



COMUNICAR LA ARQUITECTURA

DEL ORIGEN DE LA MODERNIDAD A LA ERA DIGITAL

eug

The background of the cover is an abstract composition of broad, expressive brushstrokes in various shades of teal and dark blue. A prominent, dark, textured square, resembling a piece of fabric or a different material, is positioned in the center-right area, overlapping the brushstrokes.

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TOMO I

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a la era digital

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(EDS.)

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del origen de la modernidad a la era digital

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Communicating the Welfare Architecture for Woman and Child in Fascist Italy

Comunicar la arquitectura asistencial para la mujer y el niño en la Italia fascista

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Abstract

La contribución pretende investigar las formas en que se promovió la Arquitectura Asistencial para la mujer y el niño durante los años del fascismo en Italia. El análisis realizado a través del estudio de publicaciones periódicas de arquitectura (*Architettura*, *Casabella*, *Rassegna di architettura*, *Edilizia moderna*, y otras), parte de la consideración de que la asistencia social fue un instrumento propagandístico fundamental para gestionar el consenso popular. No sólo hospitales y sanatorios, sino también clínicas, colonias y “Case della Madre e del Bambino” realizadas por la Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia (ONMI). En particular, para estas últimas, la revista *Maternità e Infanzia* desempeñó un papel fundamental. Durante el fascismo, el cuidado del cuerpo y la “salud de la raza” se consideraban uno de los principales objetivos sociales y políticos. En este sentido, la publicación periódica, como órgano oficial de la ONMI, constituye una fuente excepcional para comprender el uso de estas tipologías arquitectónicas como instrumento de persuasión y propaganda.

The purpose of this study is to explore how Welfare Architecture for Women and Children was promoted during the years of fascism in Italy. The analysis was conducted by studying architecture periodicals such as *Architettura*, *Casabella*, *Rassegna di architettura*, *Edilizia moderna*, and others. The investigation starts with the premise that social assistance served as a crucial propaganda tool for shaping public opinion. This encompassed not only hospitals and sanatoriums but also clinics, colonies, and “Case della Madre e del Bambino” (Mother and Child Houses) established by the Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia (ONMI). Particularly, the magazine *Maternità e Infanzia* played a pivotal role in this regard. During the fascist era, the well-being of individuals and the “health of the race” were regarded as key social and political objectives. The aforementioned periodical, being the official publication of the ONMI, emerges as an invaluable resource for comprehending how these architectural forms were employed as tools of persuasion and propaganda.

Keywords

Arquitectura asistencial, revistas de arquitectura, *Maternità e Infanzia*, propaganda fascista, *Casa della Madre e del Bambino*

Welfare architecture, architectural magazines, *Maternità e Infanzia*, Fascist propaganda, *Casa della Madre e del Bambino*

Introduction. Child and maternity protection between social welfare, hygiene, race

In Fascist Italy, the concept of social welfare became intricately intertwined with notions of physical well-being and racial superiority. Myths surrounding the robust hero, the spirited and courageous youth, and most importantly, the idea of national lineage were propagated¹. The establishment of the Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia (National Maternity and Childhood Organization or ONMI) took on racial undertones, evolving from efforts initiated since the mid-19th century to combat infant mortality. Furthermore, under the regime, the rhetoric of safeguarding the purity of the race evolved into an increasingly dogmatic doctrine, encompassing various shades of meaning. This doctrine aimed to showcase the dominance of specific human groups over others. This racial rhetoric converged with themes of a demographic struggle and the significance of numerical strength as a form of power. These themes laid the foundation, as is widely recognized, for Benito Mussolini's renowned Ascension speech delivered on May 26, 1927.

An intriguing aspect to ponder is the convergence of health-oriented ideologies and hygienic scientific theories, which had gained traction across European nations since the era of imperialism in the late 19th century. During and immediately after the Great War, these ideas coalesced into studies on eugenics, including the concept of eugenics. Eugenics emphasized the paramount significance of the environment in safeguarding the so-called racial identity and refining the human condition, encompassing both treatment and enhancement. These scholars were firmly rooted in the ideologies of neo-Lamarckism and neo-Darwinism. They believed that living spaces could play a role in reshaping human social behaviour by revitalizing the body and enhancing overall quality of life. This perspective extended beyond the conventional notion of healthcare architecture merely serving as a vessel for various therapeutic and preventive functions. In the late 1920s, as the movement of architectural rationalism gained momentum in Fascist Italy, driven by its scientific and health-related implications as well as its aesthetic and spiritual dimensions, the political narratives of well-being and racial hygiene became inseparably intertwined with considerations of spatial design. Notably, the sun, air, and light were emphasized as crucial elements, particularly for the growth and development of children. In Italy too, the significance of healthy housing gained prominence, particularly during the 1930s, as evidenced by a surge in publications on the subject².

