What's wrong with the Rural House? Fascism and Myth in the Photography of Giuseppe Pagano

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Giuseppe Pagano, Haystack in the Roman Agro, 1935. From Paolo Bollati and Carlo Bertelli, eds., Annali 2: L'immagine fotografica (Turin: Einaudi, 1979), 603.

Before Bernard Rudofsky's Architecture Without Architects (MoMA, 1964), there was Giuseppe Pagano's Exhibition on Rural Architecture, held at the VI Milan Triennale in 1936.[1] Built around an unprecedented photographic campaign of rural dwellings across Italy, much of it shot by Pagano himself, the exhibition was long hailed in historiography as an "anthropological inquiry," a paradigm shift away from style, received canons and capital "A" architecture, towards the humble, largely overlooked built environment of the countryside. After 1945, this reading intensified as interpretations of the project became closely entwined with Pagano's own tragic trajectory: his break with fascism in 1943, his participation in the Resistance and death in Mauthausen in 1945. Seen through this redemptive lens, leftist postwar scholars reappraised the rural exhibition as a profoundly ethical endeavor—a realist search for the collective reasons for architecture, as an antidote to fascist bombast, and as a precursor to later neorealist sensibilities.[2] These readings collectively contributed to elevating Pagano and the rural project into figures of critical resistance, a narrative this essay seeks to complicate.

In light of renewed interest in the so-called "vernacular" and in rural contexts, this essay reconsiders Pagano's influential exhibition and catalogue through a different and lesser-known lens: his 1939 photographic series and photobook Il Covo, depicting Mussolini's editorial office, "the

1 Cesare De Seta, among many other scholars, has argued that the MoMA 1964 exhibition should be considered an ideal derivation and extension of Pagano's. See Cesare De Seta, ed., *Giuseppe Pagano Fotografo* (Electa, 1979), 8; Cesare De Seta, "Giuseppe Pagano Fotografo," in *Il Destino Dell'architettura. Persico Giolli Pagano* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1985), 236–71.

2 Giulio Carlo Argan saw in Pagano's interest in the rural dwelling not primitivism but an earnest search for "collective reasons of architecture" against the regime's ideological distortion and bombastic rhetoric. (See Giulio Carlo Argan, "Valore Di Una Polemica," in *Progetto e Destino* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1965), 235.) Filiberto Menna read the research project as a "veritable anthropological survey" in pursuit of an ethical, precapitalist paradigm. (See Filiberto Menna, *Profezia Di Una Società Estetica* (Milano: Editoriale Modo, 1968). 109–113.) Manfredo Tafuri interpreted it as a precursor to the postwar "neorealist attitude." (See Manfredo Tafuri, "Architettura e Realismo," in *L'avventura delle idee nell'architettura: 1750–1980*, ed. Vittorio Magnano Lampugnani (Milan: Electa, 1985), 123–145.) For Vittorio Gregotti, Pagano's notion of functionalism represented a call for a return to the "naturalness" of building, an ur-Architektur, and, later, to notion of "architecture without architects." (See Vittorio Gregotti, *L'architettura del realismo critico* (Bari: Laterza, 2004), 84.)

lair," the mythical birthplace of fascism as a movement. When considered alongside Il Covo, Pagano's celebrated "anthropological" inquiry appears as a more ambivalent aesthetic, a double movement combining equal parts realism and myth. A close reading of his photographs, his writings in Casabella, and the exhibition catalogue *Architettura rurale italiana* suggests that Pagano's realism tended to abstract fragments of the real from their social and historical conditions, erasing conflict and contingency to produce archetypical, almost mythical forms and gestures. This reframing complicates the presumed continuity with the postwar Neorealist aesthetic and situates Pagano's visual practice within a broader reflection on fascism's capacity, in recent philosophic scholarship, to transform "reality" through myth.[3]

MISE-EN-SCÈNE OF A MYTH

Milan, 1939. Giuseppe Pagano enters the courtyard of 35 Via Paolo da Cannobio, also known as Il Covo—"The Lair"—of Benito Mussolini, former headquarters his newspaper Il Popolo D'Italia. Rolleiflex in hand, he shoots a dozen photographs, as if rapidly ascending the somber early-twentieth-century building. The first image frames the wrought-iron gate, open, with barbed wire perched in the foreground, and beyond it, the frosted French windows inscribed with "The People of Italy." The camera advances into the courtyard, frames the balcony balusters, the French windows, points to up the narrow shaft where a cluster of flags dangles, and then climbs the dim stairwell, shooting obliquely into the interiors of the courtyard. On the first balcony: a small door to the editorial office, commemorative plaque. The doors open onto a short flight of stairs. Beyond is Mussolini's editorial office; through a semi-closed door, the camera focuses on the desk: light from a window to the left spills across a crumpled issue of Il Popolo, a hand crank telephone, an inkwell, a hand grenade. On the back wall is a black pennant with a skull gripping a dagger between its teeth. The camera then turns to nearest window and looks out. The window opens slightly, then fully, the camera frames the roofs above, the terracotta tiles, gutters, a balcony with flowerpots and kitchen towels hanging to dry, a sliver of sky.[4]

The photographs Pagano took in 1939 were made more than two decades after the events they sought to commemorate. Starting from 1914, the building housed the editorial offices of the newspaper Il Popolo d'Italia, founded by Mussolini after his dramatic break from the Avanti! of the Italian Socialist Party.[5] The movement first coalesced around these cramped rooms in Milan's working-class Bottonuto quarter, described as a place of poverty and marginality—"One has to pinch their nose….It's a sewer, a cesspool…Filth seeps from the walls."[6] The building doubled as a militarized "den," as the newspaper-movement enlisted the armed assistance of WWI shock troops, the arditi, [the daring ones], who would launch attacks against socialists and defend the premises, camping out in the basement, a dark cave-like room stashed with rifles and covered with macabre mottos and graffiti.[7]

3 See, for example, Roberto Esposito, *Il Fascismo e Noi. Un'interpretazione Filosofica* (Turin: Einaudi, 2025).

4 A sequence of fifteen of these photographs was published by Cesare De Seta in the 1979 catalogue of his Bologna exhibition. See De Seta, *Giuseppe Pagano Fotografo* (1979), 98–115; also included in Daria De Seta, ed., Giuseppe Pagano. *Vocabulario de Imàgenes. Images Alphabet* (Valencia: Lampreave & Millàn, 2008), 223–227; more recently discussed in Flavia Marcello, ed., *Giuseppe Pagano: Design for Social Change in Fascist Italy* (Bristol: Intellectual Books, 2020), 271.

5 Mussolini began as a socialist journalist and became the editor of the *Avanti!* In 1914 he split from the Socialist Party, around his support of Italy's entry in WWI, and he founded *Il Popolo d'Italia*. The newspaper and its headquarters acted as the first infrastructure of the fascist movement.

6 The Bottonuto is described as a dense and labyrinthine quarter located just behind the Duomo. See Paolo Valera, *Milano Sconosciuta* (Milan: Tip. Editrice Lombarda, 1898), 105. Translation by the author.

7 The arditi, ["the daring ones"], were elite shock troops created in 1917 during the First World War, trained for rapid assault and close-quarter combat. Their emblem was the skull-and-dagger, which was coopted as fascism symbolism. After 1918, many former arditi gravitated to fascist paramilitary squads, while others aligned themselves with socialist and anti-fascist formations (*Arditi del Popolo*).

By 1920, however, *Il Popolo* had already left Via Paolo da Cannobio. As soon as the movement gained momentum—and crucially, funding, from landowners and industrial elites—its self-styled anti-bourgeois, anti-establishment newspaper relocated to an elegant neoclassical palazzo at Via Lovanio 10, in the decorous surroundings of Via Moscova.[8] Pagano himself redesigned the new offices in 1934 into a modern newsroom of linoleum floors, built-in storage, sleek wooden desks, and tubular-steel chairs.[9] Meanwhile between 1919 and 1939, the original rooms at Via Paolo da Cannobio were turned into an open air shrine of fascist lore. Mussolini's former office was fully reconstructed, with all its symbolic paraphernalia—the telephone, papers, inkwell, pistol, hand grenade—first at the *Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution* (1932–34) and later in the *Galleria D'Arte Moderna in Rome* (1937).

Giuseppe Pagano, Entrance to no. 35 Via Paolo da Cannobio; Giuseppe Pagano, Mussolini's desk.
From *Il Covo di Via Paolo da Cannobio* (Milan, 1939), 11; 65.

