

The Factory of Illusions in the ‘Third Rome’

Circus Maximus as a Space of Fascist Simulation

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Abstract

Although the site of the ancient Circus Maximus was one of the most loaded spaces of the Fascist ‘Third Rome’, it has received limited attention as a privileged site where a dizzying array of myths and illusions were entertained, simulated, and deposited as new Fascist layers on Rome’s urban and mnemonic palimpsest. Previously a decayed, ‘unsightly’, and overcrowded hodgepodge of layers of life, history, and memory, it was substantially restored, ruthlessly emptied of its previous life, and then used for a multitude of Fascist rituals and projections (parades, celebrations, exhibitions, mass spectacles). In this article, I explore the diverse facets of the circus’s transformation in the 1930s and argue that the site was used as a prime space of enacting and simulating the full thrust of the Fascist regime’s regenerative repertoire, involving erasure and disruption of layers of the past, new additive elements and spatial practices, as well as a multitude of projections of a decidedly modern Fascist new order and temporality.

Keywords

Fascism – Third Rome – Circus Maximus – space – modernism – *romanità* – exhibitions – architecture

The site of the Circus Maximus, the most impressive in scale ancient circus in Rome, has hosted a kaleidoscope of discordant memories across the two millennia of its history. Religion and entertainment, grandiose construction and decay, spectacle and utility, grandeur and poverty – all have inscribed their traces on layers upon layers of soil and memory deposited on the site. Originally

a location that was central to the ancient republican and imperial city – in the shadow of the imperial residence on the Palatine hill, flanked by the Colosseum to the north and the enormous Baths of Caracalla to its southeast –, its fortunes ebbed and flowed in medieval and modern times, mirroring the fate of the entire ancient city under the rule of the popes. As the medieval city's centre of gravity shifted to the north and west of the earlier hub around the Forum, the Circus Maximus was ostracised to the spatial and mnemonic margins of Rome. Abandoned to the ravages of time, delivered to wilful destruction, and gradually erased by layers of alluvial soil from the nearby river Tiber, it traversed the centuries with a rapidly diminishing dignity and reached the nineteenth century as a veritable microcosm of the city itself – faded, confronted with the enormous challenges of modernity, yet retaining a strong mnemonic aura that wrapped so many historic locations across the city's historic centre.

When the producers of the Hollywood blockbuster *Ben Hur* visited Rome in the late-1950s to shoot the film in the city, the Circus Maximus topped the list of their preferred locations. It was a very different site, however, to the incongruous spectacle of decay, unplanned construction, vegetation, alluvial mud, and overcrowding with life and death that had characterised the space only fifty years earlier, at the turn of the twentieth century. In the intervening years, the ancient circus had been excavated, its surviving structures restored or brought to light by stripping away centuries of accretions, its original contours retraced meticulously to match the mental image of the ancient imperial capital in its heyday. The Hollywood producers had chosen the site of the circus as the backdrop for the film's climactic scenes of chariot racing – a somewhat curious preference, given that the film was set in biblical Jerusalem. Having failed to secure shooting locations in North Africa, the producers suffered a further blow when the archaeological authorities of Rome refused to grant them permission to use the expanse of the Circus Maximus for the chariot racing scenes, their argument being that such a use would not be consonant with the historical significance and solemnity of the particular site. Instead, *Ben Hur* was mostly filmed on lavishly constructed sets in the Cinecittà Studios in the outskirts of Rome,¹ with some race scenes moved to another, less known ancient location (Circus Maxentius) along the ancient *Via Appia*.

Ben Hur went on to become one of the defining products of the classic Hollywood register of historical films. Such was the lavishness of the production and the attention to historical detail that many still believe that the

1 Steven Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism: Italian Film and Society, 1922–1943* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 181–183; Anna Maria Torriglia, *Broken Time, Fragmented Space: A Cultural Map of Postwar Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 102, 184.

replica set featured on the film was the original Circus Maximus. Meanwhile, the archaeological Superintendence of Roman Antiquities has revised its benchmarks for what constitutes an ‘appropriate’ use of the site: subsequently the circus was used for football celebrations, art installations, and pop music concerts, to mention but a few of its more unconventional official uses, alongside the daily hordes of walkers and tourists, joggers and lovers that have come to own it in their different ways.² Not without a sense of historical irony, the contemporary abstract shell of the once radiant Circus Maximus has been quietly restored to its original function – that of a vast stage of spectacle and a factory of escapist fantasies.

But there is a further irony to the site’s recent history. The circus that one witnesses today carries the most powerful memories of the modern-day imperial fantasies that consumed the Fascist regime in the 1920s and 1930s. It bears the imprint of the Fascist vision of an ‘excavated’, restored, and re-enacted *romanità*, at the same time a putatively authentic representation of its most powerful millenarian myths and an accurate, if elliptical, simulation of its former glory in situ.³ The trajectory that led from the effaced and deemed ‘unsightly’ circus to the evocatively restored historical site that caught the eye of the producers of *Ben Hur* had been punctuated by a series of highly discordant stages of transformation, all in very rapid succession during little over a decade (1929–40). The circus entered the 1930s as a somber and somewhat peripheral fragment of Rome’s ‘monumental zone’ that stretched from the Forum to the vast ruins of the Baths of Caracalla. It then grew in significance as monumental terminus of two of the most significant avenues carved by the Fascist regime inside Rome’s historic centre, the *Via dei Trionfi* (linking the circus with the Colosseum) and the *Via dell’Impero* (from the Colosseum to *Piazza Venezia*, inaugurated on 28 October 1932); as site of the relocated Obelisk of Axum, seized as war trophy from the conquered Ethiopia (where it remained until its return in 2005⁴); and as starting point of the planned *Via Imperiale* that was to link the city with the impressive new EUR quarter built for the 1942 world fair (*Esposizione Universale di Roma*, E42). But its most spectacular transformation related to the kaleidoscope of its uses in the late 1920s and the 1930s – from an anthropological microcosm of the city’s ordinary life-cycle to violently emptied excavated site, backdrop of various Fascist rituals,

2 Laurretta Colonnelli, ‘L’innovazione entra nell’arena dei gladiatori,’ *Corriere della Serra*, May 4 2012, 48.

3 Joshua Arthurs, *Excavating Modernity: The Roman Past in Fascist Italy* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), especially 91.

4 Brian Haughton, *Haunted Spaces, Sacred Places* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: New Page, 2008), 202.

privileged exhibition space for Fascist propaganda and 'theme park', and then back to the status of an empty, solemn shell, just after the outbreak of the Second World War.

In this article, I use the site of the Circus Maximus as an opportunity to reflect on how the Fascist vision of a regenerated, futural ideal 'new order' was enacted and simulated in the privileged space of Rome – the national capital, the city where the Fascist 'revolution' was consecrated in 1922, and the fount of the regime's millenarian myth of *romanità*. I will argue that the site of the circus experienced the full gamut of the Fascist regenerative repertoire in the 1930s. This ranged from the recovery and re-presentation of a radiant 'Third Rome' amidst the restored ruins of its glorious past to the relentless campaigns of *bonifica*,⁵ and from the expunging of time and the uprooting of popular communities in order to excavate and 'liberate' historic sites to their use for staging the rituals and projections of an alternative, ideal Fascist counter-reality. Given its spectacular transformations and multitude of uses during the Fascist *ventennio*, it is indeed surprising that the story of the circus has been mostly narrated in terms of a contradiction between conservation informed by the spirit of a history-obsessed *romanità*, on the one hand, and ultra-modern futural spectacle, on the other. A new wave of scholarship on Fascism and the 'Third Rome'⁶ has now set the scene for a broader reassessment of Fascism's relation to both the revival of the Roman past and the embrace of an alternative modernity. In line with this new scholarship, I approach the two as inter-related facets of a single overarching regenerative thrust with a revolutionary, futural, and universalist horizon.⁷ Using insights from architectural history, the cultural study of early-twentieth-century modernism, and the analysis of the city's space as a palimpsest of spatial, temporal, and mnemonic layers, I

5 Reclamation; recapturing or engineering of a new perfect state, whether of the environment, culture, social life or the human condition itself.