¹ The research for this paper is still ongoing. However, some findings have been presented in an initial book titled *Per la donna, per il bambino, per la razza. L'architettura dell'ONMI tra eutenica ed eugenica nell'Italia fascista* (Syracuse: LetteraVentidue Edizioni, 2021); this book delves into the history of commissions and numerous unrealized projects. Additionally, certain aspects of the research have been covered in an upcoming article discussing sea and mountain colonies constructed during the Fascist years: the article is titled “The ONMI and the Architecture for Motherhood and Childhood (1925-1975): A Forgotten Heritage”.

² See Enrico Bonicelli, *La luce naturale in architettura. Considerazioni generali ed applicazione* (Turin: Tipografia Edit. Umberto Franchini e C., 1934); Giorgio Rigotti, “Analisi dell'insolazione delle pareti degli edifici”, *Rassegna di architettura* (1934): 30-32, 80-82; Felice Aguzzi, Giovanni Sacchi, *Illuminazione naturale dei cortili* (Milan: Libreria artistica industriale A. Salto, 1937); Gaetano Vinaccia, *Il corso del sole in urbanistica ed edilizia. Contributo alla razionalizzazione dell'architettura* (Milan: Hoepli, 1938); Mario Umiltà, “Le ombre solari nell'architettura e nell'urbanistica”, *Rassegna di architettura* (1940): 275-280.

The concrete effects of the studies on sunshine were visible above all in the design of buildings intended for social housing and for children: for latters, think of the bold, well-known solutions of the rationalist kindergartens, as well as the experiments with open-air schools and sun houses. The later were a kind of urban sanatoriums created to cure infants suffering from tuberculosis, which were springing up all over the country with the aim of spreading the culture of health everywhere.

The practical implications of the research on sunlight became particularly evident in the architectural design of structures meant for both social housing and children's facilities. In the case of the latter, notable examples include the innovative and renowned designs of rationalist kindergartens, along with pioneering experiments involving open-air schools and sun houses. The emphasis on promoting well-being was markedly aligned with the broader themes of Mussolini's racialized political agendas, where childhood and youth played pivotal roles.

In this context, the exploration of functional, technological, and distributional aspects, initiated as early as the latter half of the preceding century by hygienist engineers, bore practical fruit through the endeavours of rationalist architects. These architects delved into the realm of healthy architecture, primarily through their experiments with modern housing, but also extending their innovations to school designs, hospitals, colonies, and other care-oriented establishments. Capitalizing on advancements in collective hygiene science and operational proposals for monitoring and preventive tools, and aligned with the imperative for urban renewal, the concept of a rational house solidified by the early 1930s. This rational house was perceived not solely as a stylistic or ideological emblem, but as "the cornerstone of progressive civil life, the essential element for the spiritual elevation and moral health of the people and the greater well-being of every individual"³. Moreover, it served as a practical model, valuable for designing health and hospital facilities, grounded in rational principles⁴. Over time, the health dimension grew pivotal, particularly in the development of "Case della Madre e del Bambino" (Mother and Child Houses) under the ONMI. These structures emerged from the aspiration to imbue the populace with the concept of safeguarding the race, commencing with the health of children. These spaces also aimed to install values of care and preventive measures, targeting a substantial portion of the population – often illiterate and devoid of basic hygiene knowledge (fig.1, fig. 2)–.

³ Enrico Agostino Griffini, *Costruzione razionale della casa* (Milan: Hoepli, 1932; quote from IV ed., I pt., 1948), 26.

⁴ Even during the International Congresses on Sanitary Technique and Town Hygiene, which originated in the early 1930s, professionals who had been working on improving the culture of modern living for a long time confronted each other about hospital design. The permanent international delegation for sanitary technology and municipal hygiene was based in Prague and was responsible not only for organising the annual conferences (such as those in Milan, Lyon, etc.), but also for spreading – through national committees – the culture of hygienism. See "Congresso della Associazione internazionale degli ospedali", *Architettura. Supplemento sindacale della rivista del Sindacato nazionale fascista architetti* 7 (15 June 1935): 60.



Figure 1. Cover page of the magazine *Costruzioni Casabella* 165 (September 1941).



Figure 2. Cover page of the magazine *Costruzioni Casabella* 165 (September 1941), showing the “Casa della madre e del bambino” in Via Volpato at Rome designed by architect Ettore Rossi.

