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Building Tresigallo: The City of Edmondo Rossoni (1933-1939)

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Abstract: Between 1933 and 1939 Minister Edmondo Rossoni transformed his hometown, a modest village, into a modern center of industrialized agriculture. Rossoni wanted to experiment a new economic, political, and social model within the Ferrara countryside and, at the same time, aimed to consolidate his power over the territory. The Minister asked the young and trusted engineer Carlo Frighi to give substance to his project. A provincial construction site was quickly transformed into a dynamic workshop that attracts many workers and involves designers and craftsmen from all over Italy. This has emerged from a bibliographic and archival survey that refocused the history of a town that still confronts, through its architecture, its history, and a difficult legacy.

Key words: Tresigallo, Edmondo Rossoni, city of autarky, urban refunding.

1. Introduction

In the 20th century, numerous newly founded towns were built in Italy at the wishes of a particular client who cultivated a political, economic, or social project. Among the examples with a different vocation, Tresigallo, a hamlet of the municipality of Formignana, in the province of Ferrara, is an emblematic case of a town re-founded over the site of a small pre-existing village by Edmondo Rossoni, Minister of Agriculture and Forestry from 1935 to 1939. His urban planning project aimed to transform Tresigallo into a town where autarkic production was practiced in textile and agricultural sectors. However, this goal was not achieved due to the end of Rossoni's political mandate and the outcome of World War II.

The sometimes questionable ways in which the plan was managed have cast shadows over it. The initiative's critical fortunes, which were discontinuous and often tendentious, also suffered. In the 1930s, news of the start of production of first industrial factories appeared in some national newspapers, announcing the beginning of a very ambitious urban project, but the same attention was not given to the inauguration of

urban facilities that were equally important to the area. The media silence lasted for more than 30 years.

In 1973, a monographic issue of the journal *Quaderni del Centro Etnografico Ferrarese* was dedicated to Tresigallo [1]. For the first time some notes and direct testimonies were collected and later the first studies on Rossoni and his town were launched [2]. However, a still rather imprecise and poorly detailed picture emerges.

The present research is motivated by the need to clarify the major milestones of the urban re-founding of Tresigallo. By focusing on the chronology and the protagonists, it was possible to identify unpublished contributions and to return a dense network of contacts and expertise that transformed the Tresigallo construction site into a dynamic open-air laboratory.

2. “With the Necessary Width of Vision, [but] Intoned to Local Character” [3]

Among the cities created from scratch, Tresigallo stands out not for its outcomes as for the unique way in which the urban program was defined and implemented. Its re-foundation plan was determined on the interests,

ambitions, and ideological project of the charismatic Edmondo Rossoni [4].

2.1 The Minister Edmondo Rossoni

Edmondo Rossoni (1884-1965) was named Minister of Agriculture and Forestry from 1935 to 1939. The main efforts to define a new urban and productive arrangement for the Ferrara countryside were concentrated in this period, but it was the years immediately preceding when a dense network of relationships was established, creating the conditions to launch the project for Tresigallo.

In the 1920s, by the time Rossoni decided to move to Rome, he had achieved economic stability and a prominent political position. He had behind him a career that saw him sympathize with workers' struggles, found and direct the art, politics, and syndicalism magazine "La Stirpe" (1923-1940), travel in Europe and America. From 1930 he became a member of the Grand Council of Fascism and from 1932 he was undersecretary to the Presidency of the Council [5].

When Aeronautics Minister Italo Balbo's hegemony weakened in Ferrara, after his move to Libya in 1933, Rossoni tried to increase his own prestige. This aim was combined with a personal strategic vision for his hometown. Indeed, Tresigallo enjoyed a favorable barycentric position, between Ferrara and the Adriatic Sea. Moreover, it was included in an area affected by major land reclamation operations that began in the last decades of the 19th century. Finally, Rossoni's project was inspired by the failure of previous policies, supported by Italo Balbo and Vittorio Cini, to solve the problem of local unemployment [6].