6 Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007); Jeffrey T. Schnapp, 'Fascism's Museum in Motion,' *Journal of Architectural Education* 45, no. 2 (1992): 87–97; Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo di Pietra* (Rome: Laterza, 2007); Marla Susan Stone, *The Patron State: Culture & Politics in Fascist Italy* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Arthurs, *Excavating Modernity*; Jan Nelis, 'Constructing Fascist Identity: Benito Mussolini and the Myth of Romanità,' *The Classical World* 100, no. 4 (2007): 391–415; Paul Baxa, *Roads and Ruins: The Symbolic Landscape of Fascist Rome* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

7 See the pioneering work of Roger Griffin in this area, especially 'Modernity, Modernism, and Fascism: A "Mazeway Resynthesis";' *Modernism/Modernity* 15, no. 1 (2008): 9–24; and "I am no longer human. I am a Titan. A God!" The Fascist Quest to Regenerate Time,' in *A Fascist Century: Essays by Roger Griffin*, ed. Matthew Feldman (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), 3–23.

analyse the transformations of the Circus Maximus and its surrounding spaces during the 1930s as stages of a single narrative arc of Fascist cosmogony⁸ – material and symbolic, enacted and simulated, effected through erasures, emendations, and additions, yet linked together in a project of ‘destructive creation’ of a new order.⁹ I argue that no other space in Rome hosted or simulated so complete a set of Fascist myths, fixations, and illusions than this austere site on the southern edge of the historic centre; no other recovered fragment of the city’s forgotten past functioned as so rich a space of simulated ‘hyper-reality’¹⁰ that announced and anticipated (as it turned out, all too prematurely and with diminishing correspondence to reality) the arrival of a new Fascist future. With all its spectacular, yet incongruous transformations during the 1930s, with all the losses – of people, buildings, functions, and memory – that it suffered and all the illusions – rebirth, autarchy, human perfectibility, universality – that it nurtured, the space of the Circus Maximus came tantalisingly close to becoming the most ‘Fascist’ of the historical sites of Rome, where Fascism’s volatile and hugely diverse ambitions were simulated, inscribed on space and memory, and then dismantled and suspended.

The Fascist erasure of space and time

The Fascist regime inherited a rich mental image of the ancient city that lay partly ruined amidst Rome’s contemporary visible layer and partly submerged and forgotten underneath it. At the turn of the twentieth century, the professor of Roman topography and head of the Municipal Archaeological Committee Rodolfo Lanciani produced a set of forty-six detailed maps of Roman topography, indicating the presumed location of long-forgotten ancient monuments plotted on the visible surface of the contemporary city. The illustrations were published in serial format between 1893 and 1901 under the title *Forma Urbis Romae*, offering an incredibly detailed two-dimensional reconstruction of the imperial city on a 1:1000 scale.¹¹ In separate publications, Lanciani also recorded

8 Cf. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1959).

9 Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 186–188, 306–309; Federico Caprotti, ‘Destructive Creation: Fascist Urban Planning, Architecture, and New Towns in the Pontine Marshes,’ *Journal of Historical Geography* 33, no. 3 (2007): 651–679.

10 Jean Baudrillard, ‘Simulacra and Simulations,’ in *Modern Literary Theory and Criticism: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge and Nigel Wood. 2nd ed. (Harlow & New York: Longman, 1999), 404–412.

11 Rodolfo Lanciani, *Forma Urbis Romae* (Milan: Hoepli, 1893–1901); translated as *The Ruins and Excavations of Ancient Rome* (London, New York: MacMillan, 1987).

in great detail a story of deliberate and extensive destruction of the ancient city during the medieval and Renaissance periods.¹² The cumulative message was clear – the traces of the city-symbol of western civilisation, so important for the collective identity of the fledgling Italian nation yet so ruthlessly destroyed for centuries, were fading away fast and risked disappearing altogether unless urgent remedial action turned the tide of time.

The imaginary of a once glorious cosmopolis trapped inside, and largely obscured by, the complex stratigraphy of Rome's palimpsest captivated generations of post-unification archaeologists and urban planners, who sought to reveal and restore as much of the Roman heritage as was practically and financially possible. After centuries of degradation, deliberate neglect, wanton destruction, and natural disasters, the historical value of this rich layer in the city's and nation's history received fresh attention. The idea of a vast *passeggiata archeologica* [archaeological park] featuring Rome's most famous and well-preserved ancient ruins was included in the first three regulatory plans of the national capital (1873, 1883, 1909).¹³ The conservationist momentum reached its first peak in the buildup to 1911 – the fiftieth anniversary of the proclamation of the Italian Kingdom. As part of a rich programme of celebrations, including a special world fair and a landmark archaeological exhibition curated by Lanciani, extensive excavations and restorations took place across various sites of the historic centre.¹⁴ The First World War and the turbulent years of the *dopoguerra* put a hold on most of these projects; but the power of the spatial imaginary of the ancient city that was unleashed with Lanciani's pioneering work remained undiminished until the fateful days of late-October 1922, when Mussolini arrived in Rome as prime minister designate. Over the following years, the Fascist regime added its very own mythical layer of *romanità* on this imaginary, authorising an unprecedented in scale and ambition

12 Rodolfo Lanciani, *The Destruction of Ancient Rome: A Sketch of the History of the Monuments* (London: MacMillan, 1899); Rodolfo Lanciani, *Ancient Rome in the Light of Recent Discoveries* (Boston, New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co, 1888); Ronald T. Ridley, *The Eagle and the Spade: Archaeology in Rome during the Napoleonic Era, 1809–1814* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 9–46.

13 Domenico Palombi, *Rodolfo Lanciani: L'archeologia a Roma Tra Ottocento E Novecento*. (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2006), 69–74; Italo Insolera and Francesco Perego, *Storia moderna dei Fori di Roma*. 2nd ed. (Bari, Rome: Laterza, 1999), 15–30.

14 Joshua Arthurs, '(Re)Presenting Roman History in Italy, 1911–1955,' in *Nationalism, Historiography and the (Re)Construction of the Past*, ed. Claire Norton (Washington: New Academia Press, 2007), 27–41.

programme of excavations, restorations, and spatial reconfigurations across the city and beyond.¹⁵

The Circus Maximus featured prominently in Lanciani's *Forma Urbis Romae* as the landmark monument of the valley between the Palatine and the Aventine hills known in ancient times as *Vallis Murcia*. The grandest chariot-racing stadium of the ancient city, measuring 621 by 117 metres and with a rumoured capacity of 200,000 or more, took its final form under emperor Trajan, who replaced the earlier wooden structure of the circus with one made entirely of stone.¹⁶ Time, however, proved unkind to the circus. Natural decay, damage from earthquakes, and frequent flooding from the nearby river Tiber combined with destruction by invading armies and deliberate quarrying authorised by the city's papal authorities. As Lanciani documented, in 1426 nearly half of the circus, together with large parts of the Forum and the Colosseum, perished in order to provide building materials for papal building projects in other parts of the city.¹⁷ Layers of debris and accumulated alluvial soil buried the remains of the circus, creating an empty, amorphous expanse in the periphery of the papal city that was subsequently used as fortification, popular market, site of a gas industrial plant (from 1852 until 1910), and location of public executions. Meanwhile, in the middle of the seventeenth century, the section of the land towards the Aventine hill was conceded to the city's Jewish community for the purpose of using it as burial ground until the move of all burials to the new city cemetery at Verano, on the northeastern edge of the city, in the 1890s.¹⁸ On its overcrowded and chaotic plateau, where discordant communities and functions had coexisted and collided for centuries, the ancient Circus Maximus lay a full six metres below the surface of the modern city, invisible and long forgotten. Whatever space remained vacant on and around the site was to be filled in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries with urban slums, as the city's population started to grow exponentially without the socio-economic infrastructure to absorb the large numbers of internal migrants who moved to the capital from the Lazio region and other parts of the country in search of a better life.