Euthenics and welfare communication in architectural magazines

Upon revisiting numerous texts published in magazines during the 1930s⁵, it becomes apparent that an aspiration towards the creation of a new kind of individual was taking

⁵ See articles that appeared in *Architettura*, *Casabella*, *Domus*, *Edilizia moderna*, *Rassegna di architettura*, and *L'Architettura italiana*.

shape. This aspiration was particularly pronounced if one had been nurtured in environments that evoked the prevailing “*esprit nouveau*” sweeping across Europe, influenced by Le Corbusier and Gropius. In fact, various writings from that New era, including those penned by key figures who took turns leading the ONMI, revealed a shared foundation rooted in eugenics. Eugenics was a branch of genetic studies that believed in the enhancement of physical, intellectual, and moral attributes within a race, achievable through environmental factors. As Gian Alberto Blanc, the inaugural president of the ONMI, articulated: “Air, light, motion, are the indispensable elements to give young people, with health, the joy of living”⁶. This sentiment underscored the synergy between the ideals of architectural innovation, health improvement, and the development of a robust and virtuous individual.

With the aim of enhancing humanity through its environment, the principles of Eugenics found common ground with specific attributes of the architecture heralding the “great new epoch”. This architectural paradigm embraced concepts such as arranging and orienting building volumes along heliothermal axes. It also emphasized the prominence of terraces and open spaces that facilitated sun exposure and provided opportunities for refreshing air baths. Another hallmark was the understated expressiveness –often conveyed solely through white-plastered walls– a feature synonymous with moral integrity. The convergence of Eugenics and architectural design principles underscored a holistic approach to creating living spaces that not only promoted physical well-being but also embodied a sense of ethical austerity. This fusion of ideals mirrored the broader societal aspirations of the time, encapsulated within the evolving fascist ethos and its pursuit of a renewed and improved individual set against a backdrop of innovative architecture.

In addition to the establishment of infant schools and coastal colonies, the “Case della Madre e del Bambino” (Mother and Child Houses) were also conceived in alignment with these principles. These structures can be deemed as instances of minor or, more accurately, *architettura corrente*, as articulated in the renowned 1935 article by Giuseppe Pagano, a rationalist architect, editor-in-chief of *Casabella* and emerged as a prominent advocate of modern architecture. The “Case della Madre e del Bambino” exemplified the fusion of innovative architectural tenets and health-oriented ideologies. They embodied the notion of architecture being intricately tied to well-being and social progress. These establishments, dedicated to the care and health of mothers and children, not only symbolized architectural advancements but also underscored a societal commitment to fostering a healthier and more virtuous populace.

It is now widely acknowledged that, alongside its role in shaping public opinion and behavior, architecture in the 1930s also became a potent tool for the fascist dictatorship to propagate the cult of national well-being and, consequently, the ideals of race. The extensive proliferation of structures dedicated to maternity and infancy was, in this context, a pivotal element of the educational efforts undertaken by the regime. These endeavors were

⁶ Gian Alberto Blanc, “Il fascismo dinanzi al problema della razza”, *Maternità ed Infanzia. Bollettino mensile dell'Opera nazionale per la protezione della maternità e dell'infanzia II* (October 1927): 17-27, quote p. 26.

aimed at the “fascistization” of the masses and the dissemination of what is referred to as the cult of the Littorio the symbol of fascism. In pursuit of these objectives, the regime’s actions went beyond mere construction; they encompassed the imperative to communicate to the masses the significance of these architectural endeavors. This communication took shape through diverse means of dissemination, ensuring that the message of national well-being and racial ideals reached as many people as possible.

As a commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the inception of the ONMI⁷, notable steps were taken to highlight its accomplishments. For instance, at the 1935 Brussels Expo⁸, within the pavilion of the Littorio –a structure designed by Adalberto Libera and Mario De Renzi– there was a dedicated area showcasing Social Welfare. This space exhibited models, photographs, and inscriptions that illustrated the wide array of activities undertaken by the ONMI. The organization’s extensive efforts encompassed over 9,000 welfare institutions, with 134 of these represented by the distinctive “Case della Madre e del Bambino”⁹. These houses embodied a unique architectural concept, driven by a clear and distinctive ideological motivation –an approach that set them apart from any analogous constructions in other nations–.

In addition to the magazines like *La stirpe. Rivista delle corporazioni fasciste*, *La famiglia fascista*, *Quadrivio*, *La difesa della stirpe. Rivista dell’Unione d’assistenza all’infanzia*, *Difesa sociale. Rivista di igiene previdenza ed assistenza*, *La difesa della razza*, and *Razza e civiltà*, architectural magazines played a significant role in highlighting the significance of reimagining spaces to contribute to the improvement of the race through welfare. These architectural publications provided substantial coverage to the notion of architectural renewal that aligned with the ideals of fascism. They emphasized how spaces, when designed and utilized in specific ways, could play a role in the betterment and strengthening of the race. These magazines acted as platforms to disseminate architectural ideas that were intricately tied to the broader fascist ideology of well-being, racial superiority,

⁷ See “Madri e bimbi d’Italia all’Esposizione di Bruxelles”, *Maternità ed Infanzia. Rivista mensile illustrata*.