Rossoni became close to Fascism's agrarian policy which, among its goals, had the defense and encouragement of cereal farming [6]. He was also directly familiar with the outcomes and ways in which the reclamation, transformation, and repopulation of the depressed territory of the Pontine countryside in the early 1930s

were conducted. In economic and domestic political matters, he began to reflect on alternative strategies to solve some critical issues, such as the ineffectiveness of the colonization policy that had involved many people from Ferrara and Tresigallo, who were forced to move to the suburbs of Rome [7].

2.2 How Tresigallo Was Planned

By the time Rossoni became Minister, he had already set the guidelines of the overall program for the transformation of Tresigallo, based on a deep knowledge of the economic, social, and political context.

His plan began by mapping out a new infrastructure on a territorial scale, the construction of which dated back to May 1933. The so-called "Rossonia" (today via Pomposa), was a provincial road that connected Ferrara with the Adriatic Sea. Then, the central urban axis was identified in a pre-existing road, which was regularized, enlarged, and renamed viale Roma. New urban nodes were also planned, and industrial sectors defined (Fig. 1). The presence of industries distinguished Tresigallo from neighboring towns. It would have ensured the achievement of autarkic production, constant employment, increased living standard of the inhabitants, and attracted new workers.

Rossoni had several instruments to support the urban program economically, bureaucratically, and technically. The first was the SERTIA (Società Anonima Emiliana Romagnola Terreni Industria), with its registered office in Rome and operational headquarters in Tresigallo. It was a company founded in January 1935 for the purchase, sale, construction, and management of real estate. It was also created for the installation and administration of industries and services¹.

Among the company's advisers were entrepreneurs and fascist hierarchs who gravitated around the capital, including Massimo Del Fante, but also Rossoni's relatives and trusted people, such as his uncle Edoardo Rossoni and Livio Mariani, a childhood friend. The latter was a

¹ Transcript of the SERTIA Board of Directors, December 7, 1935. Rome, Ina Assitalia (Assicurazioni Generali) historical archives, historical real estate fund UDA 12487.

key intermediary figure. When Rossoni was not present in Tresigallo, in fact, Mariani had to intercede for him with the local authorities or conclude economic agreements with the owners of the land affected by the works.

2.3 How Tresigallo Was Designed

A correspondence between Rossoni and Mariani, which began in February 1935 and ended in November 1936, allows us to retrace some phases of the work program [8, 9]. In the documents some interlocutors are identified, tasks are specified, and initial problems are discussed. Only on a few occasions are design issues addressed. These, in fact, are directly faced with another trusted interlocutor, engineer Carlo Frighi (1903-1975) from Formignana.

Frighi was a promising young man who, after completing the two-year preparatory engineering course at the University of Ferrara (from 1923 to 1925), enrolled at the *Regia Scuola di Ingegneria* in Rome. In 1930 he obtained the degree of civil engineer and, under Rossoni's direction, began his first professional experiences participating in the study of Foggia's master plan. After completing his training, he returned to Ferrara for the execution of the Tresigallo plan.

He directed the work program, was responsible for

the design of buildings, and oversaw the various construction sites. His urban design, following Rossoni's guidelines, was gradually modified and enriched until 1939, depending on the owners' willingness to give up their land or agree to the demolition of their house.

Rossoni shared with Mariani rare indications on finishes, materials, and colors only of the first buildings to be built: a kindergarten, the so-called *Scuola del Merletto* (a lace school for single mothers), and the *Albergo Italia*. These were located along an important axis of new construction, *viale XXVIII Ottobre* (today *viale Verdi*) which led to *piazza Italia*, also accessible from *viale Roma* (Fig. 1).

The three buildings were considered by Rossoni as models to which later architectures could be traced. For this reason, the Minister followed the evolution of their design with a special attention, because they had the symbolic meaning of defining Tresigallo's new identity. For their project he sought exceptional "outside" advice from the technical office of the Rome-based *Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni* (INA). From 1923 to 1935 the Minister had been an adviser to the insurance institution, and this was probably where his contact with architect Giuseppe Machin, who conducted some studies for these first buildings in Tresigallo, originated.

