author of a valuable work as a historian of the Romanian architecture,

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<sup>7</sup> Comarnescu, Petru, (1929), *The Ideas of the Age and Spirituality*, in *Action and Reaction*, Bucharest, no. 1, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Vintilă, Horia, (1938), *The Fascist Miracle*, *Thinking*, XVI, no. 8, Bucharest, 14.

the most important being the monumental: *Architecture in Romania over the Ages*.<sup>9</sup>

Nicolae Cucu was one of the most valuable personalities of the Romanian architecture, author of some emblematic works as regards the architecture in Bucharest. Perhaps his most representative creation was the residential building at 5 Splaiul Independentei St., made during 1939-40, a pertinent proof of the way in which he assimilated, during his training in Rome, the perennial values of the Italian architecture. In a similar language, perfectly integrated on the site and with remarkable finishes was also the Pension Office of the actors of the national theaters and of Romanian opera houses at 27 G.ral Berthelot St., also in Bucharest. After years of being rejected for extra-architectural reasons from the significant life scene of architects, echoes of his perfect mastering of the classicism language could be heard even when he had to be just a co-author of two projects created by some architects liked by the communist regime.

All the great architects training at Accademia di Romania in Rome were, if not directly persecuted by the new realist-socialist world, at least marginalized, being actually eliminated from the scene of the significant architectural production, being more or less victims of a permanent political pressure.

A better status than the architect Cucu had his training colleague Richard Bordenache, author in Rome of some major studies, quoted even these days as reference literature as regards certain chapters in the history of architecture. Author of a remarkable work both in terms of size and quality, he succeeded, after creating some major profoundly modern works, such as the ASIT Palace at 8 Mihai Eminescu St., near Romana Square, to continue his career after war as well, using his vast classical and modern culture to make some neoclassical works, in response to the new "social order."

Besides these students of the Rome School, other architects from this generation, who did not train directly in Eterna Urbe, were more or less marked by the interwar Italian architecture and this influence would be often beneficial for their works.

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<sup>9</sup> Ionescu, Grigore, (1982), *Architecture in Romania over the Ages*. Bucharest: RSR Academy Press.



Fig. no.3. Città universitaria, M.Piacentini, Rome 1932-1935 and The War School, Duiliu Marcu, Bucharest 1937-1939 - Picture made by autor for the coferece “Reflecton of the modern Italian Architecture in the Romanian Architecture”, arch.Matei Luca Stoian at The Swedish Institute in Rome, Italy in 2014

This list of architects is a long one and includes some of the most valuable works of some remarkable representatives of Romanian modernism, such as Horia Creanga, Bubi Georgescu, Constantin Iotzu, George Cristinel, Florea Stanculescu, Constantin Mosinschi and especially Duiliu Marcu.

Duiliu Marcu, who reached old age, was the author of a vast work, which, in his most fecund period, was a remarkable proof of the manner in which the qualities and limits of classicism were reflected. The most important works of Duiliu Marcu, reflecting the Spirit of EUR, are Baneasa Royal Railway Station, the War School, the Ministry of Exterior – the Victoria Palace and the Ministry of Transport.

Expressed in works responding to “similar questions” and not lacking imagination or creative mimesis, this particular period in the Romanian architecture marked strongly an entire generation and resulted in perennial works, therefore fulfilling its historical mission. This was possible due to a fecund contact with the Italian world, which maintained its virility after Renaissance and Baroque and within modernism, which, as any biped body, has a leg in avant-garde and another in classicism. The Italian and Romanian architecture did not use the neoclassicism for a completion on the lines of a totalitarian architecture, but tried, in a given political context, to define a new concept: the concept of classicism. This concept that, in essence, has nothing to do whatsoever with neoclassicism, is a natural corollary of any avant-garde current, only if able to maintain its dynamic, dialectic character, namely to remain itself in order to become something else immediately, therefore doing everything needed so that movement does not become self-sufficient, fossilized, in short classicized. Classicism, as a form of the tragedy of the absolute, is the legitimate longing of any creation process.

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