⁸ See Saverio Muratori, “L’Esposizione internazionale di Bruxelles”, *Architettura* XIV (October 1935): 567.

⁹ See Mangano Lori, “L’Opera maternità ed infanzia in Teramo”, *Italia Fascista* II, 4-5-6, XII EF (1935): 31. According to De Grazia, in 1940 ONMI supervised 9,617 centres, 167 of which were “Case della madre e del bambino”; see Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women. Italy 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Italian edition *Le donne nel regime fascista* (Venice: Marsilio, 1993, 2007), 101. The ONMI balance sheets show that there were 95 houses in 1935, 162 in 1938 and 192 in 1942; Minesso reports that the number of facilities (consulting rooms, refectories, kindergartens, dispensaries) increased from 3,057 in 1931 to between 8,895 and 9,291 in 1936, depending on various parameters adopted; see Michela Minesso, “Costruzione dell’uomo nuovo” e Stato sociale. L’ONMI negli anni del fascismo”, in *L’uomo nuovo del fascismo. La costruzione di un progetto totalitario*, ed. by Patrick Bernhard and Lutz Klinkhammer (Rome: Viella, 2017), 141. Institutional printed sources show that there were 99 complete buildings in 1935, 198 in 1950, and in 1961 to: 449 complete and 224 lacking a crèche; see *Origine e sviluppi dell’Opera Nazionale per la Protezione della Maternità e dell’Infanzia* (Rome: Stabilimento tipografico ditta Carlo Colombo, 1936), 153; *L’opera nazionale per la protezione della maternità e dell’infanzia dalla sua fondazione* (Rome: Pubblicazione a cura dell’ONMI stampata presso lo Stabilimento A. Staderini, 1962), 70.

and social progress. This interplay between architectural discourse and ideological promotion contributed to the shaping of architectural practices within the context of the fascist regime (fig.3, fig. 4).

Deeply ingrained in Western culture, colonialist attitudes and race theories found their way into nationalist rhetoric, which in turn manifested in articles that justified the adoption of traditional forms –a topic extensively discussed since debates surrounding the concept of “local character”–. With the advent of Fascism’s autarkic policies, especially following the imposition of the racial laws in the autumn of 1938, discussions within Italian magazines intensified regarding the relationship between architecture and the Italian identity. These discussions were often spurred by the various commemorative events of that era. The notion of celebrating the Italic lineage had become so deeply entrenched that even the Universal Exhibition planned for Rome in 1942 was set to host two substantial exhibitions. One was centered on health and race, while the other focused on orthogenesis –the first of its kind– within the pavilion commissioned by the Ministry of the Interior. The latter took place in the grand edifice of the Fascist Institute of Orthogenesis and Human Reclamation¹⁰.

The dissemination of the completed and ongoing architectural endeavors was facilitated by architectural magazines, with *Architettura* under the direction of Marcello Piacentini playing a significant role. It was not coincidental that this magazine was chosen as the platform for publishing the design specifications for the “Case della Madre e del Bambino” in 1938¹¹. These specifications were crafted by Alessandro Laurinsich, a distinguished figure in the field of pediatrics, serving as a university lecturer, clinician, and scientist. In a comprehensive article, Laurinsich elucidated the purpose and functions of these buildings, which had sprung up and were intended to proliferate across Italy’s towns and cities. An introductory editorial note emphasized that these buildings were erected in alignment with the regime’s initiatives “in favor of the health of the race”¹². This editorial choice and the prominence given to these architectural endeavors within the magazine reinforced the interplay between architecture, ideology, and public discourse –a convergence that defined the architectural landscape of the era and reflected the broader social and political context of Fascist Italy–.

After the introduction of racial measures in Italy in 1938, the theme of race and its implications became a prominent topic in numerous public debates and discussions involving architects and artists. These dialogues often featured in architectural publications and served as platforms for reflecting on the implications of these measures within the architectural context. For instance, Giuseppe Luraghi, the editor-in-chief of the magazine

¹⁰ “Istituto fascista di ortogenesi e di bonifica umana”, *Architettura*, special issue dedicated to *L’Urbe di Mussolini* (1940): 62-65.

¹¹ Alessandro Laurinsich, “Definizione della Casa della Madre e del Bambino”, *Architettura* XVII (October 1938): 625-633.