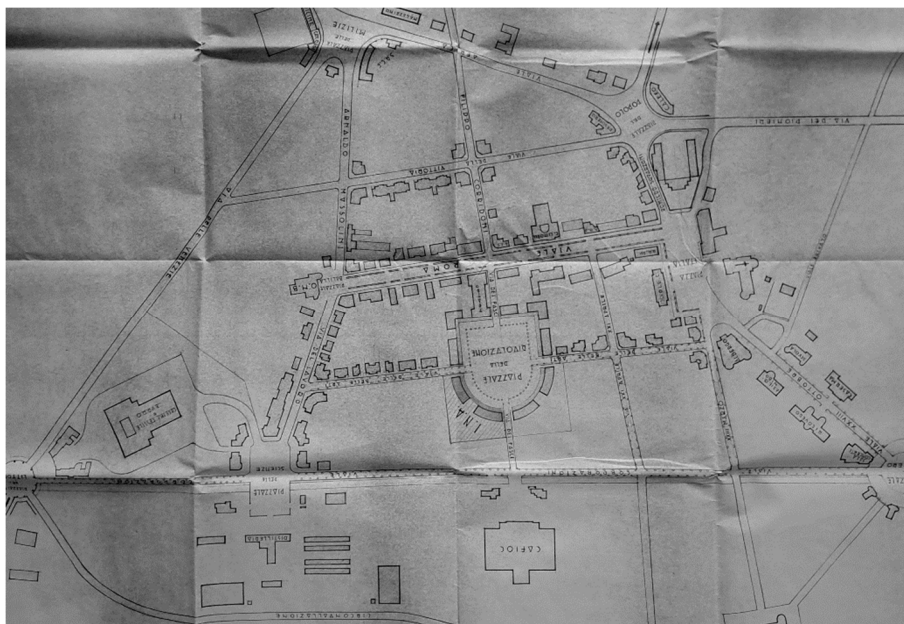


Fig. 1 Planimetry of Tresigallo, undated but made around 1937. ©Historical archive, Municipality of Formignana.

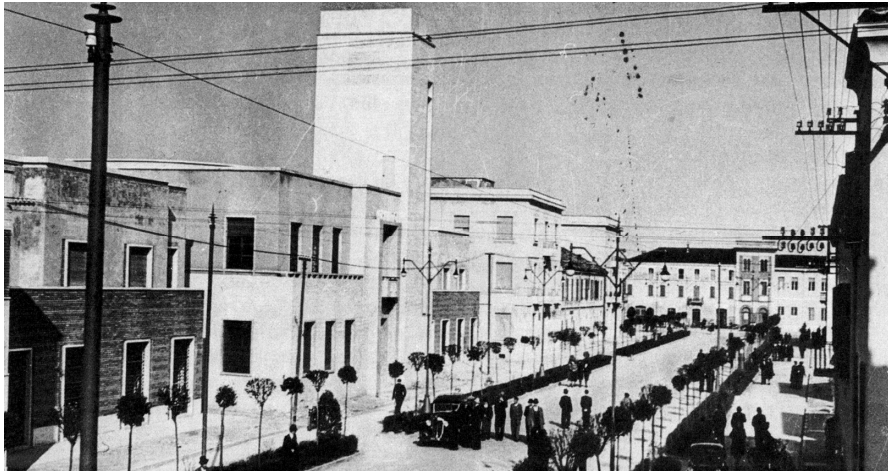


Fig. 2 The *Casa del fascio* on viale Rome in the 1930s. ©Tresigallo tourist center, Piazza Della Repubblica.

Numerous projects are identified in INA's historical archive². These documents make it possible to evaluate Frighi's contribution in a new light. Although attributed to him, these buildings could only be entrusted to the engineer at the executive phase. In the early stages, the INA technical office may have played an important role in identifying the overall architectural direction.

The final project, then, was the synthesis of a multi-handed effort: on the one hand, the advice of one or more designers who gave the city a less provincial look, in line with the architecture of the capital; on the other hand, Frighi and his collaborators to guarantee the perpetuation of local taste.