15 Nelis, 'Constructing Fascist Identity,' 391–395; Aristotle Kallis, *The 'Third Rome', 1922–1943: The Making of the Fascist Capital* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014), Chapters 3–6.

16 Marcus Junkelmann, 'On the Starting Line with Ben Hur: Chariot-Racing in the Circus Maximus,' in *Gladiators and Caesars: The Power of Spectacle in Ancient Rome*, ed. Eckart Köhne (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 93–98; Corrado Ricci, 'Circo Massimo,' *Capitolium* 2, no. 4 (1928): 59–61.

17 Lanciani, *Destruction*, 191–192.

18 Attilio Milano, 'Il Cimitero ebraico sull'Aventino,' *Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 9, no. 5–6 (1934): 240–248.

The 1911 excavations – continuing intermittently until 1919 – revealed a few fragments of the ancient circus but did not alter dramatically the uses and appearance of the site. The Fascist regime's chief archaeologist Antonio Muñoz described it in stark terms as one of the most degraded and unsightly spectacles of the city's 'monumental zone':

crumbling slums (*baracche*), shored-up walls, little squares reduced to puddles, streets with their pavement destroyed, fields with unsightly industrial installations, deposits of rags, warehouses of all sorts of refuse covered the vast area, offering the observer who looked on the site from the heights of the Palatine hill a truly miserable spectacle.¹⁹

Still, in 1927 Mussolini included the Circus Maximus in the priority list for the 'works of grandeur' in the capital, alongside the 'liberation' of the Capitoline hill, of the Theatre of Marcellus, and of the Mausoleum of Augustus, as well as the ongoing excavations in the area of the Forum.²⁰ Later in the same year, the published plan for the Aventino quarter (immediately to the south of the site) envisaged the 'liberation' and excavation of the circus, with particular emphasis on its eastern edge, where the medieval *Torre dei Frangipane* stood amidst scattered ruins unearthed during the (incomplete) 1911 excavations.²¹ Until the early 1930s, however, all other projects in Rome's historic centre were eclipsed by the opening of the two new monumental avenues starting from Piazza Venezia (*Via dell'Impero* to the east, *Via del Mare* to the west). Following from the inauguration of the two avenues in late October 1932 (marking the apex of the celebrations for the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome), Muñoz seized the opportunity to direct the Fascist regenerative gaze towards the zone beyond the Colosseum and towards the southern sector of the 'monumental zone'. Muñoz himself was tasked with designing the enlargement of the old *Via San Gregorio* that linked the end of the *Via dell'Impero*, past the Colosseum and the Arch of Constantine, to the eastern edge of the Circus Maximus. Together the three avenues formed a modern-day triumphal procession that cut through the restored and configured ancient hub of the city.²²

19 Antonio Muñoz, 'La Via del Circo Massimo,' *Capitolium* 10, no. 10 (1934): 482.

20 Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Segreteria Particolare del Duce (SPD), Carteggio Ordinario (CO), 500.019 I, 839: Mussolini to Boncompagni Ludovisi, January 13, 1927.

21 ACS, SPD, 500.019 I, 839: 'Il nuovo quartiere Aventino,' *Il Lavoro Fascista*, July 26, 1927.

22 Antonio Muñoz, 'La via dei Trionfi e l'isolamento del Campidoglio,' *Capitolium* 9, no. 11 (1933): 521–547; *Via Dei Trionfi: Isolamento del Campidoglio* (Rome: Governatorato di Roma, 1933). See in general D. Medina Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected: Architecture,*

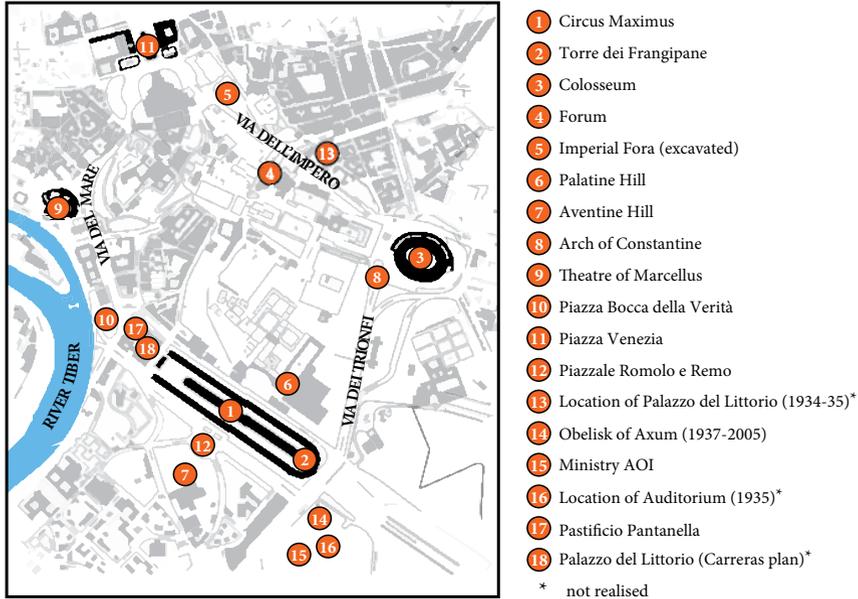


FIGURE 1 *The Circus Maximus in the new topography of the 'Third Rome'.*

It was as part of the project of enlarging the Via San Gregorio that the site of the ancient circus experienced its most profound transformation – one that has largely defined it visually and archaeologically until today. In early September 1933, six weeks ahead of its scheduled inauguration, Mussolini intervened to rename the old street into Via dei Trionfi.²³ Then in 1934 the site of the circus was thoroughly excavated, revealing four-fifths of its original level.²⁴ Mussolini had received ample warning that the excavations would most likely fail to recover a significant part of the site's original structure;²⁵ and, given the detailed information concerning the destruction of the monument during the centuries of papal rule collated by Lanciani, the excavations indeed delivered a disappointingly sparse register of archaeological findings.

Spectacle and Tourism in Fascist Italy (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 4–8.

23 ACS, SPD 500.019 I, 839: Mussolini to Boncompagni Ludovisi, October 6, 1933.

24 ACS, SPD 500.019 I, 840: Boncompagni Ludovisi to Mussolini, June 6, 1934; ACS, Ministero di Pubblica Istruzione (MPI), AABBA, II, 1929–1932, 183; Ministry of Finance to General Directorate of Antiquities and Fine Arts (DGABA), February 10, 1932.

25 ACS, MPI, AABBA, II, 1929–1932, 183; Superintendent of Museums and Excavations of the Lazio province, June 3, 1924.

The excavation work itself – executed in a haste over the summer of 1934²⁶ – showed scant attention to the established archaeological norms, resulting in a flattening of the site's complex stratigraphy and the reburial of elements that were considered of lesser historical significance at the time.²⁷ Still, when Mussolini inaugurated the next stage of the 'monumental zone' on 28 October 1934 (from the circus along the *Viale Aventino* until the southern side of the Aurelian Walls), the excavated and reconfigured site traced accurately the shape and contour of the ancient circus, creating a unique site in the city's ancient zone – a vast blank canvas of a historic space in an otherwise dense urban palimpsest, haunted by faded imperial memories but also bearing the signature of a genuine Fascist regenerative and con-structive achievement.

