

## Front to Rear: Architecture and Planning during World War II

Conference co-organized by the Institute of Fine Arts, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, and Princeton University's School of Architecture

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Institute of Fine Arts, New York University  
1 East 78th Street, NYC

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#### *Italy 1938: The Autarchic Debate*

On 3 October 1935, Mussolini's fascist regime invaded Ethiopia with undesired but foreseeable consequences for its imperialist aims: four days after the conquest, the Society of Nations imposed the subsequent economic sanctions, promoting an international economic blockage. Although financial retaliations against Italy didn't last long, ending on 15 July 1936, the chance was taken by the dictatorship regime to intensify autarchic policies as a way to overcome the scarcity of raw materials and successfully address the pre-war intricate global panorama. This soon translated into both a ferrous control of foreign currencies in order to purchase commodities in the international markets and a vociferous campaign discouraging those materials as iron and steel, which the military endeavor jealously demanded. Consequently, architecture as a discipline and all the industrial activity around it suffered from governmental interferences through the scarcity and control of commodities, therefore accommodating the discourse to a new tendentiously created material situation. If during the immediate past the defense of modern materials was traditionally articulated around technical and sociological values, the battle in pre-war Italy was politically and geographically focused: after stigmatizing some modern materials as "antinational", the dispute among those who saw in modern techniques a thread to Italian traditional architecture, and those embracing the formal and intellectual basis of modern movement became ideologically loaded. National and autochthonous values came to the fore, promoting local materials as stone, marble, or wood, as a source to diminish the cost of construction following a seeming misinterpretation of the autarchic logic.

The presentation is focused on the written technical reports and the political reactions taking place after the debate organized by *Il Giornale d'Italia* during July and August 1938 and entitled "Per l'autarchia. Politica dell'Architettura". The journal published fifteen articles with contributions of some of the major figures of Italian architecture as Marcelo Piacentini, Gio Ponti or Pier Luigi Nervi. Those articles soon triggered resounding reactions in magazines such as *Casabella* or *Rassegna*, filling their pages with technical investigations and opinionated articles and therefore polarizing the discussion between the architects supporting the official indictments and the ones against. The sour discussion led to a definition of autarchy directly and intimately linked to the cheapness of the outputs on the one hand, but also to a traditional, historicist national turn as a legitimate way to address future challenges in architecture. Material availability became then the battlefield of ideology, intermingling political interests, aesthetic agendas, and warfare events. Even though the paper does not address post-war Italian architecture, the implicit target is to present an episode of the always difficult relationships between politics, architecture, industry, and material contingencies in order to partially unveil the

archaeological precedents of the Italian post-war architecture.

**Pep Avilés** graduated as an architect from the School of Architecture in Barcelona (E.T.S.A.B.) where he also received his Master in History and Theories of Art and Architecture. He has worked as an architect in Spain, Switzerland, and England and he is currently pursuing his Doctoral degree at Princeton University.

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