3. A City for Autarky

Tresigallo was built and partly rebuilt with a "fascist rhythm", pressing and sustained. The considerable economic efforts directly supported by Rossoni through SERTIA or by concluding agreements with private individuals, gave him wide freedom of action. His persuasive skills guaranteed some local support. At the central level, however, its marked autonomy and resourcefulness was kept secretly under control by Ovra, the political police of fascism [4].

3.1 The City of Services

In the second half of the 1930s, Tresigallo was in promising growth. In a limited urban form, it combined equipment, a respectable manufacturing system and modern houses. The priority with which the works were carried out corresponded to a precise strategy: first realize the services to attract new investors, then build the industrial facilities and finally equip the town with houses for workers.

As for the architectures of public interest, in addition to those already mentioned, the *Casa del fascio* and the *Casa del balilla* with annexed public toilets were built, among others. These were buildings clearly distinguished from other architectures in the Ferrara countryside although they used the same traditional building materials and constructive systems. They had stereometric volumes articulated in composition, a formal rigor due to the elimination of the decorative apparatus and made extensive use of frames to emphasize openings or distinguish the various floors. Through a series of details, these aspire to be, or to "appear", modern. To simulate the presence of a flat roof, for example, the *Casa del balilla* masked the slope of the pitched roof with an extension of the facade wall up to the roof height.

² See the projects held in Rome, Ina Assitalia (Assicurazioni Generali) historical archives, historical real estate fund UDA 20823.

Among the new buildings, the *Casa del fascio* was characterized by its use of higher quality materials (Fig. 2). In fact, it was one of the few buildings with travertine cladding of the ground floor and tower, instead of the more common artificial stone. The latter material was cheaper than natural one, but had a similar color and surface property, obtained through special mixture. However, the importance of the building justified the greater economic effort devoted, which included the creation of inscription in stone and bas-reliefs.

3.2 The City of Work

In August 1935, news of the start of production of the SADA (Società Anonima Distilleria Agricola) was spread by several newspapers [3, 10]. This was the first agricultural alcohol distillery in Italy, processing 1,200 quintals of beets per day for distillation of combustible alcohol [11]. Numerous authorities were invited to the inaugural tour of its departments, accompanied by the Parisian engineer Joseph Pérard, inventor and builder of the machinery, engineer Levi, director of the factory, and Rossoni (Fig. 3).

Within a few years, about fifteen factories sprang up in the Tresigallo industrial zone, introducing efficient systems for growing, processing, and storing agricultural products, including sugar beet and hemp.

Rossoni was constantly looking for new financiers with whom to share the economic effort. He turned to investors from Bologna, Milan, Rome, and Turin. Many of them agreed to open a new branch and, in some cases, they took on the construction of houses for future employees.

The various factories were arranged on the edge of Tresigallo urban plan and on the boundary with the surrounding countryside. The factory of the CAFIOC textile company, for the processing of a product derived from hemp staple, defined the limit of a road axis that perpendicularly intercepted viale Roma in a median position. The road, after passing through the center and the Piazza della Rivoluzione (today Piazza della Repubblica), reached the Tresigallo cemetery, symbolically relating the space of work, life, and death (Fig. 1).

With few exceptions, the industrial establishments were coherent with the urban image. The factory of the SAIMM (Società Anonima Industrie Meccaniche e Metallurgiche), built between 1936 and 1937 to produce agricultural machinery, for example, repeated the expedient of extending the facade beyond the building's ridge to simulate a flat roof, also experimented in *Casa del Balilla*. Moreover, placed at an intersection, the SAIMM connected two street directions with a corner facade with a curvilinear course, also a recurring solution³.