¹² “We are pleased to publish a comprehensive study by Prof. Laurinsich on the subject, which is on the agenda, given the Regime’s burgeoning action in favour of race health”, N.d.R. in Laurinsich, “Definizione della Casa...”, 625.

Edilizia Moderna, dedicated an entire triple issue in 1940 to a “complete review of the most significant works carried out in recent years in the field of health care, for the defense of the race”¹³ (fig. 5). This initiative highlighted the connection between architecture, health, and the regime’s racial policies. As the “Case della Madre e del Bambino” structures were realized, articles were consistently published to elucidate the innovative aspects of these architectural creations. For instance, as early as the December 1932 issue of *Domus*, Gio Ponti featured the first “Casa della Madre e del Bambino” in Mortara, designed by Luciano Baldessari with Werner Daniel. Ponti lauded this building as a remarkable example of “clear and fresh” design, characterizing it as a comforting illustration of a “very civilized building”¹⁴. These articles and publications underscored the intertwining of architecture with the political and ideological currents of the time, showcasing how architectural discourse and creation became vehicles for propagating and manifesting the regime’s policies and values.

The influence of Rationalism extended even to architects and engineers who had not previously shown significant interest in the rationalist movement. Gio Ponti, for example, adopted the rationalist design language for the “Case della Madre e del Bambino” structures, despite not being particularly aligned with Rationalism before. From 1933 onward, these buildings were inaugurated across various regions of Italy. This phenomenon, often referred to as the “conversion to rationalism of artists of neoclassical taste”¹⁵, was noted by Edoardo Persico in *Casabella*. In 1934, Ponti designed an unsuccessful project for a nursery school and consulting room. This shift in architectural style and ideology showcased the widespread embrace of rationalism’s principles and aesthetics, even by those who had formerly adhered to different architectural tastes.

¹³ Giuseppe Luraghi, “Editoriale”, *Edilizia Moderna* 34-35-36 (December 1940): 1.

¹⁴ See “Moderne architetture. Architetti Luciano Baldessari e Werner Daniel – Milano. Centro di assistenza materna e infantile Emilia Bossi in Mortara”, *Domus* 60 (December 1932): 727. At the beginning, the structure was only defined as a “nursery”, then later it was decided to call it Maternal and Infant Care Centre; but in 1934, the name “Casa della Madre e del Bambino” was made official, according to the regime’s nomenclature: “Every ‘Maternal and Infant Care Centre’ should therefore be called by a less technical, less dry, but more heartfelt, warmer, more common name: Casa della Madre e del Bambino. This denomination is, after all, part of the nomenclature of the Regime. Alongside the Casa del Mutilato (House of the Mutilated), the Casa del Combattente (House of the Fighter, House of the Student, House of the Balilla (House of the Balilla), the Casa della Madre e del bambino (House of the Mother and Child) could also have an equally evocative place”; see Sileno Fabbri, “La Casa della madre e del bambino”, *Maternità ed Infanzia. Rivista mensile illustrata. Bollettino ufficiale dell’Opera nazionale per la protezione della maternità e dell’infanzia* IX (September 1934): 194-195.

¹⁵ Edoardo Persico, “Nido-Asilo e consultorio (Architetto Gio Ponti)”, *Casabella* 88 (April 1935): 126. The article was unsigned. Giulia Veronesi included it in the anthology dedicated to the writings of Edoardo Persico; see Edoardo Persico, *Tutte le opere (1923-1935) vol. II*, ed. by Giulia Veronesi (Milan: Edizioni di Comunità, 1964), 270. Ponti’s project was also published, but without critical commentary, in “Nido-asilo-consulterio a Bruzzano per l’Opera maternità ed infanzia dedicato dal comune di Milano a S.A.R. Maria Pia di Savoia”, *Rassegna di architettura* (1935): 278-279.



Figure 3. (left) Cover page of the magazine *La Stirpe* XV (September 9, 1937).

Figure 4. (right) Cover page of the magazine *La Famiglia Fascista* I (April 1934). On the cover, Mussolini's phrase: "We must be strong first of all in numbers because if the cradles remain empty, the nation grows old and decays".



Figure 5. Cover page of the magazine *Edilizia Moderna* 34-35-36 (December 1940). Dedicated to sanitary buildings, the magazine features on its cover a picture of the interior of the "Casa della madre e del bambino" built in Brescia by architect Luciano Baldessari.