The dramatic transformation of the Circus Maximus was the product of multiple and insensitive erasure. By the early 1930s, the Fascist authorities and the hordes of professional experts working on 'systematisation' projects across the capital had already embraced the strategy of demolition of recent and contemporary 'humble' urban tissue in order to reveal the earlier layers of Rome's history, 'liberated' from subsequent accretions and unsightly modifications.²⁸ The site that Mussolini inaugurated in 1934 celebrated this act of regeneration through expunging – of space and, through it, time. As the excavations had produced little and truncated original material, Muñoz had ruled out a representation of the ancient circus through reconstruction, opting instead for a space conceived as a natural, evocative landscape.²⁹ A new road carved on the slopes of the Aventine hill (*Via del Circo Massimo*) skirted the length of the circus, offering dramatic vistas over the 'liberated' expanse and the remnants of the Palatine hill on the other side. From the newly constructed square dedicated to Romulus and Remus (*Piazza Romolo e Remo*), the observer could traverse effortlessly with a single gaze millennia of history – from the city's mythic origins to its imperial glories and then all the way to the contemporary revival of *romanità* by Fascism.

In order to manufacture this evocative panorama, the area of the Circus Maximus had been relentlessly emptied of all traces of its rich previous life and use. The kaleidoscope of precariously accumulated layers and memories that had once dotted the site were peeled off without leaving any trace behind.

26 Muñoz, 'Via del Circo Massimo,' 495.

27 Paola Brandizzi-Vittucci, 'L'emiciclo del Circo Massimo nell'utilizzazione post classica,' *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome* 103, no. 1 (1991): 9.

28 Aristotle Kallis, 'The "Third Rome" of Fascism: Demolitions and the Search for a New "Urban Syntax",' *Journal of Modern History* 84, no. 1 (2012): 40–43.

29 Muñoz, 'Via del Circo Massimo,' 496.

The Jewish cemetery that for nearly three centuries covered the southern side of the circus was dismantled with little respect for funerary customs, the tombs transported hastily to a section of the new cemetery in Campo Verano. The trademark cypress trees that once marked the site of the cemetery were rescued but only by being transplanted along the new Via del Circo Massimo. The expropriation of the burial grounds was conducted amicably between Rome's *Governatorato* [municipal government] and the representatives of the city's Jewish community, for reasons of 'public utility'.³⁰ Still, there was a sense of foreboding in this forced exodus of traditional Jewish life from Rome's physical and mnemonic register.

Tightly-knit networks of social and economic life were also dismantled hastily and erased from the area of the circus. The removal of the industrial installations had already started in 1910, with the decision of the owners of the gas plant to relocate to more ample premises in the Ostiense area, then earmarked as the city's industrial zone. In 1928, the Pantanella pasta factory that had occupied a large edifice between the circus and the nearby *Piazza Bocca della Verità* moved to new headquarters on *Via Casilina* in the eastern outskirts of the city. But it was the small makeshift neighbourhoods dotting the area (especially on the slopes of the Palatine and the Aventine hills) that were destroyed with the trademark Fascist insensitive efficiency rehearsed earlier on the neighbourhoods flanking Piazza Venezia. The 'liberation' of the Circus Maximus coincided with one of the Fascist regime's most high-profile campaigns of anthropological erasure, targeting *baracche* [slum settlements] and their inhabitants both inside the metropolitan centre and in the periphery of the capital. The campaign had originated, under strict orders directly from Mussolini, in 1927 but received fresh momentum in the early 1930s, growing in both scope and ruthlessness as years went by. Uprooting 'unsightly' *baracche* combined with the relocation of their former inhabitants in new, purpose-built *borgate* [suburbs] constructed by the *Governatorato* and the *Istituto di Case Popolari* [ICP; Institute of Popular Housing] in increasingly more distant locations of the city's eastern and southern periphery. The campaign of demolishing the urban slums (known as *sbaraccamento*) soon became a project worthy of the anniversary celebrations of the March on Rome, with Mussolini heaping pressure on the municipal authorities to proceed at an even faster pace and on the ICP to extend its programme of social housing.³¹ When it thus

30 Milano, 'Cimitero Ebraico,' 248.

31 Riccardo Crespolani, *L'Istituto Fascista della Casa: Il Problema delle Abitazioni* (Modena: Società Tipografica Modenese, 1929); Luciano Villani, *Le Borgate del Fascismo: Storia Urbana, Politica e Sociale della Periferia Romana* (Milan: Ledizioni, 2012), 13–20.

came to the 'liberation' of the Circus Maximus, the fate of the relatively small number of houses on and around the site had already been sealed; the 'crumbling slums' and their inhabitants would have to go at the shortest of notices. The area had previously hosted one of the ICP's temporary hostels that was used for housing the homeless, the poor but also the increasing victims of the regime's demolitions in the historic centre. It too, however, had been removed in 1928 as too 'unsightly' for the monumental zone.³² More than sixty families were thus forced to abandon their residences, with the option either to be housed temporarily in one of ICP's other (and more distant) emergency hostels or to receive a lump sum of fifty lire as a subsidy that would help them to find their own accommodation elsewhere. Fifty-five of them opted for the latter option, refusing to be transported to such distant locations as the borgata of Pietralata (in the eastern outskirts of the capital) or to be housed in miserable conditions in one of the public dormitories.³³

The search for a Fascist legibility: plans for new constructions and uses

When Mussolini inaugurated the 'liberated' site on 28 October 1934, watching thousands of young athletes compete in a race along the new Via del Circo Massimo, neither the expropriations nor the excavations had been completed, as was typical of many Fascist-era projects that were executed under immense pressure of time due to strict anniversary deadlines imposed by Mussolini himself. Work was meant to continue beyond the inauguration, unearthing as much as possible from the stratigraphy of the circus. 1934 was in fact a year of effervescent anticipation for some of the most ambitious Fascist projects across the monumental zone. The competition for the landmark *Palazzo del Littorio* – the municipal but also national headquarters of the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* [PNF; National Fascist Party] that would also host Mussolini's office and a section of the hugely successful 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution – was in full swing, with the winning design expected to occupy a privileged plot along the new Via dell'Impero, opposite the Basilica of Maxentius and in close proximity to the Colosseum. Plans for further excavations and 'systematisations' in the area had been put on hold in anticipation of the outcome of the competition. But the consensus view was that, after the avalanche of demolitions and excavations, the

32 Villani, *Borgate*, 34.

33 ACS, SPD, 500.019 I, 840: Boncompagni Ludovisi to Mussolini, September 19, 1934.

time was ripe for Fascism to infuse this most significant in symbolic terms part of the city with its own additive markers and legibility.