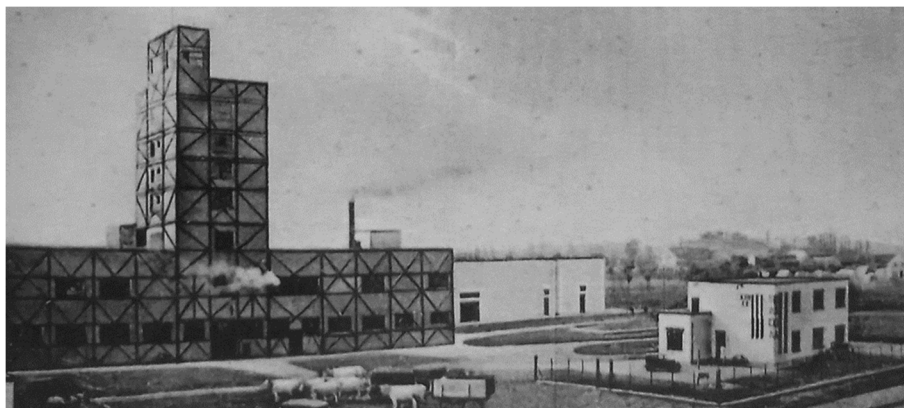


Fig. 3 SADA factory (no longer in existence today) in the 1930s. ©Casa della Cultura, Tresigallo.

³ See historical archive, Municipality of Formignana, folder "Edifici produttivi".

Most of the factories were designed by Frighi. The hemp rod storage warehouse was an exception because it was projected by Milanese engineer Giorgio Baroni between 1939 and 1940. For the occasion, he experimented with a daring 30×60 m light reinforced concrete roof, made by juxtaposing 18 umbrella modules consisting of four hyperbolic 4-pitch paraboloids supported by a central pillar [12].

3.3 *The City of Workers*

The last element that completed the urban structure was the residential apparatus, designed to improve the living condition of the original residents and to incentivize the arrival of new inhabitants in Tresigallo, making a considerable increase in inhabitants possible (from 500 to 12,000) [13].

To keep costs down, balancing the greater economic efforts made for representative buildings, many pre-existing houses on viale Roma were not replaced with new construction but merely modernized and made more decorous. The work may involve an extension, but in most cases, it merely redesigned the main elevation, to which elements such as cornices were added⁴.

Most houses, however, were built from scratch. They were villas, duplex, or condominiums. New construction reveals, through details and finishes, a greater focus on cost containment, as was evident from their more modest appearance.

For houses near road intersections, Frighi studied a more sophisticated plan composition, where the entrance was placed in the corner facing the street crossing, which became, depending on the case, a sloping, tapered, concave or convex wall. Reasoning on a repeated theme with variations, the engineer designed floor plans that were not only governed by internal symmetry but were also repeated specularly at the same intersection. These buildings were also given special treatment in detailing solutions and finishes, juxtaposing

multiple materials and different thicknesses to create light shadows. Other “characteristic” elements were railings and parapets custom-designed by local craftsmen.

There were also examples of multifamily houses repeated without variation, such as the apartment building on via Vittoria (today “condominio La Rosa”) and via Corridoni (today “condominio Fior di Loto”) or the mirrored buildings bordering Piazza della Rivoluzione.

The identification of a building type and a certain architectural solution allowed strengthening urban identity and defined constructive and formal models to refer to in making rapid (and economical) progresses with structural calculations and actual construction.

4. Conclusions

Rossoni’s plan was only partially realized. With the end of the Minister’s political term, the construction sites started were completed, while the projects still on paper remain so.

The industrial area that should have been the pillar of the urban program was downsized. It was later partly converted, dismissed, and abandoned. This had repercussions on the entire urban context because the expected growth process was not triggered. A similar destiny affected public architectures. *Casa del balilla* was partially occupied in the immediate post-war period. This started its premature process of obsolescence. The neglect or lack of maintenance of many buildings led to the material and functional decay of the innovative structures and materials pioneered in the 1930s.

It was only in 2002 that an urban redevelopment program was launched with the general variant to the municipal master plan. Among its major achievements was the transformation of the *Casa del balilla* into the *Casa della Cultura*, which hosts the municipal library.

However, even today Tresigallo struggles to confront its history. In some cases, it has distanced itself from it, in others it has tried to redeem it. The

⁴ See historical archive, Municipality of Formignana, folder “Edifici privati”.

more or less voluntary dispersion of part of the documentation related to the re-foundation project is another result of the difficult legacy.

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