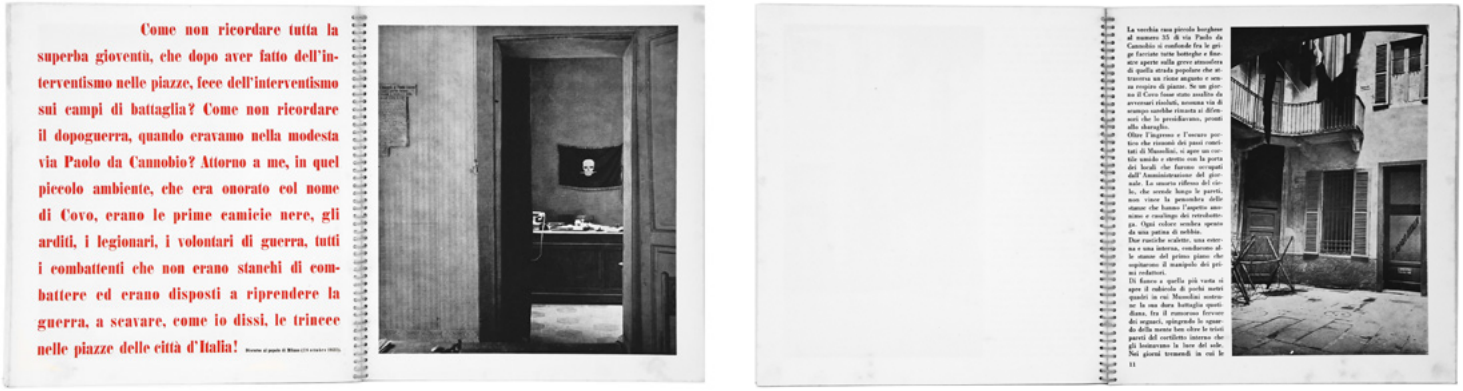
On November 1, 1939, the site was formally entrusted to the School of Fascist Mysticism, founded in 1930 by university activist Niccolò Giani. Initially marginal, the school gained traction in the late 1930s, when fascism, at its apex of power, sought to revive its own revolutionary mythology. Pagano served as the school's artistic director and taught courses on the socialist and revolutionary foundations of fascism; his commitment was such that he volunteered for war service in 1941 alongside his colleagues.[10] On occasion of the handover, Pagano designed *Il Covo*, a commemorative photobook, today extremely rare and known mostly among antiquarians. The book reconstructs, according to the fascist narrative, the six-year between November 15, 1914—the founding of *Il Popolo d'Italia*—and November 15, 1920, the creation of the Fasci Italiani di Combattimento. Pagano not only took the photographs but also designed the graphic and typographic layout. Thus, Il Covo shares several hallmarks of his modernist publications, from *Casabella* to the *Quaderni della Triennale*: square format, spiral binding, fold-out sheets, bold typefaces and a continuous text-image layout. Issued in 400 copies as a strenna [gift] for the regime's

8 On the funding from landowning elites, see Lando Bartolotti, "La Proprietà Edilizia e Il Fascismo," *Studi Storici Anno 12*., no. 4 (1971): 718–78. Note that the *Popolo d'Italia* moved locations for the third time in October 1942, into purpose-built headquarters, the Palazzo dell'Informazione, located at piazza Cavour 2, in Milan.

9 See Giuseppe Pagano, "Tre Stanze al 'Popolo d'Italia,'" *Casabella* 13, no. 84 (1934): 24–25.

10 On Pagano's involvement with the School of Fascist Mysticism, see Marcello, *Giuseppe Pagano: Design for Social Change in Fascist Italy*, 60; 82; 140; 271. See also Antonino Saggio, *L'opera Di Giuseppe Pagano Tra Politica e Architettura* (Dedalo Libri, 1984), 7–14.

closest supporters, the book has a studied coarseness: doubled "Japanese style" pages, exposed twine stitch binding, a rough hemp slipcase emblazoned with the fasces symbol, and—in the second edition—a white cover is stamped with a hand-drawn skull and dagger echoing the basement graffito "*Me Ne Frego*" [I don't give a damn].[11]



Giuseppe Pagano, Mussolini's desk in the editorial office of *Il Popolo d'Italia*; Giuseppe Pagano, Entrance to the editorial offices in the courtyard. Spreads from *Il Covo di Via Paolo da Cannobio* (Milan, 1939), 64–65; 14–15. Courtesy Libreria di Frusaglia.

Giuseppe Pagano, Interiors of the arditi's cellar hideout; Giuseppe Pagano, Internal stairwell connecting the ground-floor shipping rooms with the first-floor editorial offices. Spreads from *Il Covo di Via Paolo da Cannobio* (Milan, 1939), 72–73; 68–69. Courtesy Libreria di Frusaglia.

Pagano's photos of "The Lair" are entirely unlike the images of the official exhibition reconstructions: not stiff nor didactic, but cinematic and vivid. As Tim Benton notes, the photographic sequence is a promenade architecturale that emphasizes the revolutionary character of the space.[12] Through oblique angles, tilted views, and harsh contrasts, Pagano's sequence appears to have been shot live while the original events were unfolding, or, as Benton remarks, "It puts you in the mind of Mussolini, what he saw from the window, how he arranged his work space…"[13] It is striking, therefore, to find out that the shoot was anything but spontaneous. As Franco R. Gambarelli, who assisted Pagano, later recalled, the architect's intervention had gone so far that "it was difficult to identify how much of it was authentic and how much was procured for the occasion," in terms of the furnishings, the objects, and even the smallest details. "The architect

11 See Giacomo Coronelli, "Tre Luoghi Reali e Imaginari Della Milano Del Ventennio," *ALAI: Rivista Di Cultura Del Libro*, no. 4 (2018): 101–16. The book had a complex publishing history: the first edition, in 1939, printed in 400 copies; the second expanded edition (Feb 1940), in 2000 copies; the third in 10,000 copies for general distribution. Key additions to the 1940 edition include eight pages of new photographic contributions and selected quotations (after p. 73) and the inclusion of the "Topographical maps of the Covo" on special folded paper at the end of the book.

12 Tim Benton, "Giuseppe Pagano, Polemic Photographer," in *Giuseppe Pagano: Design for Social Change in Fascist Italy*, ed. Flavia Marcello (Bristol: Intellectual Books, 2020), 271. I agree with Benton's view that the series carries the specific message about the humble origins of early Fascism that aligns with Pagano's initial faith in the movement.

13 Benton, 271.

had taught us to age the papers with tea, because they looked too new."[14] The result was no objective documentary, but, as Giorgio Grillo observed, a partial mise-en-scène, a staged reconstruction of a historical episode, artfully made to feel current and alive. The disjunction becomes even sharper when set against the political and urban transformation of the intervening years: Mussolini's office at the time, far removed from those cramped and dimly lit rooms, then occupied the monumental marble-clad interiors of Rome's Palazzo Venezia;[15] while the surrounding dense historical fabric of the Bottonuto quarter was being dismantled under the regime's program of urban renewal and large-scale sventramenti [clearings].[16]

Plan reconstruction of basement, ground and first floors of "the lair;" Giuseppe Pagano, View of the entrance to no. 35 Via Paolo da Cannobio. From *Il Covo di Via Paolo da Cannobio* (Milan, 1940), 91–92; 61.

Like the photographs, the book itself constructs a rhetoric of realist marginality. The spaces are described as "bare and wretched," "humble," and "humid and narrow."[17] At the same time, the book elevates these spaces into the setting for heroic origins: full-page historical photographs, bold red captions, handwritten letters, newspaper clippings, portraits of protagonists depicted injured or dead, and macabre memorabilia, such as the backpack of a fallen ardito. In the expanded 1940 edition, the final pages reproduce reconstructed floor plans of the basement, ground floor, and

14 See Giorgio Grillo, *Il Libro Fotografico Italiano* 1931–1941 [The Italian Photobook 1931–1941: Experimentation, Industry, Propaganda] (Ravenna: Danilo Montanari Editore, 2020), 227; citing *All'ISA di Monza*, 103.

15 German photo-reporter Felix H. Man shot a 1931 report for the *Müncher Illustrierte* titled "A Day in the Life of Mussolini," capturing *il Duce* inside his office in Palazzo Venezia, a small stiff figure dwarfed by the monumental marble-clad interiors. See Felix H. Man, *Mussolini at Palazzo Venezia in Rome* (1931), Städel Museum Digital Collection, https://sammlung.staedelmuseum.de/en/work/mussolini-at-palazzo-venezia-in-rome. For a discussion on Felix H. Man, see Federica Di Castro, "Il Fascismo e La Guerra," in *Giuseppe Pagano Fotografo* (Milan: Electa, 1979), 98.

16 Initial clearances of the Bottonuto quarter began under Fascism as part of the urban renewal campaigns known as *Risanamento.* After heavy bombing of Milan during the Second World War, postwar developments in the1950s replaced these buildings with modern office and commercial buildings, including those on Via Larga and Via Paolo da Cannobio. In a photograph from 1952, the last few standing structures are still visible at the intersection of Via Paolo da Cannobio and Via Bottonuto. See Urbanfile, "Milano, Bottonuto: Il cuore perduto di Milano," *Urbanfile Blog*, July 12, 2016, https://blog.urbanfile.org/2016/07/12/milano-bottonuto-il-cuore-perduto-di-milano/.

17 *Il Covo di via Paolo Da Cannobio [The Lair of Via Paolo Da Cannobio]* (Edizione della Scuola di Mistica Fascista Sandro Italico, 1939), 15.

first floor. By omitting the thickness of the party walls and rendering the interior outlines, the plans read like the burrowed chambers of a cave or catacomb. Contemporary newsreels announcing the official transfer of the premises reinforced this aura. Amid fanfare and crowds, announcers emphatically described the "Covo" to be both "newsroom and trench," a place where "ink pen and weapons stood equally ready." These "bare walls," viewers are told, "speak of memories enhancing the raw solemnity of rooms, now sacred to the eternal reverence of Italians."[18]

In this light, the bareness of the *Il Covo* photographs can be read not as a sign of Pagano's growing disenchantment with fascism but, following Tim Benton, as a sincere appreciation of the "revolutionary" early days.[19] Their fusion of avant-garde technique and hieratic austerity recalls the aesthetic forged two decades earlier, during Gabriele D'Annunzio's "Impresa di Fiume" (1919–20), long understood as an ideological laboratory for fascism.[20] Pagano, an eighteen-year-old Istrian irredentist and war veteran, participated directly in that episode, joining D'Annunzio's convoy of rebel soldiers in the occupation of the city, an experience that, as Cesare De Seta notes, shaped his intellectual and political formation. In the *Charter of the Carnaro*—half-constitution half-artistic manifesto—D'Annunzio set out an architectural ethos in §63, "The Aediles," calling for a return a to the simplicity of "the old days," the "somber elegance of our fathers" found in humble tools—"the simplest sign passed down from generation to generation engraved or painted on the cradle, the loom, the spinning wheel, the chest, the yoke," objects that carried for D'Annunzio, "religion," "human mystery," and "the imprint of man's life."[21] At the same time, the charter called for the construction of "a new architecture" in iron, glass, and concrete.[22] Seen in this light, Il Covo—part modernist reportage, part ancient reliquary—crystallizes the contradictory fusion at fascism's origin: suspended between Futurist modernity and mythic-archaic aura.