ONMI and the magazine *Maternità e infanzia*

To disseminate the principles and activities of the ONMI, a magazine titled *Maternità ed Infanzia* was established. This publication was intended for patrons, peripheral managers, and individuals engaged with the organization's work. Founded in 1926, the magazine initially operated on scientific principles, transitioning to a more practical and accessible format with numerous illustrations from 1932 onwards (fig. 6, fig. 7). The inaugural editor-in-chief was Attilio Lo Monaco-Aprile, and Guido D'Ormea, a medical doctor and scientist, served as the editor. Under the presidency of Sileno Fabbri, Carlo Curcio, a professor at the University of Perugia, assumed the role of editor-in-chief from May 1932.

Indeed, a significant number of magazines emerged during the fascist era that specifically addressed the themes of child and maternity care. These publications demonstrated a substantial and broad interest, aligned with the policies of the regime. Some of these magazines included: *La stirpe. Rivista delle corporazioni fasciste*; *Quadrivio*; *La difesa della stirpe. Rivista dell'Unione d'assistenza all'infanzia*; *Humana*; *Difesa sociale. Rivista di igiene, previdenza ed assistenza*; *Clinica ed igiene infantile*; *Il Lattante*; *Rassegna della previdenza sociale*; *Ausonia*; *Le forze sanitarie*; *Tecnica e organizzazione. Nuove macchine, architettura industriale, assistenza sociale*; *L'ospedale italiano*; *Salute*; *Politica sociale*. All these magazines demonstrate a widespread interest, endorsed by the regime's policies.

The ONMI's magazine embarked on a deliberate campaign to popularize the “Case della Madre e del Bambino” structures and the underlying principles behind them. These efforts often involved articles authored by doctors and journalists, which carried an apologetic tone. President Sileno Fabbri also contributed his writings to the magazine, wherein he employed the term “rationalisation”. He used this term to denote a comprehensive set of methods encompassing technique and organization¹⁶. Amid the broader European and Italian resonance of Fordism and Taylorism, the concept of rationalization gained prominence¹⁷. Fabbri's writings underscored the alignment of the ONMI's architectural and organizational pursuits with contemporary industrial and efficiency-driven paradigms¹⁸.

Sileno Fabbri's ideas indeed resonate with the tenets of architectural rationalism and the pursuit of truth, logic, and order. These principles, championed by architects from the Group 7 movement in the celebrated articles published between 1926 and 1927 in *La Rassegna Italiana*, underscored the ideals that permeated various manifestos, declarations, and programs within the architectural discourse of the early 1930s. While it remains unclear how deeply Fabbri was engaged in the animated debates and clashes, including political ones, within Italian architectural culture during that period, his initiatives aligned with the prevailing architectural philosophy. Associating the scientific organization of work

¹⁶ Sileno Fabbri, *L'assistenza della maternità e dell'infanzia in Italia. Problemi vecchi e nuovi* (Naples: Ed. Chiurazzi, 1933), 37-38. The text was also published in the ONMI magazine (May 1932).

¹⁷ See Charles S. Maier, “Between Taylorism and Technocracy: European ideologies and the vision of industrial productivity in the 1920s”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 2 (1970): 27-61; Diana Garvin, “Taylorist Breastfeeding in Rationalist Clinics: Constructing Industrial Motherhood in Fascist Italy”, *Critical Inquiry* 41, n.º 3 (Spring 2015): 655-674.

¹⁸ Fabbri, *L'assistenza della maternità...*, 37-38.

with the holistic development of the spirit and body, and establishing “Case della Madre e del Bambino” across urban and rural centers, necessitated a “rational” reimagining of spaces. These spaces had previously been repurposed in a makeshift manner within eclectic buildings that were initially created for different functions. Fabbri’s focus on rethinking these spaces in a rational manner aligned with the overarching architectural discourse that emphasized functional efficiency, logical design, and a sense of order. Fabbri’s writings also highlighted the fundamental role of hygienic education, proper nutrition, and the overall environmental conditions in addressing maternal and infant mortality. His approach mirrored the architectural and social zeitgeist of the time, reflecting a collective aspiration to apply rational principles to not only architectural design but also broader societal concerns related to health and welfare.