Between 1935 and 1939, different locations of the zone stretching from the Colosseum along the Via dei Trionfi to the circus were identified as suitable for the construction of high-profile new buildings that were to be chosen through the regime's then favourite medium of architectural competition. In 1937, plans for the construction of the new seat of the *Cassa Malattie per gli Addetti al Commercio* [National Health Insurance Fund for Tradespeople] on a large plot directly opposite the Colosseum resulted in one of these trademark competitions. Closer to the circus, the large empty plot opposite the Torre dei Frangipane at the point where the Via dei Trionfi turned into Viale Aventino was selected as the location of Rome's future auditorium, with yet another competition announced for the project in 1935. The fate of these two competitions was strikingly similar: they were announced with great fanfare as unique opportunities to mark the monumental zone with Fascist-era architecture worthy of the site's significance and Fascism's legacy, they produced an avalanche of designs by some of the most famous architects of the time, they were judged by committees featuring some of the most important curators of architectural taste in the 1930s, they resulted in winning projects or ranked short lists, and then they were declared 'closed' without winners or any further action.³⁴ The auditorium competition in particular delivered some truly imaginative modernist architectural visions that would have completely altered the appearance of the landscape surrounding the excavated circus. The brief envisaged the construction of a set of conjoined gigantic curved or circular volumes aligned with the Via dei Trionfi but also in close visual dialogue with the Circus Maximus. In stylistic terms, this was one of the most open-ended competitions organised by the Fascist regime, blissfully freed from later restrictions relating to the use of 'autarchic' materials or symbolic tributes to imperial *romanità*. The project by Francesco Fariello, Saverio Muratori, and Giuseppe Quaroni framed the large circular volume of the auditorium with two rectilinear buildings executed in the clean, measured, and pure style that was the trademark of Italian 'rationalist' architecture in the early 1930s. The solution offered by Gino Cancellotti and Alfredo Scalpelli featured four interconnected volumes organised in a symmetrical curved composition. More austere and inspired by the Roman imperial past but still opting for a modern style based on abstraction, purity of form, and strict attention to the functional aspects of the project (especially acoustics and

34 'Concorso per l'Auditorium di Roma,' *Architettura* 14, no. 12 (1935): 671–691.

crowd circulation) was the project signed by Mario De Renzi, Adalberto Libera, and Giuseppe Vaccaro. A different interpretation was offered by Luigi Vietti, who designed a more plastic, egg-shaped shell punctured by the oval of an open-air amphitheatre.³⁵

By the time that the competition for the auditorium was declared 'closed' and the project was abandoned, seismic changes had already started to transform the Fascist regime's attitude to modern architecture and its plans for Rome's monumental zone. In October 1935, Fascist Italy declared war on Ethiopia. This was a decision that would have enormous implications on numerous levels. First, victory in Ethiopia in May 1936 paved the way for the proclamation of the Fascist *impero* and marked a full-scale realignment of Fascist aesthetics with a rhetorical classical architectonic taste that echoed more accurately the new narrative of revived imperial *romanità*. This change marked the turning of the tide for modernist architecture, especially inside Rome. The earlier effervescent pursuit of a visual dialogue between the ruins of the Roman past and a contemporary architecture infused with the spirit of modernist experimentation gave way to a stricter official style for new buildings that dictated an increasingly closer emulation of classical stylistic elements and thus restricted the creative freedom of the architects. Second, the invasion of Ethiopia provoked an international backlash against Fascist Italy and led to the imposition of economic sanctions on the country. In response, Mussolini sponsored the policy of national *autarchia* [autarchy], which outlived the Ethiopian war and the sanctions, becoming a primary component of the regime's ideological discourse for the rest of the 1930s. The policy of autarchy meant that architects were increasingly more constrained in their choice of materials for their designs, favouring stone and marble at the expense of steel, aluminium, and reinforced concrete that were linked – both stylistically and in construction terms – with contemporary modernist architecture. Third, the international isolation of Fascist Italy during the Ethiopian war paved the way for a rapprochement with National Socialist Germany and soon afterwards sealed the alliance between the two regimes.³⁶ The relationship between the

35 Alessandra Muntoni, *Roma tra le due Guerre: Architettura, modelli urbani, linguaggi della modernità* (Rome: Kappa, 2010), 290; Piero Spagnesi, 'Roma 1921–43: I concorsi di architettura,' in *L'Architettura dell'Altra Modernità: Atti del XXVI Congresso di Storia dell'Architettura, Roma 11–13 Aprile 2007*, ed. M. Docci and M.G. Turco (Rome: Gangemi, 2010), 363–364.

36 John F. Pollard, *The Fascist Experience in Italy* (London: Routledge, 1998), 87–103; M. Giulia Marziliano, *L'Italia che si rinnova* (Santarcangelo di Romagna: Maggioli Editore, 2010), 93–101.

two countries, regimes, and leaders was to have a profound transformative effect on the history of Italian Fascism, leading to an idiosyncratic form of covert competition for primacy that would leave a lasting mark on the future transformation of Rome.³⁷

Along with the plans for the auditorium, the competition for the Palazzo del Littorio on Via dell'Impero was revised and repeated in 1937. The second time, the building had changed location – an ample plot at the southern end of Viale Aventino, much further away from the monumental zone. All ideas and plans for the further development and embellishment of the new network of avenues opened by the Fascist regime in Rome's historic centre that had been put on hold pending the decision of this landmark competition now came back to the fore. Without the new Palazzo del Littorio – and given the scant archaeological findings along Via dei Trionfi and on Circus Maximus –, the new triumphal itinerary continued to lack either a definite form or a clear Fascist legibility. As a response, two separate projects that took shape in the course of 1937 implicated the area of the Circus Maximus. The first came on a speculative basis from the architect Guido Carreras. His main concern was to give the Via dei Trionfi a function and appearance worthy of its name and historical associations. To that effect, he petitioned the authorities with a plan to turn the Circus Maximus into the primary area of Fascist party rallies, parades, and other political festivities. Carreras bemoaned the under-utilisation of the vast expanse of the excavated circus, seeing it as the perfect setting and most functional space for the regime's political liturgies. His plan envisaged the transformation of the Via dei Trionfi into the principal tributary for parades and crowds feeding the area of the circus, with enlarged sidewalks lining up each side of the avenue that could hold up to 60,000 spectators. The area of the Circus Maximus itself, according to Carreras's plan, would be divided into two sections – one dedicated to rallies and the other reserved for military or other inspections – and would be framed by a network of new buildings: in addition to the auditorium, a Centre of Political Studies, a new Museum of the Empire on the Aventine hill (a gargantuan edifice occupying most of southern side of the Via del Circo Massimo that would replace the existing – since 1926 –, smaller premises of the museum in the nearby ex-Pantanella building), and finally the Palazzo del Littorio itself, scaled down to fit the plot between the western tip of the circus and the Piazza Bocca della Verità, enveloping the ancient church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin. From this building, a massive elevated

37 Kallis, *The 'Third Rome,'* Chapters 7–8; cf. Aristotle Kallis, *Fascist Ideology: Territory and Expansionism in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (London: Routledge, 2000), 138–158.

balcony (*arengario*) would function as the main platform from which the Duce would address the amassed crowds below.³⁸

Carreras's plan appears to have been discussed favourably by Mussolini and the Governatorato³⁹ but never truly considered as a viable option for the final reconfiguration of the zone. At any rate, it was rejected by archaeological authorities keen on continuing the excavations on the site. Other decisions too superseded it – the Palazzo del Littorio moved once again from its second site on Viale Aventino to a vast plot adjacent to *Foro Mussolini* on the northern edge of the city, where a far larger area for mass rallies was being planned (but never executed) by the architect Luigi Moretti (*Piazzale delle Adunate*). One symbolic connection, however, that Carreras had attempted to make with his plan did survive and form the centrepiece of a second project that was soon to transform the gravitas of the site. In the early autumn of 1937, a small square at the foot of Via dei Trionfi and opposite the circus – *Piazza di Porta Capena* – was chosen for the relocation of the seized Obelisk of Axum – a war trophy from the invasion of Ethiopia that was transported in five pieces all the way to the Italian capital and was erected there, its inauguration coinciding with the fifteenth anniversary of the March on Rome (28 October 1937).⁴⁰ This was a key moment in the 'fascistisation' of the site, at a time when the entire city basked in the glory of ancient imperial memories, courtesy of the bimillenary anniversary of emperor Augustus's birth. But the identification of Circus Maximus with the new narrative of imperial *romanità* did not stop there. Although Carreras's idea for a Museum of the Empire on the Aventine hill never materialised, the circus was soon chosen as the starting point of a new avenue, suitably named Via Imperiale, that would lead through the southern part of the city's monumental zone to the new city that the Fascist regime planned to build for the 1942 world fair in the southern-western periphery of Rome.