AGAINST THE CANON: POLITICS AND AESTHETICS OF THE RURAL HOUSE

Milan, 1934. Five years before photographing the Covo, Pagano, newly appointed director of Casabella, was actively involved in the debates that pitted modern "Rationalism" against the pseudo-classical architecture of architects such as Marcello Piacentini and Gustavo Giovannoni. Defending modern architecture against accusations that it lacked historical grounding, Pagano's early writing argued that antecedents of functionalism were clearly discernible even in the ancient past. In 1931, he exhorted readers to look beyond the "well-preserved basilicas," to the humbler insulae of Pompei and Ostia where a clear functionalism was at play.[23] In 1932, he railed against Piacentini's historicist reconstructions of Via Roma in Turin and praised instead the ruins of Porta Palatina—Roman military architecture, which he describes as a rhythm of "stones upon stones,"

18 Istituto Nazionale Luce, "Prima sede del "Popolo d'Italia" (il covo di via Paolo da Cannobio) è affidato alla Scuola Mistica Fascista," newsreel, November 1, 1939, Archivio Storico Luce, https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000022898/2/prima-sede-del-popolo-d-italia-covo-via-paolo-cannobio-e-affidato-consegna-dal-segretario-del-partito-alla-scuola-mistica-fascista.html. Translated by the author.

19 Federica di Castro and Gabriella Musto both suggest the images of il Covo convey a sense of "detached disapproval" [*distaccato disappunto*] of Pagano towards the regime and that their "bare scenography" [*scarna regia*] expresses an internal conflict within the architect. However, I would agree more with Tim Benton's view when he writes, "These photographs strike me as a sincere appreciation of Mussolini's early career as a 'revolutionary.'" Benton, "Giuseppe Pagano, Polemic Photographer," 271.

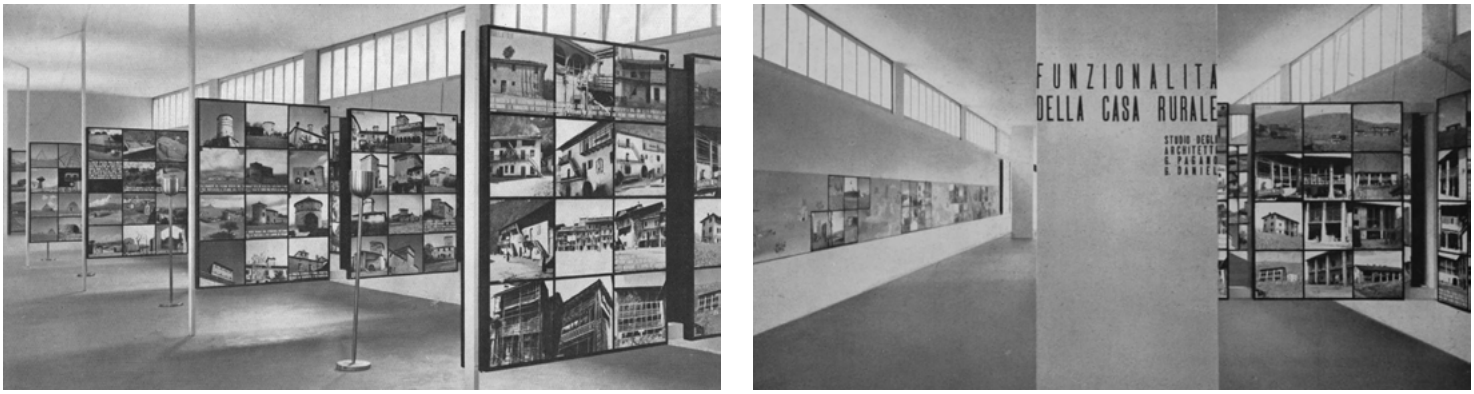
20 Cesare De Deta notes Pagano's direct involvement in the "Impresa di Fiume" and argues the experience played a crucial role in his political and intellectual formation. De Seta also suggests that Pagano was likely familiar with the *Charter of Carnaro* and with its section on architecture, "The Aediles." See Cesare De Seta, *Pagano. Architettura e Città Durante Il Fascismo* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1976), XII, XIV.

21 Gabriele D'Annunzio, "La Carta Del Carnaro," in *La Carta Del Carnaro nei testi di Alceste De Ambris e di Gabriele D'Annunzio*, ed. Renzo De Felice (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1973), 35. Translation by the author.

22 Ibid.

23 Giuseppe Pagano, "Architettura Moderna Di Venti Secoli Fa," *La Casa Bella*, no. 47 (November 1931): 14–19.

solemn yet not grandiose, no-nonsense, "structural like a clenched first," and "like homemade rye bread, with no icing sugar."[24] In another article that year, he polemicized against the canonical works of architectural history—"the usual export partridge sauce with the great Palladios and Michelangelos and Sangallos and Sansovinos…"—and outlined instead a new constellation of references: late-Medieval and Romanesque works, all monolithic, tectonic, and unadorned.[25] His polemic charged these contrasts with moral value: against deceitful ornamentation he opposed frank simplicity; against aesthetic whim, the virtues of need and function. Pagano's search for an anti-canonical paradigm culminated with his research project on rural dwellings, begun in 1934, crystallized in 1935 in the pages of Casabella, and materialized in the 1936 sixth Milan Triennale Exhibition of Rural Architecture [Mostra dell'Architettura Rurale].[26]



Views of the Exhibition on Rural Architecture at the VI Triennale di Milano, 1936.
Adapted from *Architettura rurale italiana* (Milan: Hoepli, 1936) and *Casabella*, no. 104 (1936).

Spreads from Giuseppe Pagano and Werner Daniel, eds., *Architettura rurale italiana* (Milan: Hoepli, 1936), 32–33; 18–19.

The exhibition's central claim was that rural architecture across the peninsula embodied a primordial functional clarity and could serve as the foundational precedent for modern Rationalism. To demonstrate this, the Mostra, co-curated with Werner Daniel, assembled one of the most comprehensive photographic records of rural buildings produced in 1930s Italy, largely based on Pagano's own photographs and supplemented by re-

24 Giuseppe Pagano, "Architettura Polemica Dell'epoca Romana," *Casabella*, no. 76 (1934): 34–35.
25 Giuseppe Pagano, "L'insegnamento Degli Antichi," *Casabella*, no. 80 (August 1934): 2–3.
26 The exhibition was held between May 30 and October 31, 1936. The full title of the exhibition, as noted in *Casabella* in issue no. 104, was *Architettura rurale nel bacino del Mediterraneo* or *Rural Architecture in the Mediterranean Basin*.

gional collaborators.[27] Foregoing chronological order, the display grouped building typologies into climate-zone clusters: Alpine, Apennine, Southern, and Insular.[28] The core of the display consisted of four vertical panels on the right side of the room; each panel carried twelve square black-and-white photographs arranged in a gridded formation, with only minimal accompanying text. The installation was notably restrained: white walls, a repetition of square prints; a gridded layout, mounted on slender metal uprights, produced a unifying visual framework across highly diverse regional material.[29] The accompanying catalogue, *Architettura rurale italiana* (Hoepli, 1936), followed the same visual and typological logic: a square book with seventy-three pages presents dense gridded sequences of square black-and-white photographs, with a running text below.

Pagano was not alone in this interest. Attention to rural dwellings had been rising across Europe in the early 1930s. Avant-garde architects and artists, such as Josep Luís Sert and the Spanish GATEPAC group, brought the Ibizan farmhouse to the center stage as early as 1932, praising its functionality, logical adaptation to use, and the standardization of its forms. In 1934, Sert himself called them "houses without style and without architects," built not by design, but by use, shaped by climate, material and custom.[30] The abstraction and clean lines of its white cubic masses appeared strikingly contemporary, an ideal a-stylistic, a-historical precedent for modern architecture, so much so that in 1935 the mouthpiece of the Spanish Rationalist group, *AC: Documentos de Actividad Contemporanea*, dedicated two entire issues to rural houses and crafts. The same impulse was visible in the French modernism scene: the 1935 issue of *L'Architecture D'Aujourdhui* featured essays Charlotte Perriand defining "the peasant house" as "the direct extension of the daily gestures, without intermediaries."[31] Across Europe in the early 1930s, as avant-gardism encountered increasing resistance and crisis, the rural house emerged as an attractive paradigm, at once archaic and modern. Pagano, as director of Italy's leading modernist journal, was likely aware of these debates, yet his own research took on a far more systematic and operative register.

Already in 1935, in his first article on the topic, Pagano framed the interest in rural houses in explicit political terms. In "Case Rurali" [Rural Houses], in the February 1935 issue of *Casabella*, he wrote that the topic had become urgent after Mussolini, at the 1934 Quinquennial Assembly of the Regime, declared the state of rural houses "a highly important problem of national interest," calling for state intervention on four-million farmhouses he claimed were in a state of decay, needing repair, reconstruction, or demolition. "It is time to take care of the farmers' homes," Mussolini proclaimed, "if we want to keep them working on the land." Repairing or rebuilding rural houses was framed as the only means to halt what he termed "nefarious urbanization" and to bring back those "deluded and disappointed by the mirage of urban wages and easy entertainment."[32] Thus, beyond an avant-garde fascination, Pagano's project

27 The exhibition photography was supplemented by collaborators: in particular, Pier Niccolo Berardi provided twenty-four images of Tuscan farmhouses; Roberto Pane provided information and photographs from Ischia and Capri; Gino Chierici contributed a photographic collection of Apulian *trulli*; Lorenzo Chiaraviglio and Angelo Scattolin supplied material on rural dwellings in Lazio and straw roofs in Veneto. See Bilò, *Le indagini etnografiche di Pagano*.