When the well-known controversy that arose on the occasion of the 2nd Exhibition of Rational Architecture organised by Miar (Italian Movement for Rational Architecture)¹⁹, the “Case della Madre e del Bambino” structures, which had evolved beyond being mere nurseries, took center stage. These buildings came to epitomize the apex of “rational” welfare policy within the domain of architecture. This was attributed to their capacity to accommodate a diverse array of functions that had not been previously feasible. Moreover, no existing structures were capable of fulfilling these functions, as elucidated in the pages of the ONMI’s magazine²⁰. The “Case della Madre e del Bambino” represented an architectural embodiment of the comprehensive and multifaceted vision of rationalism within welfare policy. Their design integrated various functions and services under one roof, addressing the needs of mothers and children comprehensively. This strategic approach aligned with the principles of rational architecture, which emphasized functional coherence and efficiency. The buildings thus emerged as tangible expressions of the intersection between architectural design, social policy, and the contemporary discourse on rationalism in Italy. Following the issuance of racial laws in 1938, Alessandro Laurinsich meticulously detailed the guiding principles behind the design of the “Case della Madre e del Bambino” structures. His comprehensive study provided an organic portrayal of these principles, encompassing various aspects ranging from architectural characteristics to internal layout, room distribution, technical systems, materials, and furnishings. Laurinsich’s study elucidated the meticulous and holistic approach that was undertaken to ensure the alignment of these buildings with the regime’s racial policies and health-oriented objectives. In 1938, the ONMI’s health-oriented ethos was reaffirmed by Carlo Bergamaschi in the inaugural issue of the renewed ONMI magazine. This revamped version took on a more restrained character compared to its previous iteration and focused on studies and scientific information pertaining

¹⁹ A vast literature exists on the subject; see, however, Giorgio Ciucci, *Gli architetti e il fascismo. Architettura e città 1922-1944* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1989); Paolo Nicoloso, *Gli architetti di Mussolini. Scuole e sindacato, architetti e massoni, professori e politici negli anni del regime* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1999).

²⁰ “Le case della madre e del bambino nell’anno XIII”, *Maternità ed Infanzia. Rivista mensile illustrata. Bollettino ufficiale dell’Opera nazionale per la protezione della maternità e dell’infanzia* IX (December 1934): 12-13.

to “the material and moral health of the race”²¹. This magazine served as a conduit for disseminating the organization’s principles and activities to a wider audience, reflecting the interplay between architecture, health, and ideological aspirations. From 1940 onward, the collaboration extended to the magazine *Famiglia Fascista*, which was the official organ of the Fascist Union of Large Families. This collaboration resulted in the publication of numerous reports and news bulletins about ONMI’s endeavors, further amplifying the reach of their efforts and their resonance within the larger societal context.

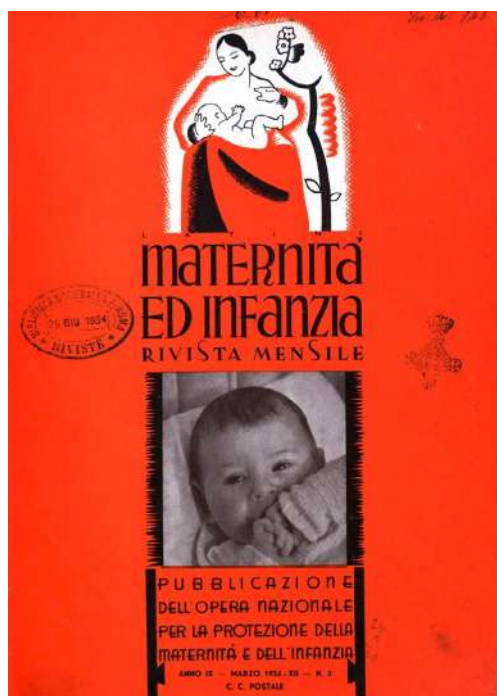
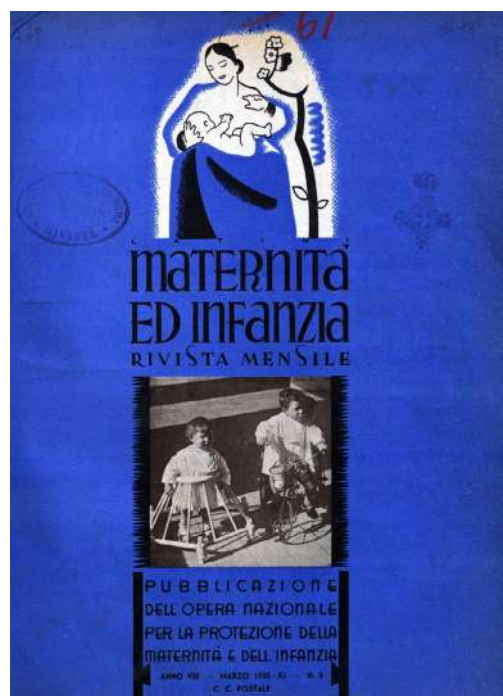


Figure 6. (left) Cover page of the magazine *Maternità ed Infanzia* VIII (March 1933).

Figure 7. (right) Cover page of the magazine *Maternità ed Infanzia* IX (March 1934).