The simulation of an ideal Fascist future

When Adolf Hitler arrived in Rome for his six-day official visit in Italy in the evening of 3 May 1938, the meticulously planned itinerary of his convoy offered him a superb first view of the Circus Maximus – in addition to the Via dei Trionfi

38 ACS, SPD, 167.694: Promemoria del Progetto Guido Carreras, May 5, 1936; the full plan was submitted on June 6, 1936.

39 ACS, SPD, 167.694: Ricci to Capo Gabinetto and Ministry of Press and Propaganda, August 11, 1936.

40 ACS, SPD, 174.330: Colonna to Mussolini, March 6 and April 20, 1937.

and the Via dell'Impero –, dramatically flood-lit and embellished for the occasion.⁴¹ It was a glimpse that would also punctuate three more of his busy days in Rome, including a lengthy inspection of military troops along the Via del Circo Massimo. For the Fascist regime, the visit of the Nazi delegation was a unique opportunity to both steal the international limelight and impress their visitors with an avalanche of vistas over the transformed 'Third Rome'. Predictably, every aspect of the visit had been studied and prepared months in advance, with extraordinary attention to detail and lavish spending.⁴² In the final hectic months leading up to Hitler's arrival, the Governatorato of Rome and the Ministry of Popular Culture oversaw a vast operation that included the decoration of the streets, the completion of excavation and re-configuration projects, as well as a long list of cosmetic interventions aimed at awing the Nazi delegation.⁴³

What Hitler actually saw, however, when his cavalcade brought him past the Circus Maximus was a rather surprising spectacle – not an austere, empty vast expanse under the shadow of the imperial ruins that dotted the peak of the Palatine hill but something that resembled a model city in construction, occupying every inch of the original surface of the excavated circus. At the time of Hitler's visit, the site was being prepared for a special exhibition organised by the PNF and dedicated to the regime's after-work programme of leisure activities (*Mostra del Dopolavoro*). The exhibition opened its gates barely two weeks after the departure of Hitler and his entourage. But this was the third such event organised on the grounds of the circus. Hitler's visit coincided with a period of change-over between a special exhibition on national textile and fashion (which closed in February 1938) and the *Mostra del Dopolavoro* that would succeed it. These two events had been preceded by an exhibition dedicated to the special Fascist summer camps and other forms of assistance to children (*Mostra delle Colonie Estive e Assistenza all'Infanzia*) that had lasted from June to September 1937, closed in time for the inauguration of the relocated Obelisk of Axum in Piazza di Porta Capena a month later. After the exhibition of the *Dopolavoro*, the PNF organised a final exhibition event on the circus, this time with an 'autarchic' theme (*Mostra Autarchica del Minerale Italiano*), which lasted until the spring of 1939.

41 Archivio Storico Capitolino (AC), Ripartizione X, 116/1: Muñoz to Capo Gabinetto, April 29, 1938.

42 Paul Baxa, 'Capturing the Fascist Moment: Hitler's Visit to Italy in 1938 and the Radicalization of Fascist Italy,' *Journal of Contemporary History* 42, no. 2 (2007): 227–242.

43 ACS, Ministero di Cultura Popolare (MCP), Gabinetto, 63: 'Viaggio del Fuehrer in Italia', Docs 25–42, various versions of the maps marking the itinerary planned for Hitler and the German delegation in May 1938.

The quartet of PNF exhibitions on the Circus Maximus formed a unique subset of the Fascist regime's impressive exhibition register in the 1930s. The two most high-profile events – the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* [Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution] (1932–34) and the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* [Augustan Exhibition of Roman Civilisation] (1937–38) had been hosted inside the dedicated exhibition space of the neo-classical *Palazzo delle Esposizioni* in the modern centre of Rome. Hitler's itinerary in May 1938 included the obligatory tribute to the latter, as well as a visit to the second iteration of the original, hugely successful 1932 exhibition that had been transferred to another location – the Museum of Modern Art in Valle Giulia. When, however, the PNF authorities approached the Governatorato and the archaeological authorities in 1936 with a request to use the premises of the Circus Maximus as temporary exhibition space, they broke new ground and teased the limits of what was considered until then appropriate use of historic sites in the capital. The original request was met with significant opposition from the archaeological authorities – both as a matter of principle and because the timeframe of the exhibition clashed with plans to continue the excavations in the zone, as Mussolini himself had demanded during one of his frequent supervisory visits to the area a few months earlier.⁴⁴ Yet, the Duce was capable of spectacular, inexplicable u-turns at very short notice. When confronted with the PNF request, he acquiesced without hesitation, noting that 'the excavations could wait'.⁴⁵

This was of course not the first time that Fascism had deliberately sought to stage its own events against the backdrop of ancient monuments and celebrated sites in the capital. Even before Mussolini's ascent to power, the Fascists had descended on Rome to hold their third national congress in November 1921, against the dramatic backdrop of the Mausoleum of Augustus. In October 1932, the celebrations for the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome culminated in a spectacular parade along the newly opened Via dell'Impero, with Mussolini traversing the avenue on horseback, against the dramatic backdrop of the Colosseum and the excavated Fori. Meanwhile, the Via dei Trionfi had quickly become the site of choice for the most spectacular military parades, again mining the millenarian imperial associations of the surrounding ruins. But from the mid-1930s onwards the Fascist authorities appeared far more inclined to grant permission to use the historical sites themselves for celebratory occasions – not as passive setting but as the deliberate spatial frame that infused the

44 ACS, SPD, 500.019 I, 841: Colonna to Mussolini, December 31, 1936.

45 ACS, SPD, 500.019 I, 841: Mussolini to Colonna, January 2, 1937.

regime's rituals with a more profound historical significance.⁴⁶ With its vast space, resplendent location, and unrivalled imperial symbolism, the Circus Maximus could not escape its destiny as a premium space for the burgeoning programme of open-air Fascist mass events. Almost immediately after its restoration in 1934, requests to use the grounds for ceremonial purposes flooded the Fascist authorities and the municipal administration. The newly systematised area was seamlessly incorporated into the ceremonial itinerary of the parades marking the anniversary celebrations of the March on Rome from 1934 onwards.⁴⁷ Although the site underwent successive restoration and 'clearing' work in 1935–37, it was often used for highly-publicised Fascist events with military or youth themes. Its vast, unordered, and unassuming space was the ultimate blank canvas in the midst of the city's historic centre – loaded with imperial memories but at the same time fluid and pliable to serve a host of diverse Fascist rituals.⁴⁸

The overall responsibility for the transformation of the site into a temporary exhibition space was assigned to the same two architects who had caused a sensation with their audaciously modernist temporary facade for the 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution – Adalberto Libera and Mario De Renzi. The two architects had participated with separate projects in the competition for the Palazzo del Littorio on the Via dell'Impero in 1934; and had joined forces to produce a design for the 1935 competition for the new auditorium building opposite the circus (see above). Yet, as we saw earlier, their efforts to infuse their modern architectonic vision into the heart of Rome's monumental zone had been thwarted on both occasions because of the regime's decision to either revise or cancel the competitions. Now, together with the painter Giovanni Guerrini, they transformed the vast expanse of the ancient site into a miniature simulation of a perfectly ordered ideal city, with an ample avenue leading the visitor from the entrance through the perfectly arranged thematic pavilions to the imposing *Padiglione dei Congressi* on the other end of the circus and back.⁴⁹ The perfect visual

46 See, for example, AC, Rip X, 1920–53, 159/5: Rip X to Inspector of Archaeological Sites, December 27 1938, where it is noted that permission has been granted for the use of Trajan's Markets to numerous Fascist organisations; cf. Muñoz to Head of Gabinetto, January 19, 1938.