28 Michelangelo Sabatino, "Documenting Rural Architecture," *Journal of Architectural Education* 6, no. 2 (2010): 92–98. Sabatino notes that compared to earlier attempts to gather and document rural architectures, Pagano's exhibition followed a non-chronological structure and had an unprecedented and aestheticizing emphasis and use of photography

29 See the discussion by Michelangelo Sabatino in "Documenting Rural Architecture." For more on the theatricality of fascist exhibition in the 1930s, see Diane Ghirardo, "Architects, Exhibitions, and the Politics of Culture in Fascist Italy," *Journal of Architectural Education* 45, no. 2 (1992): 67–75.

30 Perhaps the first piece of writing to use the phrase "architecture without architects." See José Luis Sert, "Arquitectura Sense 'Estil' i Sense "arquitecte," *D'ací i d'allà*, no. 179 (1934).

31 See Charlotte Perriand, "L'habitation Familiale, Son Développement Économique et Social [Family Housing, Its Economic and Social Development]," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* (1935), 25–32. Perriand writes: "[Lais maison paysanne est] le prolongement direct des gestes journaliers, sans intermédiaire." Translation by the author.

32 From Mussolini's speech at the second Quinquennial Assembly, March 18, 1934: "There are approximately 3,390,000 isolated rural homes, of which 142,298 are uninhabitable and must be demolished, 450,000 are habitable but require major repairs…" Translation by the author. See Benito Mussolini, "Assemblea Quinquennale del Regime, 18 marzo 1934," in *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, ed. Edoardo & Duilio Susmel, vol. 27 (Florence: La Fenice, 1958).

was responding to a large-scale governmental program of ruralization. Between 1931 and 1935 ruralization and major investment in public works had been the regime's attempt to counter the violent economic recession sparked by 1929 economic crash and related housing crisis. Central to this effort was the *bonifica integrale*, the reclamation of the Pontine Marshes; and—after "draining off the muck," as Ezra Pound put it—the rapid construction of new towns, such as Littoria, Sabaudia, Pontinia, and Aprilia on reclaimed land.[33]

Mussolini threshing the first wheat in Littoria. From *Il Quadrante*, September 1933.

This political program was given strong visual form by the propaganda campaign, the "Battle for the land," in which Mussolini appeared directly participating in agricultural labor bare-chested at the threshing machine, scythe in hand, or driving a tractor to trace the boundaries of a new town.[34] Rural life, its events, products, and buildings were turned into highly charged political and rhetorical arenas. Yet, "regrettably but not surprisingly," Pagano remarked, "architects are considered too proud for such trivial matters."[35] The vast program of repair and re-building had fallen almost entirely on the *geometri* [surveyors] and engineers who, Pagano complained, treated the problem as purely technical, neglecting its inherent aesthetic and formal dimensions. Architects, he argued, had to set aside their pride, if only to offer the *geometri* "an education in simplicity" and guidelines for intervening in a "world so delicately artistic," which would otherwise be left to "just a vulgar use of mortar and cement."[36] His

33 In the first five years of the 1930s, the Fascist state invested massively in public works, for new towns such as Sabaudia, but also for the Florence train station, the Case del Fascio, marine colonies, public offices, and so forth. Credit expansion in the construction sector peaked in 1934. See Salvatore La Francesca, *La Politica Economica del Fascismo*, (Rome–Bari: Laterza, 1972), 65, cited in Cesare De Seta, "Giuseppe Pagano Architetto e Critico," in *Il Destino Dell'architettura. Persico Giolli Pagano* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1985), 190. This vast mobilization was underpinned by the revival of the *Corporazioni*, an apparatus designed by fascism to reconcile class conflicts and the contradictions of capitalism by merging workers and employers within a single state organism. Its premise was that historical antagonisms, capital-versus-labor, industry-versus-agriculture, could be neutralized through a functional reorganization of society into stable, self-regulating bodies. See Cesare De Seta, "Giuseppe Pagano Architetto e Critico," in *Il Destino Dell'architettura. Persico Giolli Pagano* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1985), 190.

34 Istituto Luce, "Mussolini si cimenta nella trebbiatura del grano" [Mussolini tries his hand at Threshing Wheat] newsreel, 4 July 1935, claiming that "Il Duce had personally threshed nine hundred tons of wheat in one hour of work,"https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000016970/2/mussolini-si-cimenta-nella-trebbiatura-del-grano.html; and "Mussolini traccia il solco di Aprilia," [Musolini Ploughs the First Furrow of Aprilia], newsreel, May 3, 1936, https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000023602/2/mussolini-traccia-solco-aprilia-4-comune-agro-redento-posa-della-prima-pietra-sulle-fondamenta-della-torre-littoria-modello-del.html.

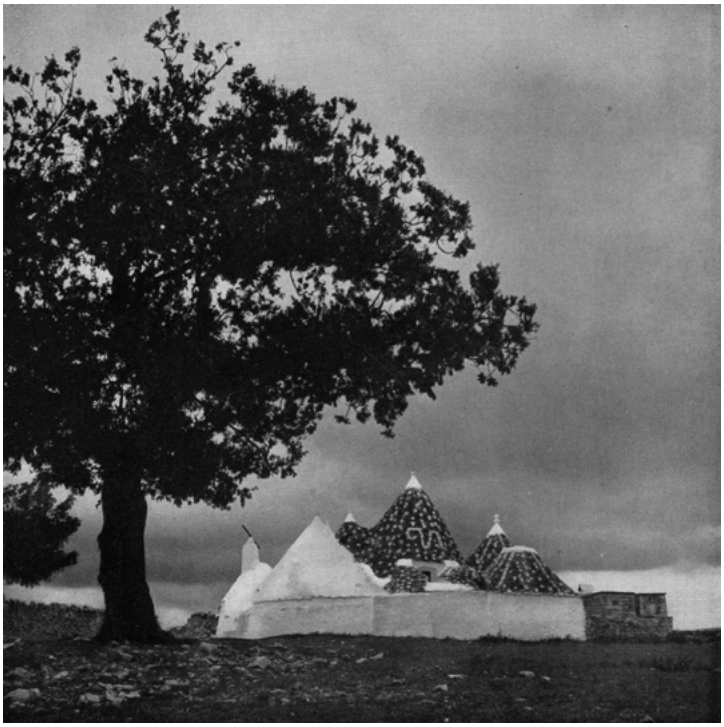
35 See Giuseppe Pagano, "Case Rurali," *Casabella* 13, no. 86 (February 1935): 8–15."container-title":"Casabella","issue":"no. 86","page":"8-15","title":"Case rurali","volume":"13","author":[{"family":"Pagano","given":"Giuseppe"}],"issued":{"date-parts":[["1935",2]]}}],"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"} Quotes from this article are translated by the author.

36 Ibid.

project sought to wrest this task away from technocratic management and reposition it as a legitimate architectural problem—and for that, he needed a compelling narrative.

LIKE A DIET OF SIMPLE FOODS

To ground his argument, Pagano provides a sweeping anthropological narrative. Rural architecture, he suggests, by virtue of its functional and utilitarian character, provides a record of human civilization from its primordial beginnings.[37] By examining dwellings, one could read the "milestones of human civilization," a literal index of the shifting relations between materials, needs, and forms. Hence, rural structures appeared to him as living fossils, preserving "building habits that can date back to the age of the *palafittes* or the feudal Middle Ages." In this unchanging state of necessity, the rural house occupied a dimension suspended from history. He writes: "What stands out the most in rural construction is its abstraction from a chronologically defined time according to stylistic attributes." For Pagano, this timelessness turned the rural house into an "architectural fact," spontaneous, utilitarian, and devoid of theory or styles, preserving a "naiveté, freshness, and sincerity over the centuries."[38] As Antonio De Rossi notes, Pagano "extracts rural architecture from the flow of time" and turns it into "an attitude, a tendency that, while starting from practical purposes, transforms itself in a transcendental act,"[39] a mystical condition in which form and life coincide beyond history; history is flattened into one anthropological continuum in which the only truth is necessity.



Giuseppe Pagano, A group of trulli near Martina Franca (Puglia); Giuseppe Pagano, Trullo dome near S. Fili di Cosenza (Calabria). From Giuseppe Pagano and Werner Daniel, eds., *Architettura rurale italiana* (Milan: Hoepli, 1936), 90; 91.

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 See Antonio De Rossi, "Le Ricerche Novecentesche Sulla Casa Rurale Alpina Tra Questione Epistemologica e Narrazioni Legittimanti," *Archalp*, no. 7 (2021): 43–51.