Conclusion

The “Case della Madre e del Bambino” survived after the Second World War. Amidst commissioner administrations, a challenging restart of the bureaucratic machinery, unsuccessful purges, and ordinary administrative activities, the ONMI’s existence continued, despite its limited funding and the fact that it had been one of the most active institutions of the Regime founded on questionable ideologies. This was because the symbolic meanings that had been crucial at the time of its establishment and for much of its existence had gradually faded away.

²¹ Carlo Bergamaschi, “Al servizio di una nobile causa”, *Maternità e Infanzia. Rivista bimestrale dell’Opera nazionale per la protezione della maternità e dell’infanzia* XIII (January-February 1938): 3.

In the aftermath of the conflict, after overcoming the issue of the so-called “betterment of the race”, a legacy of a government that needed to be swiftly forgotten, and in a situation of widespread misery, providing assistance to poor women, needy children, and civilian war victims became a priority. While racism, which was a foundational element of the organization, was soon disregarded, the social and humanitarian values upheld by the ONMI buildings continued to play a central role in providing aid to the region, particularly during a period when financial resources were scarce. Consequently, these houses were repurposed to intervene in support of populations afflicted by inadequate housing, lack of education and food, and, finally, the absence of proper basic healthcare. In the articles written for the revived magazine *Maternità e Infanzia*, compiled in a volume published in 1950, Gemma Gagliardini emphasized how ONMI remained a driving force in the field of welfare, providing swift and comprehensive aid. During that period, ONMI oversaw 3,700 pediatric clinics, 2,300 obstetric clinics, over 100 kindergartens, 800 maternal dining facilities, and most notably, 198 “Case della Madre e del Bambino.” Gagliardini noted that over the previous two years, both services and the number of assisted women had increased significantly: from 500,000 women in 1947 to 1,700,000 in 1949. Furthermore, the number of operational facilities had risen from 171 to 198 within two years, as several buildings, planned before the war, had been constructed or completed in the interim.

The war and the difficulties of the post-war period had exacerbated the issue of abandoned children. In response, ONMI bolstered the activities of the 11 permanent institutes managed by its headquarters, which provided care for minors ranging from 4 to 18 years old. Amidst the political climate of Degasperri’s centrism, Gagliardini’s writings championed the institution and its facilities, amplifying its essential moral work²².

No longer centered around the issue of race and the well-being of young fascists, attention –now taking on a renewed form of political propaganda– shifted in the ONMI magazine towards orphaned children, who were seen as the future fathers of families. These children could acquire Christian values during their formative years, thanks to the efforts of doctors and nuns often tasked with running ONMI facilities. Due to the destruction of many buildings during the war and the subsequent looting, in 1952 the ONMI formulated a comprehensive plan for constructing, reconstructing, and adapting existing structures. The goal was to establish at least one “Casa della Madre e del Bambino” in every regional capital and in all towns with over 10,000 inhabitants. Within the paternalistic Christian Democrat climate of the prosperous post-war years, the focus shifted away from improving lineage and instead emphasized preventive medicine and health education.

Spread across the nation with its extensive network of facilities, the ONMI continued to maintain a prominent position in family support during the early 1970s. This was achieved through a network of 1,960 obstetrical clinics and 6,289 pediatric clinics²³. Over time,

²² Gemma Gagliardini, *Istituti e preventori dell’Opera nazionale maternità e infanzia* (Rome: Stabilimento tipografico ditta Carlo Colombo, 1950), 4.

²³ The data, published in *Maternità e Infanzia* XLI, n.º 9 (1969), were reported also in *Stato e infanzia nell’Italia contemporanea. Origini, sviluppo e fine dell’ONMI 1925-1975*, ed. by Michela Minesso (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007), 191.

premarital clinics and psycho- pedagogical centers were also introduced to augment the organization's offerings. Amidst the tumultuous atmosphere of the era, characterized by debates regarding women's roles, the institution faced significant criticism from politicians and medical professionals. They deemed it financially inefficient and poorly managed, representing a vestige of outdated perspectives on women.

The approval of the Italian law in 1975 aimed at the reorganization of parastatal services proved to be a critical blow to the ONMI. Although it was not explicitly designated for elimination in the official list of organizations, its survival came into question when, in the same year, a law was enacted to establish family counseling centers under the administration of regions, municipalities, various public entities, and non-profit private entities focused on social and health goals. The law abolishing ONMI was approved by the Chamber of Deputies on November 27th and subsequently passed to the Senate. On December 31st, it was published in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale* as Law No. 698 of December 23, 1975. This law outlined the dissolution of ONMI and the transfer of its responsibilities to local authorities such as regions, provinces, and municipalities. With this development ended the history of the institution dedicated to the support of mothers and children, but the time when its work was publicized in the press was long gone.



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