47 ACS, SPD, 500.019 I, b.840: Boncompagni Ludovisi to Mussolini, June 3, 1934.

48 Marla S. Stone, 'A Fascist Theme Park,' in: *Visual Sense: A Cultural Reader*, ed. E. Edwards and K. Bhaumik (Oxford & New York: Berg, 2008), 274.

49 Maria Luisa Neri, *Mario De Renzi: L'architettura come mestiere, 1897–1967* (Rome: Gangemi, 1992), 126.

order and austere classicist perspective of the exhibition complex was nevertheless juxtaposed to the bold appearance of individual structures, innovative use of modern 'autarchic' materials (combinations of timber, glass but mostly metal), and cutting-edge construction techniques.⁵⁰ The ephemeral architecture designed for the first exhibition in 1937 was subsequently adapted to suit the specific requirements of the subsequent exhibition events, complemented by a host of new pavilions executed by other celebrated architects of the time;⁵¹ but the overall spatial and visual concept executed by Libera and De Renzi remained firmly in place throughout the 1937–39 exhibition quartet of the Circus Maximus.⁵² Simulations of beautifully designed summer youth colonies and luscious gardens with spectacular water fountains were replaced by impressive fashion designs and advertisements, then by a kaleidoscope of open-air theatres and cinemas, and finally by impressive production facilities and displays of bold scientific innovations. Against the unique backdrop of the remains of the ancient metropolis, the temporary arrangement of the site enacted diverse facets of an ideal, illusory, yet bizarrely tangible and 'real' present of hyper-modern achievement, projecting a miniature image of a perfectly ordered, regenerated, prosperous, and innovative society.⁵³

The use of the Circus Maximus as spatial frame for Fascist thematic exhibitions was audacious and bewildering in equal measure. Unlike the use of other historic sites – both ancient and medieval – for particular events, there was no connection between the circus and the exhibitions's content. What is more, the four themes (infancy, fashion, leisure, and autarchy) celebrated present achievement and future ambition, with no discernible historical subtext that could invoke, however obliquely, the site's illustrious historical associations. In contrast to the mythical, largely intangible subtext of the 1932 and 1937 major exhibitions held in Rome, the mostre of Circus Maximus celebrated ostensibly concrete achievements in specific fields of social, economic, and scientific activity under Fascism. When the first exhibition opened its doors on 20 June 1937, it was an experiment that had been authorised as an exceptional, one-off event. The success, however, of the exhibition dedicated to summer camps and

50 Elena Mucelli, *Colonie di Vacanza Italiane degli Anni '30: Architetture per l'Educazione del Corpo e dello Spirito* (Florence: Alinea, 2009), 111.

51 Stone, 'Fascist theme park,' 277.

52 Francesco Garofalo and Luca Veresane, *Adalberto Libera* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), 93–98.

53 'La mostra delle Colonie Estive e dell'Assistenza all'Infanzia,' *Architettura* 16, no. 6 (1937): 307–332.

infancy prompted Mussolini to change his mind one more time, granting permission to use the site as temporary exhibition space for further PNF events, in rapid succession.⁵⁴

Taken together, the four PNF exhibitions that were hosted on the grounds of the Circus Maximus extended the narrative of the 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution into a new era of concrete Fascist achievement. Although the 1932 event had a strongly retrospective character focused on the 1914–1922 period, its concluding room on the upper floor of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni hosted a condensed panorama of Fascist regenerative agency that had marked the first decade of its rule. In hindsight, it appears that the four PNF exhibitions picked up the narrative thread from that room and populated it with new panoramas that paid tribute to the Fascist regime's key policy areas: the production of a 'new man' reborn as the perfect embodiment of Fascist values, the forging of a new Fascist generation through the regime's dedicated institutions from cradle to adult life, the spirit of globally leading innovation in the fields of science and commerce, and the putative achievements of the policy of 'autarchy'. A new narrative of 'Fascist revolution', leading from the dramatic events chronicled in the 1932 exhibition through the experiments of human regeneration (the multifaceted Fascist policy of *bonifica umana*) to the dynamism invested in the project of autarchia and to the achievements of the regime's campaign for land reclamation (*bonifica integrale* – a mini-exhibition, in fact, hosted at the same time with the one dedicated to the autarchic mineral industry), had found its tangible expression inside the splendidly remodelled space of the Circus Maximus, effectively collapsing for the benefit of the spectators the 'revolution that *is becoming*' into the illusion of the 'revolution that *is*'.⁵⁵

The growing sense of permissiveness in the use of historic sites across Rome's monumental zone for propaganda events divulged a deeper transformation of the Fascist regime's attitude vis-à-vis the city's ancient imperial heritage. The earlier deference of the curatorial approach that was respectful of the archaeological experts's rulings had gradually given way to a sense of Fascist ownership that underpinned the growing list of permissions to use monuments for all kinds of spectacles. The Circus Maximus experienced this transformation in the starkest terms. When the PNF was preparing the site for the fourth exhibition on 'autarchic' mineral production, it did not even seek permission to construct a special pavilion dedicated to combustible carbon

54 ACS, Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF), 334: PNF report on the Circo Massimo, November 17, 1940.

55 Carlo Magi-Spinetti, 'La prima Mostra dell'Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro al Circo Massimo,' *Capitolium* 13, no. 7 (1938): 353–60.

materials near the most sensitive – in archaeological terms – eastern hemisphere of the circus, next to the medieval Torre dei Frangipane. The city's archaeological authorities protested to no avail. Concerns about potential damage to the tower or the site's stratigraphy were brushed aside, as were broader issues of respect for the aesthetic integrity of one of the capital's most celebrated ancient sites.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, the oversized, dramatically illuminated facade of the exhibition's main pavilion did feature a gigantic imperial eagle that seemed to acknowledge the historical associations of the site with the Roman Empire; but the historical analogy was dwarfed by the most denotative of messages framing the decoration. The vindication of the Duce's policy of autarchia and the dictum 'Mussolini is always right', both imprinted on the facade with the boldest typography, together with the unashamedly modernist aesthetics of the pavilions, projected a future of pioneering achievement, heralding – all too prematurely – the arrival of a futural model Fascist society.⁵⁷

With the conclusion of the 'autarchic' exhibition in May 1939, it appeared that the exhibition cycle of the Circus Maximus had finally come to an end. The party reached an agreement with the Governatorato to return the use of the site to the municipal authorities, the exhibition facilities dismantled and the area cleared for different future uses. Instead, however, of resuming the excavations, already pending since 1935 and with the calls renewed as the 1942 world fair loomed on the horizon, Rome's municipal authorities had other, very different ideas about the immediate future of the site. The Governatorato came into a commercial agreement with a consortium of private enterprises to lease the site of the circus for the construction of a *parco attrazzioni* – what could be accurately described as an enormous 'theme park' occupying the nearly 50,000 square metres of the circus.⁵⁸ A new *Villaggio Balneare* [seaside village], complete with swimming pools, artificial forests, and a theatre, proved a spectacular success in the summer of 1939, with half a million visitors. Although the 'seaside village' was closed somewhat prematurely due to the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, the decision of the Fascist regime not to join the military campaign revived the fortunes of the theme park. During the winter of 1939/40, the area underwent yet another

56 AC, Ripartizione X, 161/1/B: Director of Ripartizione X to Capo Gabinetto, July 6, July 27, and August 20, 1938; Collini to Muñoz, July 2, 1938.

57 Jeffrey Schnapp, 'Mostre,' in *Kunst und Propaganda im Streit der Nationen 1930–1945*, ed. Hans-Jörg Czech und Nikola Doll (Dresden: Sandstein, 2007), 66–67.