This logic demands an archetypical definition of the rural house. Pagano rejects all modernized or hybridized forms—no "houses for agricultural firms" or "pseudo *villette* for land-consortia members." The rural house, he insists, "is the house of the peasant who works the land." He depicts this world as: "alive, raw, sometimes generous, sometimes harsh, and often savage."[40] Not bucolic or picturesque, but elemental: "a refuge, an embryonic workshop, a cell of life and civilization in constant and direct struggle with the most mysterious and powerful forces of nature." Borrowing from emerging human geography, he defines it as "a work tool; the most important and most visible work tool that the farmer's spirit builds."[41] Like the tool, it obeyed an economy of necessity: "nothing is useless, nothing is superfluous, everything is born out of necessity." Every form could be traced back to need, and where need disappeared, forms persisted as habits.[42] Every element, from "fountain, a seat, a canopy," arose through "calm and rough simplicity," "embryonic but sufficient," making rural architecture "a book of honest construction, full of lessons." Contemporary interventions, he argues, should emulate this "brazen ease, an air of improvisation," the new buildings should "identify with the land," accommodate "accidents of stains, the most unexpected additions," achieving a condition halfway between the human and the natural: "harmony between the house, the countryside, and the farmer."

Giuseppe Pagano, Haystack with conical roof in the Val Sugana. From Giuseppe Pagano and Werner Daniel, eds., *Architettura rurale italiana* (Milan: Hoepli, 1936), 80.

40 Pagano, "Case Rurali."

41 Giovanna D'Amia and Michelangelo Sabatino have discussed the interdisciplinary aspect of the debate on rural houses which became a topic of inquiry in the burgeoning fields of human geography, ethnography, and related human sciences, anticipating the interest of architects. See Giovanna D'Amia, "Giuseppe Pagano e l'architettura Rurale," *Territorio*, no. 66 (September 2013): 109–20; Giovanna D'Amia, "Le débat sur l'architecture rurale en Italie et l'exposition de Giuseppe Pagano à la Triennale de 1936," *In Situ: Revue Des Patrimoines*, no. 21 (2013); Michelangelo Sabatino, *Pride in Modesty: Modernist Architecture and the Vernacular Tradition in Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022), 56–57.

42 Pagano, "Case Rurali." In particular, D'Amia notes that Pagano borrowed from ethnographers in speaking of "habits" and the cultural dimension of the phenomenon. See D'Amia, "Giuseppe Pagano e l'architettura Rurale," 122

Later that year in "Documenti di architettura rurale," in *Casabella*, Pagano returned to his polemic against the "aulic" tradition of architectural history—its "temples, churches, palazzos." Anticipating the forthcoming Triennale exhibition, he argued that this newly examined rural world, long dismissed as folklore, offered documentary proof that in the shadow of those monuments, a more prosaic building environment had always existed, one that satisfied the "simplest and least vain needs of man in a spirit of wonderful 'primitivism.'" For Pagano, the modernist quest was nothing but the rediscovery of a functionalist ethos of a primeval past. Recovering this spirit, he wrote, was like a cure, "like going on a diet of simple foods for those who have been spoiled by the patisseries of the caryatids." Building on these moral metaphors of "honesty, clarity," he added somatic associations with healthfulness, in line with the thriving Naturist ideology of time, "like a clenched fist," "like homemade rye bread," against "patisseries," and "export partridge sauce." This search for renewal, a new *salute edilizia* [building health], moved through a cleansing and a stripping away of all excesses, of style, of theory, and ultimately of history itself.[43]

THE ETERNAL PRESENT OF THE RURAL HOUSE

Pagano's use of photography for the rural exhibition mirrored his attitude and theorization of the rural house itself. The process, as he recounted it, was nothing short of revolutionary, a revelation of material long ignored by intellectual elites and cultural institutions. With the backing of the Triennale, he approached regional superintendents, asking them to photograph, all expenses paid, the most interesting farmhouses, rural dwellings, and villages in their regions, but the responses he received were "discouraging, absurd and implausible….even the Superintendency of Tuscany replied that there was nothing interesting to photograph in those countryside areas."[44] Forced, as he put it, to "do everything myself," he turned to photography as the only medium capable of "rapidly gather[ing] large quantity of documentation material on the subject," unlike sketching, which he deemed "too slow, too subjective, and not very scientific."[45] His turn to photography thus acquires the same mythic contours of the exhibition itself: against the scorn of the "chorus of pessimists" and out of sheer necessity, Pagano proceeded to wander across the peninsula almost single-handedly gathering this unprecedented material.[46]

The photographic style he adopted was equally polemical. Pagano did away with the traditional single-point perspectives, frontal framing, and even the lighting and elevated viewpoints of academic architectural photography. As film director Luigi Comencini later put it, Pagano "destroyed Alinari photography."[47] His casual framings, from exaggeratedly low or high angles, and highly abstracting close-ups aligned him with the "New Vision" of avant-garde artists such as László Moholy-Nagy and with Le Corbusier's photographic experiments of the early 1930s. Italo Zannier describes Pagano's avant-garde use of the Rolleiflex as emblematic, in particular his "bold techniques that were unusual, especially in professional photography: diagonal horizons, strongly anamorphic perspectives,

43 Giuseppe Pagano, "Documenti Di Architettura Rurale," *Casabella*, no. 95 (November 1935): 18–25. Throughout his writings, Pagano frequently used metaphors and adjectives that evoke bodily conditions, nutrition, and health, echoing the Naturist ideology thriving in those years promoted by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, leading figure of the Futurist avant-garde, who in the 1930s had turned to issues of human nutrition and physical culture.

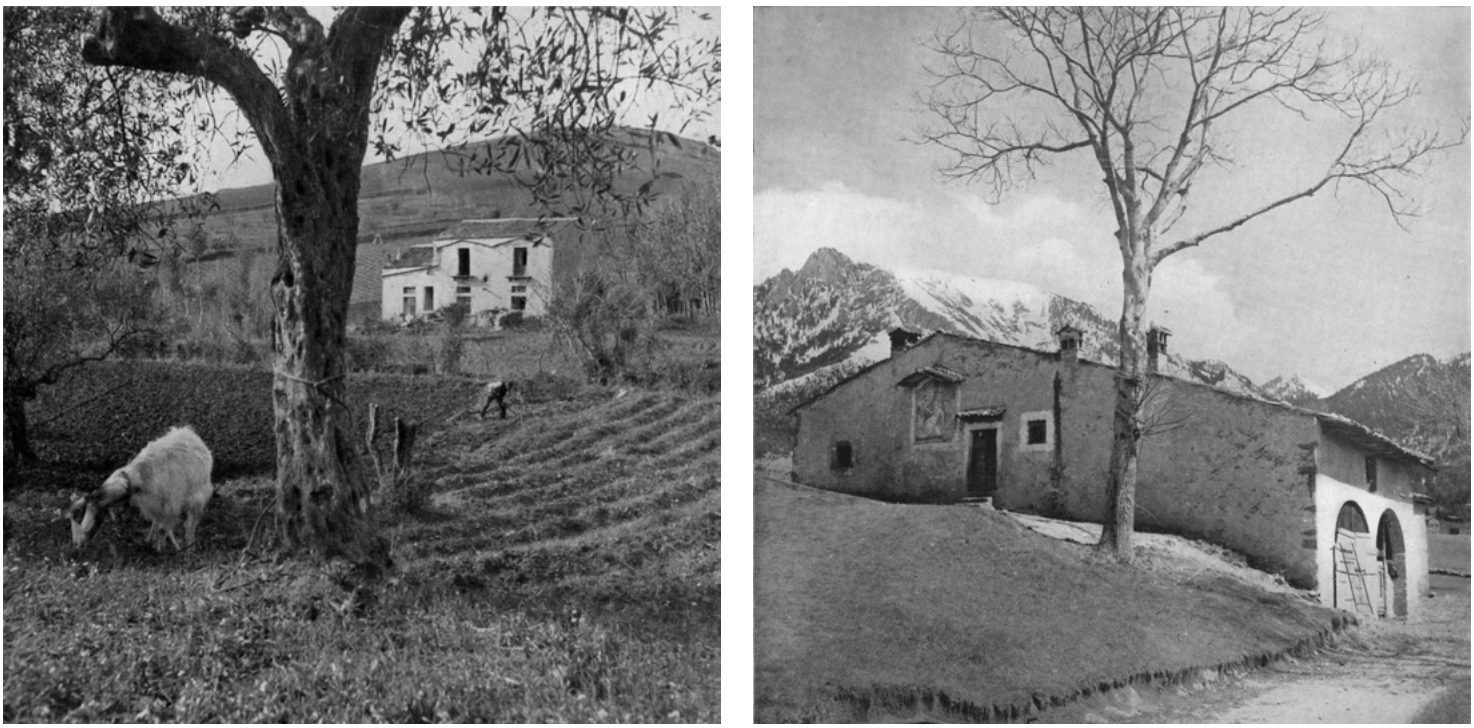
44 Giuseppe Pagano, "Un Cacciatore Di Immagini," *Cinema*, December 1938, 401–3; later republished in Cesare De Seta, ed., *Giuseppe Pagano Fotografo* (Milan: Electa, 1979), 155–156. Quotes from here on are translated from the original by the author.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Fotografia Alinari (later Fratelli Alinari), founded in Florence in 1852, was the most well-known and established commercial photographic atelier in Italy. It was the main source and reference for art-historical and architectural images, especially of important monuments and artworks. See Luigi Comencini and A.A.V.V, "Le Fotografie Di Pagano," in *Giuseppe Pagano Pogatschnig, Architetture e Scritti* (Milano: Hoepli, 1947). Translation by the author.

and then details of materials and architectural elements."[48] This novel approach Pagano would later describe as a search for realism. He called it "a hunt for live impressions" meant to capture something "more real and more life-like than the cold archive of stereotypical academic images."[49] Yet, despite these claims to a study of objective reality and life-like realism, as Cesare De Seta notes, his photography "always tends towards an abstract transfiguration of reality."[50]



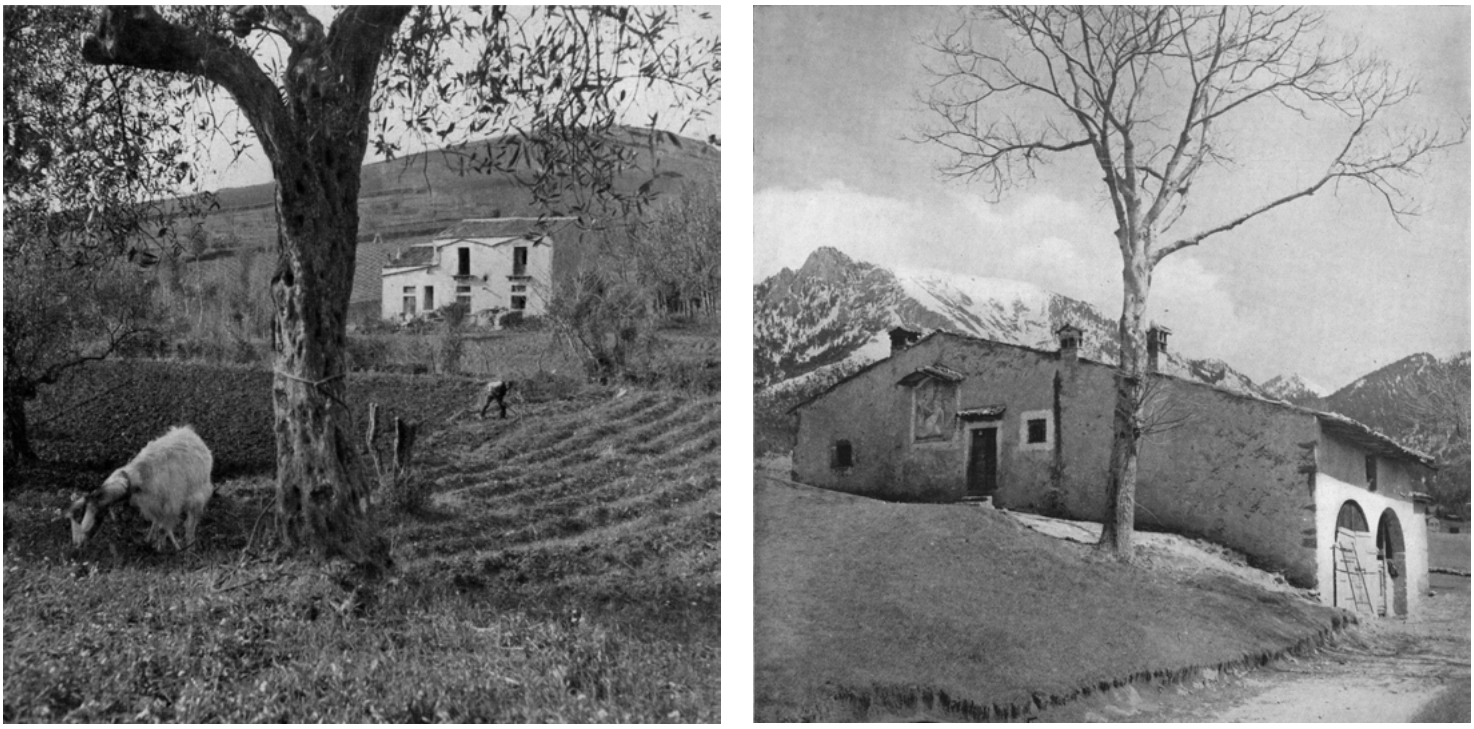
Giuseppe Pagano, Rural house in the countryside of Segesta (Sicily); Giuseppe Pagano, Alpine cascinale near the Presonala pass. From Giuseppe Pagano and Werner Daniel, eds., *Architettura rurale italiana* (Milan: Hoepli, 1936), 134; 140.

The photographs in the exhibition reflect this double movement of realism and transfiguration. The houses are captured in isolation, framed by a foreground of land and a terse background of sky, shot from a point of view that is nearly always exaggeratedly low, which gives them a dramatic standing. The horizon line is also pushed to an extreme, either very low or very high in the square frame, so that most of the image is filled with either an imposing ground or sky, and the dwelling appears as a hinge, a solitary mediator between crops and clouds. As critics have noted, the focus of the photographs falls almost exclusively on the house: outbuildings and other infrastructures and inhabitants are under-represented or absent.[51] At times, a lone tree appears next to the house, like an alter ego, another domesticated form. Other photographs feature close-ups: a repetition of arches, of stairwells, rooftops, chimneys, and vents rendered in heavy contrast, framed in such a way that the plastic, sculptural qualities are emphasized. What emerges is a sense of essentiality or, in the words of contemporary architecture historian Roberto Pane, that the rural house, "with the bareness of its structural elements, is timeless, ancient of a few

48 Italo Zannier, *Architettura e Fotogragia* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1991), 113.
49 Pagano, "Un Cacciatore Di Immagini."
50 De Seta, *Giuseppe Pagano Fotografo* (1979), 146.
51 On this critique see, Claudio Greppi, "Evoluzione Dei Modelli Della Casa Rurale," in *La Casa Rurale in Italia*, ed. Lucio Gambi and Giuseppe Barbieri (Florence: Olschki, n.d.), as cited in De Rossi, "Le Ricerche Novecentesche Sulla Casa Rurale Alpina Tra Questione Epistemologica e Narrazioni Legittimanti."

years or several centuries."[52]

The catalogue's running texts provide a theoretical narrative for this visual timelessness. Pagano describes rural architecture as a styleless background environment governed by "that eternal law" linking utilitarian purpose and relative form—a law "as natural as gravity." In the running text of the catalogue, he proposes an evolutionary theory, beginning with the haystack and advancing through a chain of necessary transformations. "The haystack was created," he writes, "from the primary need to store the harvest and protect it from the elements."[53] From this cylindrical mass of piled straw, the hut emerged by hollowing out a void; two circular huts merge to create an ellipse: "the creation of the ridge." The ellipse, needing enlargement, becomes a square. In Puglia, the sequence is re-enacted in stone: the straw hut becomes the *trullo*, its cone "nothing more than the petrification of the circular hut."[54] From trullo to dome, from dome to pavilion, from pavilion to vault, the evolution continues until it reaches the terrace roof, "the greatest technical achievement in construction." This sequence of linear cause-effect relations becomes the only history worth attending to, as inexorable as destiny. The "anonymous" rural houses full of "proud modesty," he writes, "teach us to overcome time."[55]



Giuseppe Pagano, Rural house in the countryside of Segesta (Sicily); Giuseppe Pagano, Alpine cascinale near the Presonala pass. From Giuseppe Pagano and Werner Daniel, eds., *Architettura rurale italiana* (Milan: Hoepli, 1936), 134; 140.

The theory of evolution did not go unquestioned by contemporary critics, who noted how the sequence proposed was too simplified, too deterministic, too linear.[56] In particular, a very interesting commentary comes from

52 In the Italian original: "come per la nudità dei suoi elementi costruttivi essa [la casa rurale] è senza tempo, antica di pochi anni o di parecchi secoli." Translation by the author. See Roberto Pane, *Architettura Rurale Campana* (Florence: Rinascimento del libro, 1936), 10; cited in Gabriella Musto, "Un Architetto Dietro l'obiettivo, L'Archivio Fotografico Di Giuseppe Pagano" (2007), 22.

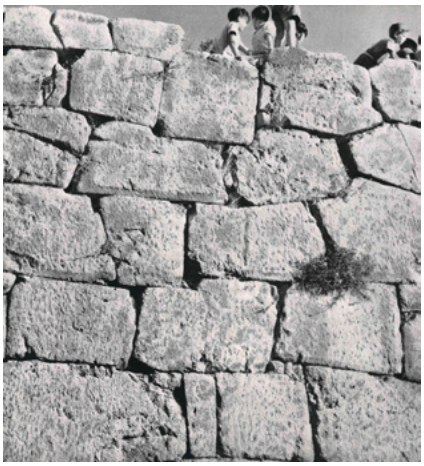
53 Giuseppe Pagano and Werner Daniel, *Architettura Rurale Italiana*, Quaderni Della Triennale (Milano: Hoepli, 1936). Quotes from here on are translated from the original by the author.

54 Ibid.

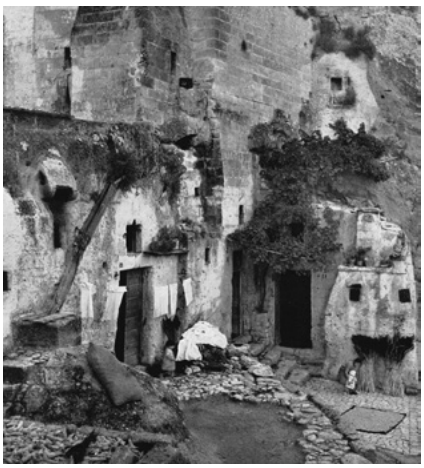
55 Ibid.

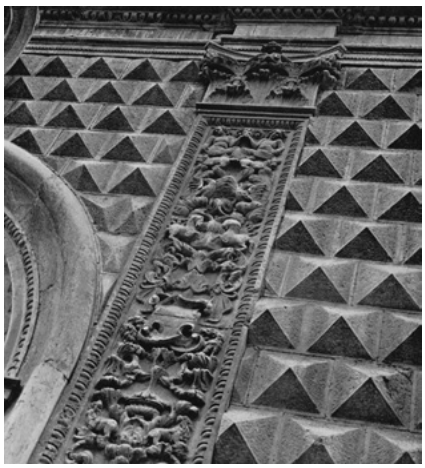
56 Contemporary Neapolitan historian Roberto Pane would critique Pagano's theorization as functionalist determinism, arguing against the reduction of rural architecture to purely practical and functional causes. See D'Amia, "Le débat sur l'architecture rurale en Italie et l'exposition de Giuseppe Pagano à la Triennale de 1936."