58 Marla S. Stone, 'A Flexible Rome: Fascism and the Cult of Romanità,' in *Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture 1789–1945*, ed. Catharine Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 217–218.

transformation, this time to simulate a 'winter village' with a skating ring and a large 'attraction park'. The last recorded use of the space for exhibition purposes was for the *Mostra Alberghiera* [Exhibition of Hotel Owners], which closed in April 1940. By that time, the city authorities had taken the decision to completely dismantle the entertainment village and return the site to the archaeologists for its final reorganisation, to the dismay of the commercial franchise that had leased the premises until the autumn of 1940.⁵⁹

Conclusions: the Fascist simulacrum?

Just as the commercial tenants of the Circus Maximus were grudgingly dismantling the installations of the remaining exhibition and fun fair, Mussolini approved the final stage of the 'systematisation' of the area of Circus Maximus. A fresh programme of excavations and aesthetic embellishments were (partly) executed in 1940–42 on the circus, alongside the opening of the Via Imperiale that would lead to the entrance of the E42 exhibition quarter, then under feverish construction, before the eventual termination of all work relating to the 1942 world fair. The location's primary association with imperial *romanità*, already entrenched with the presence of the Obelisk of Axum since 1937, received a further boost with the decision to construct the premises of the newly instituted Ministry of Italian East Africa (*Africa Orientale Italiana*) opposite the circus and next to the obelisk – the same site that had been initially reserved for Rome's new auditorium that joined the long list of Fascist-era projects in Rome remaining on paper. The competition for the ministry building began in 1938, went into two stages but resulted a year later in the unprecedented decision to ask two winning teams to work together on the basis of a redesigned hybrid design. Construction began in 1939 under the overall supervision of Vittorio Cafiero and Mario Ridolfi but progress was interrupted by the war⁶⁰ (it was completed, with significant modifications, in the early 1950s and offered to the United Nations).

Within just over a decade (1929–40), the site of the Circus Maximus had witnessed a dramatic, multiple transformation: from a decaying, chaotic palimpsest of layers and uses to a somber archaeological site, violently emptied of its previous life (industrial installations, slum settlements, markets, the Jewish cemetery), seamlessly integrated into a new Fascist triumphal itinerary

59 ACS, PNF, 334: PNF report on the Circo Massimo, November 17, 1940; 104.113, 312; Borghese to Mussolini, April 15, 1940.

60 Spagnesi, 'Concorsi,' 365–367.

across the remnants of the ancient 'city of Caesars'; then to a premium projection canvas of a simulated Fascist reality; and finally to a space of pure illusion and escapism. But perhaps the most eccentric usage of the site occurred in the summer of 1939, as part of the installations for the 'seaside village'. The success of this particular theme park owed a lot to the use of the occasion by the state broadcaster EIAR (*Ente Italiano per le Audizioni Radiofoniche*) for the first experimental television transmissions to the public through a set of screens placed inside a dedicated section of the installation.⁶¹ Broadcasting for roughly two hours every day, the television transmission event formed part of a dress rehearsal for the expected wider use of the medium in the context of the impending 1942 world fair.

The use of experimental television transmissions to project, and thus make 'real', carefully redacted images of a Fascist reality, confirmed the transformation of the Circus Maximus into the factory of Fascist illusions par excellence. Starting with the PNF exhibitions of 1937–39 and reaching its apogee with its various commercial uses in 1939–40, the historic site became a space of pure creative *simulation*. What was being simulated had little to do with a nostalgic retreat into the past, whether the faded glory of the ancient imperial *romanità* or the romantic vision of a more authentic, harmonious society steeped in tradition and expunged from the putative ills of western modernity. Instead, the vast expanse of the excavated and re-modelled circus (only a few years earlier described as 'a receptacle for the worst eyesores . . . [and] a truly miserable site'⁶²), now filled with modernist pavilions and futuristic displays, announced the supposed arrival of a Fascist future and sought to simulate it as a living, authentic experience for the benefit of its visitors. The PNF organisers' choice of an open-air exhibition setting, as opposed to an enclosed hall or museum, aimed to foster the illusion of an authentic, real-life experience; and each of the PNF exhibitions and subsequent theme parks highlighted this tendency further by reconstructing entire ideal sites ('villages', houses complete with rooms, gardens, theatres, camps etc) on the grounds the circus – not static but perfectly three-dimensional and dynamic, not as abstract symbols but purporting to be 'real' material simulations.

The future Fascist ideal society that the rapid succession of exhibition and entertainment events simulated on Circus Maximus never arrived of course. Simulation preceded, de-temporalised, and perverted reality. The simulated images and sensations gradually turned into a dizzying parade of

61 Diego Verdegiglio, *La Tv di Mussolini: Sperimentazioni televisive nel ventennio fascista* (Rome: Cooper & Castelvechi, 2003), 189–203.

62 Arthurs, *Excavating Modernity*, 75.

simulacra – not so much a condensed, idealised *representation* of Fascist reality as something unchained from reality itself, disguising itself as the ‘real’ thing, masking the absence of the ‘reality’ that it allegedly represented.⁶³ More than any other new, ‘framed’ or ‘systematised’ site inside the capital, the Circus Maximus supplied form and narrative context to disparate Fascist myths and ideological obsessions before turning into a vortex of escapism – for its visitors, the organisers, and the Fascist regime itself.⁶⁴ In this rapid succession of manufactured images, sensations, words, and memories generated through its disparate uses in 1934–40, the Circus Maximus became something akin to a vast magic mirror, on the prismatic surfaces of which a litany of Fascist illusions were pieced together, simulated, and then dismantled and defeated by reality itself.

Still, the paradox of an unashamedly futural Fascist counter-reality simulated in starkly modernist style and effect against the backdrop of one of the most historic sites of ancient Rome casts a different light on the regime’s attitude to both *romanità* and modernity. Far from being a reactionary and regressive form of *passatismo*, far from functioning solely as a cynical ‘propaganda’ scenery, loaded with empty rhetoric and lacking in ideological substance, the Fascist interventions in, and uses of, the Circus Maximus captured the multiple traces of the most expansive and multifaceted Fascist regenerative ambition. Through erasure and ‘cleansing’, disruption of the layers of stratigraphy and memory, addition of new architectonic forms, and saturation with a host of new spatial practices, the circus became a space where millennia of (redacted) history interpenetrated and became sedimented, deliberately collapsing the past into the future and celebrating the agency of the new Fascist historical subject.⁶⁵ Just like Fascism injected a new leash of glorious life into the decayed circus, scaling back the unkind effects of time, the site itself functioned as a powerful contemporary mythopoeic ‘frame’, mined for all sorts of Fascist rituals in order to inject them with the aura of time- and space-less universality. The planned itinerary of the Via Imperiale, starting from the Circus and leading to the new E42 exhibition quarter where the Fascist regime

63 Baudrillard, ‘Simulacra,’ 406; Nan Ellin, ‘Shelter from the Storm or Storm follows Fear and Vice Versa,’ in *Architecture of Fear*, ed. Nan Ellin (Princeton NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 40.

64 Terence Young, ‘Grounding the Myth: Theme Park Landscapes in an Era of Commerce and Nationalism,’ in *Theme Park Landscapes: Antecedents and Variations*, ed. Terence Young, Robert Riley (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 6–8.

65 Claudio Fogu, *Historic Imaginary: Politics of History in Fascist Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 34.

planned the most dramatic and fullest consecration of its universalist project, became a metaphor of Fascism's entire trajectory – from futural ambition steeped in the mythology of Rome to the haunting *nonfinito* of its 'Third Rome', suspended and shattered, another fading layer in the history and topography of the millennial city.