Raoul Hausmann, former leading figure of the Berlin Dada, who spent his years in exile on the island of Ibiza (1932–36) deeply engaged in architectural-anthropological study of the rural Ibizan *finca*, producing in the same years an extraordinary body of photography and writing. In 1944, he would discuss at length Pagano's exhibition catalogue, praising it for the "dazzling" presentation, but he criticized the proposed model as being "too specifically Italian," unable to account for "mixed forms" and "parallel indigenous developments" produced by migration and cultural exchange. Hausmann insisted that dwelling forms arose from "occupations, human activities, and gestures" and not from a single logic of necessity.[57]



Giuseppe Pagano, Prehistoric walls at Cori, Latium; Giuseppe Pagano, Pebbles on the beach. From Giuseppe Pagano, *Sassi, Steine, Pierres, Stones* (Milan–Rome: Panorama, 1939), 14; 6.





Giuseppe Pagano, Cave dwellings in Matera; Giuseppe Pagano, Detail of the Palazzo dei Diamanti, Ferrara. From Giuseppe Pagano, *Sassi, Steine, Pierres, Stones* (Milan–Rome: Panorama, 1939), 13; 17.

This sense of essentiality underpins Pagano's broader photographic practice, some 3,275 images produced between 1934 and 1944. In a 1939 article, he describes this work as revealing an "undiscovered Italy" made up of "rural and heroic horizons, strange contrasts, revelations full of modern resonance, courageous poverty, and dignified restraint. An Italy of scant

57 Raoul Hausmann, "Recherches sur l'origine de la maison rurale a Eivissa," *Revista de Tradiciones Populares*, no. 1 (1944): 231–51. Translation by the author.

words…provincial and rough."[58] He archives his vast photographic production, grouping photographs under abstract keywords such as *smiles, sea*, *clouds, trees,* and *stone,* and he spoke of this subjects in similarly absolute terms: "clouds, plants, farmhouses, ruins, wide horizons of lonely valleys, the portrait of a presumptuous tree…the gesture of a reaper in Romagna…the transparencies of a wave in Murano." This tendency is clearest in a small book he published in 1939, titled *Sassi* [*Stones*], which gathers, by analogous association, an atlas of all kinds of "stones," natural and man-made, ancient and modern: the Sassi cave dwelling of Matera, the *bugnato* façade of a Renaissance palazzo, ancient Roman road paving, pebbles at the beach, Etruscan steps—the story of human building across all times and spaces.[59]

A similar emphasis on archetypes can be found in the contemporary work of renowned Italian poet and novelist Cesare Pavese. Rooted in his pioneering translations of North American authors such as Steinbeck, Melville and Dos Passos, Pavese developed what critics describe as an experimental mode in which realism and myth operate simultaneously.[60] This is already explicit in his first major work, the collection of poems *Lavorare Stanca* [Hard Labor] (1936). While writing in completely novel verse about completely novel subjects (such as gas pumps and mechanical workshops in the outskirts of Turin), Pavese remains uninterested in the here-and-now but rather seems to be constantly trying to grasp a latent dimension, something "beyond." Phenomena are not treated as singular events, but as absolute figures—dawn, death, God, "man"—described without adjectives, like "fulgurations."[61] This archetypal register intensified across his short novel *Paesi tuoi* [The Harvesters] (1941), built on symbolically charged oppositions between countryside and city, old and young, men and women. This tendency culminates in his works *Dialoghi con Leucò* [Dialogues with Leucò] (1947), *La casa in collina* [The House on the Hill] (1948), and La *luna e i falò* [The Moon and the Bonfires] (1950). Significantly, while writing these last novels, Pavese had struck up a collaboration with anthropologist Ernest De Martino and the pair had begun to co-edit the Einaudi series *La Collana Viola* (The Purple Series), publishing texts by Frobenius, Eliade, and Frazer.[62] But their collaboration soon turned toward contrast, as De Martino came to insist on the need to historicize their fascination for myth and openly criticized Pavese for indulging in a notion that was too irrational, abstract, and politically ambiguous.[63]

58 Pagano, "Un Cacciatore Di Immagini."

59 See Giuseppe Pagano, *Immagini 1. Sassi* (Rome-Milan: Panorama Casa Editrice Italian S.A., 1939) ; and Giuseppe Pagano, *Immagini 2. Una Porta* (Rome-Milan: Panorama Casa Editrice Italian S.A., 1939). On this cross-temporal cross-spatial abstraction, see discussion by Musto, "Un Architetto Dietro l'obiettivo, L'Archivio Fotografico Di Giuseppe Pagano," 85.

60 Pavese translated, among others, Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1938), Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1932). On the importance of North American literature for Pavese's original understanding of myth, see Alberto Bertoni, who notes: "Although it might look like an oxymoron, the connection between American literature and myth is very active on the hermeneutics level." Alberto Bertoni, interview by the Fondazione Cesare Pavese, accessed November 21, 2025, https://fondazionecesarepavese.it/en/news/dialogues-with-pavese-alberto-bertoni/.

61 See Riccardo Gasperina Geroni, "Cesare Pavese Controcorrente," Letture.org, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.letture.org/cesare-pavese-controcorrente-riccardo-gasperina-geroni. For more on the mythical dimension that underpins Pavese's entire literary production, see Riccardo Gasperina Geroni, *Cesare Pavese Controcorrente* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2020).

62 Einaudi's *Collana Viola* (Purple Series) brought "anthropological" literature on myth and religion to a wider Italian readership. Its first title was De Martino's *Il mondo magico* (1948); the series went on to publish authors like Frazer, Frobenius, and Eliade—authors whose ideas were, in the leftist postwar climate, viewed as reactionary, problematic, and even dangerous. On the relationship between the two figures, see Ernesto De Martino and Cesare Pavese, *La Collana Viola. Lettere 1945-1950*, ed. Pietro Angelini (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2022).

63 As Carlo Ginzburg has noted, both Pavese and De Martino shared an ambiguous fascination with fascism that fed their attraction to myth. De Martino, he notes, had harbored fascist sympathies in the late 1920s and 1930s, while Pavese, long regarded as a figure tied to the Resistance, and who experienced *confino* [internal exile] in Calabria in 1935, was dramatically reinterpreted after the discovery and publication of his *Taccuino Segreto* [Secret Notebook] (1990), which exposed very troubling views, including condoning Nazi brutalities and criticism of antifascism. See Pavese and Giulia Boringhieri, "Dialogue on Pavese," interview published by the Fondazione Cesare Pavese, October 9, 2020, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hldc8ZExCzs.

BETWEEN REALISM AND MYTH

These tensions between realism and myth are discussed by Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito in his recent book *Fascismo e noi [Fascism and Us]* (2025).[64] Esposito argues that fascism cannot be understood as an isolated parenthesis in twentieth-century history, nor can it be understood only in terms of violence, repression, deceit, and terror. Were it only that, it could not have endured two decades, nor cast such a long shadow across Europe, nor would it have survived its own death and reached us now. Esposito argues that it should be understood instead as a form of culture that endures among us. The defining characteristic is its functioning like a *complexio oppositorum,* a machine able to collapse and absorb opposing impulses, neutralizing them in the process: blending left- and right-wing ideals, revolutionary and reactionary impulses, rural nostalgia and industrial modernity, thereby turning contradiction into hegemony. For Esposito, the engine that drives the "machine" is myth. But unlike the more-or-less spontaneous "traditional" myths that create an imaginative distance from the real, the fascist "mythological machine" actively produces a new reality. Mussolini had theorized this himself in his 1922 speech, declaring that "Fascism is both creation and resurrection of myth." In this sense, this particular form of myth does not simply belong to history but rather re-writes it.

Seen in this light, Pagano's *Il Covo* participates in a similar dialectic. Though presented as documentary, his reconstruction was, as seen, more of a reenactment carefully staged. Through artful framing and studied austerity, the camera resurrected the atmosphere and events of two decades earlier, attempting to make a mythical past, newly present. The images gain emotional charge by collapsing opposites—violence and intellect, sacred and profane—and in the process class is aestheticized and marginality becomes material for morality. A similar double movement underlies the *Mostra dell'Architettura Rurale Italiana* (1936), suspended between claims to objective empirical study and a universalizing, mythic narrative. Regional farmstead types, such as the *masseria* in the South, the *cascina* in the North, and the *casale* in central Italy, are presented as timeless "architectural facts," rather than the products of centuries of land colonization, concentration of holdings, and exploitative systems of labor. The fortified *masseria* in Puglia, for instance, far from spontaneous or "natural," encoded the latifundist order in the south, preserved, often through violence, well into the post-unification period.[65] In Pagano's photographs, however, this social dimension remains muted; farmers, sharecroppers, tenants, are largely absent from the frame, while buildings are recast as anthropological constants, rather than historically produced conditions.

The mythicizing tendency becomes very clear when set against Walker Evans's contemporaneous photographs for the Farm Security Administration (FSA). In 1936 Evans was tasked, along with several other important photographers, with the documentation of rural conditions following the implementation of the New Deal reform policies. His series in Hale County, Alabama, published together with an essay by James Agee in the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) depicting the life of three sharecropper families, offers a revealing counterpoint to Pagano's project.[66] Here there are no dramatic low-angle shots, no sculptural shelters, no rugged lyricism. Instead, there are unsparingly close portraits of

64 See Roberto Esposito, *Fascismo e noi* (Rome: Einaudi, 2025).

65 Notably the eruption of the phenomenon of *brigantaggio* in the South during and after the unification process 1860s, as is widely interpreted as a reaction to top-down land dispossession and coercive state-making, rather than as mere criminality, as demonstrated in classic studied by Franco Molfese and Giovanni de Luna. See Franco Molfese, *Storia del brigantaggio dopo L'Unità* (Rome: Feltrinelli, 1964).

66 James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Praise Now Famous Men: Three Tenant Families* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1941). Agee originally wrote his 30,000-word report on sharecropper families for *Fortune* magazine, but it was turned down and the material was published for the first time together with thirty of Walker Evan's photographs of cotton-farm tenants. Evans's photographic albums are held in the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs divisions. Volume 1 is titled "Pictures of the House and Family of an Alabama Cotton Sharecropper," and Volume 2 is titled "The House and The Family of Frank Tengle Near Moundville, Hale County, Ala."

family members, interspersed with views of their surroundings, and above all gestures and names: Mrs. Frank Tengle washing clothes in a tub on a bench; Lucille Burroughs picking cotton; Mrs. Floyd Burroughs taking in the milk mule in the barnyard. Evans frames not just the "house," but a whole ecology of labor: the tool house, chicken house, barn and outbuildings, the cistern and rainwater trough, the cotton fields, the gourd birdhouses; and then interiors: the porch, the kitchen corner, the washstand and dog-run, the bed. Rural life appears not in archetypical terms but as a lived, material, historically specific condition.

Walker Evans, Sunday Singing, Hale County, Alabama, 1936;
Walker Evans, Cotton and Corn, Hale County, Alabama, 1936. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

From this perspective, we can begin to complicate the reading of Pagano as a precursor to Neorealist sensibilities, a view advanced by several scholars, notably Manfredo Tafuri in his 1985 essay "Architecture and Realism."[67] Early Neorealist films, however, present a markedly different visual language, in the opening scenes of Rossellini's *Roma Città Aperta* (1945), for example, stark contrasts, a defined horizon, and formal hierarchy give way to a confusing montage of close-range shots of roofs, corridors, stairwells, a shabby aesthetic in muddied shades of grey; or in the last episode of *Paisà* (1946) shot in the Po Valley, where Rossellini abandons dramatic angles and sweeping views for a flat, bleak expanse—an architecture and landscape without form or qualities.[68] The periphery becomes a key vantage point from which to grasp this shift. Compare Mario Sironi's *Outskirts* (1922), where abstracted housing blocks rise with the hieratic presence of an Assyrian city, with Renzo Vespignani's *Periphery with Gazometer* (1946), whose dense, informal and textural grain capture the unsettled fabric of the postwar city.

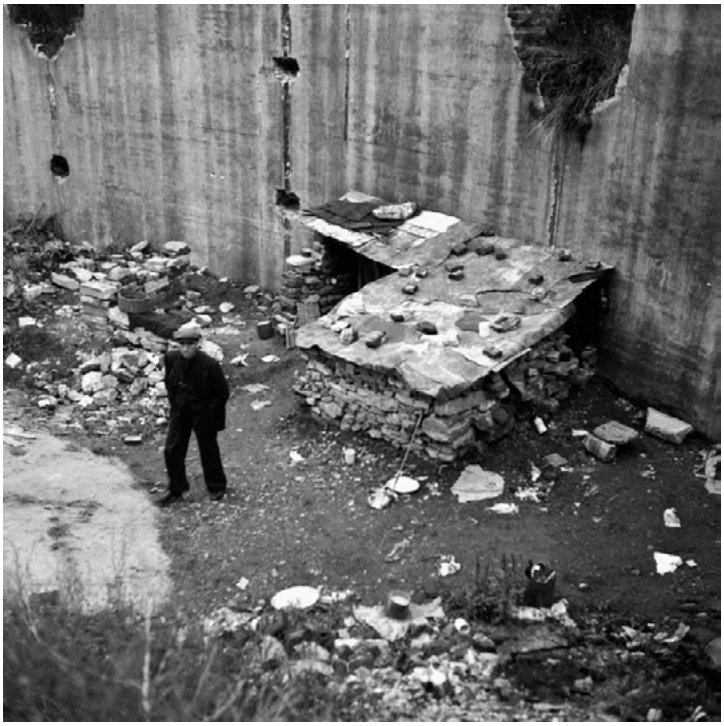
But perhaps the sharpest counter-paradigm is offered by Alberto Lattuada's photographs of Milan in 1938–39, contemporaneous with Pagano's *Il Covo*. Then a young architecture graduate, soon to be a renowned filmmaker, Lattuada captured peripheral and marginal moments of the city. The most striking are those of people living in make-shift homes, constructed around the perimeters of abandoned eighteenth-century gasometers between via Tueliè and via Bligny.[69] Stones prized off the crumbling walls of the gasometer were stacked against the perimeter walls to build

67 Tafuri, "Architettura e Realismo." Translated by the Jolanda Devalle in the forthcoming book Pier Vittorio Aureli et al., eds., *Order and Disorder: Selected Essays and Interviews by Manfredo Tafuri (1964–1994)* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2025).

68 See *Rome, Open City [Roma Città Aperta]*, directed by Roberto Rossellini, 1945; *Paisan [Paisà]*, directed by Roberto Rossellini, 1946.

69 The photographs depict a few of the five gasometers that formed part of the first gasworks in Milan. They were located in Porta Ludovica, between via Teuliè and via Sarfatti and were dismantled in 1921, when they were re-located to the Bovisa area. See Antonello Frongia, "Occhio Quadrato," *Rivista Di Studi Di Fotografia*, no. 8 (2018).

shelters. One shot from the gasometer series shows a man crouched near a small cavity that forms the entrance to a structure barely large enough for one person; in another, a man is washing his clothes in a basin amid debris; a woman stands in profile next to a single kitchen ladle hanging from a nook in the self-made stone wall. Later republished under the title "troglodytes in the former gasometer of Milan," these scenes could not be further from Pagano's photograph of the cave dwellings of Matera, his celebration of "stones upon stones," or his anthologies of beach pebbles, marbles and building materials.[70] Here the subject is not a universal story of human building, but a specific historical condition, most likely wrought by the *sventramenti*: the large-scale urban clearances that displaced thousands into make-shift settlements, the beginnings, for instance, of Rome's *borgate*.



Alberto Lattuada, Evening walk, ca. 1940. Alinari Archives, Florence;
Alberto Lattuada, Former gasworks in Via Teulié, 1939–1940. Alinari Archives, Florence

Scholars have often read an affinity between Pagano and Lattuada, as sharing a non-heroic, non-rhetorical gaze, an impression reinforced by their contemporaneous photography of Milan's Sinigaglia flea market.[71] Yet their approaches diverge. Amid the crowds and the heaps of discarded parts and second-hand items, Pagano's eye is drawn to patterns, isolating formal recurrences: rows of bicycle saddles, spiraling coils of metal, dense ranks of packed shoes. Lattuada's photography, by contrast, even at its most abstract, remains more historically contingent. One sequence shows a garage filled with cars draped in grey sheets and lifted on trestles to preserve their tires while, mysterious and compelling, the huddled, cloaked masses point directly to the fuel shortages gripping the country as it entered the war. In 1941, when Lattuada published *Occhio Quadrato* [*Square Eye*], a minimalist booklet of twenty-six square photographs, he was summoned to the Milan police headquarters and asked: "Why is it,

70 The title given to the photographs of the make-shift shelters when they were republished in Bertelli and Bollati, eds., *L'Immagine Fotografica*, Vol. II (Turin: Einaudi, 1979). 626-27.

71 Musto and Taramelli both argue for a profound affinity between the Pagano and Lattuada, due to what they interpret as a shared non-rhetorical and non-heroic vision of humanity. See Musto, "Un Architetto Dietro l'obiettivo, L'Archivio Fotografico Di Giuseppe Pagano," 126, citing Ennery Taramelli, *Viaggio Nell'italia Del Neorealismoo. La Fotografia Tra Letteratura e Cinema* (Turin: SEI, 1995).

Lattuada, that while we are building the E42, the urban renewals, all you see are poor people and peeling walls?"[72] He got away, replying that his was only a formal study with a small print run.

Under Lattuada's burgeoning Neorealist gaze, there is no moralizing lesson of "courageous poverty and dignified restraint," but instead a lot more resignation and an unflinching view of the changes at play. One photograph seems to capture this reversal: a shot by Lattuada frames the gasometer pit, a make-shift shelter within, with the end of the city beyond, petering out into an open countryside dotted by a few chimneystacks. Just on the edge of the frame is a half-completed multi-story building still in scaffolding—less than a stone's throw from the new Bocconi University complex, whose iconic rationalist cornerstone on Via Sarfatti 25 Pagano designed, and which was inaugurated in 1941.[73] Everything about this photo speaks to a singular and transitional moment in the city's rapidly shifting landscape. Here, Neorealism, as it takes its first steps, seems intent on jolting the gaze away from an impossible "beyond," and back to the here-and-now, to begin disentangling the mythic construction of reality from reality as such.

72 See Bertelli and Bollati, eds., *L'Immagine Fotografica*, Vol. II (Turin: Einaudi, 1979). Carlo Bertelli underlines this anti-fascist dimension of Lattuada's photography; cited in Musto, "Un Architetto Dietro l'obiettivo, L'Archivio Fotografico Di Giuseppe Pagano," 126. The original quote: "Come mai, Lattuada, mentre noi facciamo l'E42, i rinnovi urbanistici, vedete soltanto povera gente e muri scrostati?" Translation by the author.

73 Pagano's iconic building for the Bocconi University Headquarters is located on the corner of Via Sarfatti and via Bocconi in Milan (1937–1941). Pagano extensively photographed the construction site of this building.

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