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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role of ONMI in the management, coordination and construction of buildings for the protection of childhood, particularly the *colonie* (holiday camps) and the "Case della madre e del bambino," built in Italy during the fascist regime. This article is based on research that is partly still in progress and partly already published. The considerations that arose around the role of commissioning also make it possible to highlight certain aspects related to the concept of rationalist architecture as a representation of the racist health instances of fascist ideologies. These aspects can be made explicit through the search for a correlation between original designs, buildings and functional and symbolic programmes. After the Second World War, most ONMI buildings survived (unlike the Case del Fascio and Case del Balilla), continuing to exercise to some extent the functions for which they were born, albeit with new meanings. These buildings were, in fact, the object of an absolutely necessary *re-signification* since they had in their genesis an ideological component, in the specific case racist, which was no longer acceptable in the changed historical-political context.

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The ONMI and the Architecture for Motherhood and Childhood (1925–75): A Forgotten Heritage



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“ In Italy, there is a complete lack of knowledge of the basic principles of child hygiene and no thought is given to the fact that the child represents a rising generation, so that peoples will be all the more vigorous and powerful the more childhood is protected by hygiene laws.¹ ”

For a long time, doctors and luminaries such as Gherardo Ferrari denounced the problems concerning the world and the health of children. The issues were periodically addressed in parliamentary debates and discussions since the end of the nineteenth century.² However, the Opera Nazionale per la protezione della Maternità e l'Infanzia (ONMI) was only founded in 1925. The parastatal organisation was officially established by Law No. 2277 of 10 December to protect mother and child, considered as an inseparable duo.³ Until 1930, ONMI did not have its own buildings. Therefore, in large and medium-sized towns, the organisation used existing health and welfare facilities, such as hospitals, maternity hospitals and begging asylums. These buildings were in some cases owned by the local authorities, in others by the Congregation of Charity (Congregazione di Carità). In the small towns, however, ONMI subsidized maternity refectories, consultants, and clinics, which had been set

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Propaganda film publicity poster: *Alle madri d'Italia*, 1935 (composizione fotografica Piero Giacomelli, Venezia. Arti Grafiche Navarra S.A., Milano. Private collection).

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Marcello Dudovich, ONMI Poster "Giornata della madre e del fanciullo," ca. 1934, Edizioni Star, Milano (Museo Nazionale Collezione Salce, <https://catalogo.beniculturali.it/detail/HistoricOrArtisticProperty/0500662799>).

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Castro Holiday Camp (holiday camp of the Italian Red Cross) ("Le colonie marine in provincia di Lecce," *Maternità ed Infanzia. Bollettino mensile dell'Opera nazionale per la protezione della maternità e dell'infanzia* 3 (January 1928): 54).

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Gallipoli Holiday Camp, Lido San Giovanni ("Le colonie marine in provincia di Lecce," *Maternità ed Infanzia. Bollettino mensile dell'Opera nazionale per la protezione della maternità e dell'infanzia* 3 (January 1928): 52).

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Arrigo Cantoni, Marina di Massa Holiday Camp, 1913–14 (postcard).

up in schools, charitable institutions, and Case del Fascio, and played an important role in the management of holiday camps for children. During this period, which was mainly dedicated to bureaucratic organisation and propaganda, benefactors and aristocratic women donated numerous buildings and private homes for the establishment of the first autonomous headquarters and sanatorium colonies. As local patronage committees were being organized, they took steps to raise additional funds and to establish nurseries and schools for health workers. **Fig. 1** Hygiene courses were introduced, as well as itinerant childcare and maternity care chairs to spread hygiene awareness among the population, especially in rural areas and factories. In addition, Maternal and Infant Care Centres for pregnant and lactating mothers were established in premises provided by the Istituto delle case popolari, such as in Naples, Genoa, Trieste, Bari and Milan.

To popularise the principles of the ONMI, a magazine entitled *Maternità e Infanzia* was founded, the Mother and Child Day was created, and a bachelor's tax was established to finance its activities. The tax was used to supplement the state contributions determined each year by the budget law. **Fig. 2** The headquarters allocated a global fund to each federation in relation to the province's population and local conditions. The aim was to

prepare and preserve a hygienically favorable environment, to prevent, as far as possible, the development and preparation of pathogenic germs, to eliminate as far as possible, or at least mitigate the pernicious effects of hereditary defects, in order to ensure the population those sanitary conditions that are a necessary prerequisite for any useful action for the physical invigoration and intellectual development of the race.⁴

ONMI's activities, in specific sectors such as holiday camps for children and kindergartens, complemented from the very beginning the countless private initiatives or those of public-law moral entities such as the Red Cross. **Fig. 3** The ONMI thus had an essential role in coordinating individual actions in the field of assistance, often also financing them with generous subsidies. The coordinating role was also recognized in 1927 by the Commissione centrale delle Colonie marine e montane, chaired by Augusto Turati. He resolved on the establishment of as many buildings as possible by the Fasci Femminili (FF, the women's section of the PNF, Partito Nazionale Fascista), the school organisation and all child welfare organisations, and entrusted the census, coordination and supervision to the ONMI "by the express will of the Duce."⁵ The role of



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control, also in order to understand how funding was used, had already begun in 1926, as recorded in the organization's magazine, which had started a column devoted precisely to the subject of holiday camps and care institutions that would take in children for heliotherapeutic treatment.

THE SUN AND LIGHT: ONMI, HEALTHCARE, AND THE HOLIDAY CAMPS FOR CHILDREN

Yes, Italy now knows that in the sun is life, and the Italy that enjoys its most beautiful ray will be the most fruitful nation of healthy life. Summer holiday camps spread their tents to the caress of the sun; more or less grandiose institutes spring up on sunny shores to give asylum at all times of the year to the weakest children and the sick. The Riviera now hosts several of these permanent institutes. We will describe them all step by step, beginning with the grandest of them all: the Santa Corona Institute in Pietraligure.⁶

In reality, the Ligurian institute – even though it had integrated the summer camp in Spotorno – appeared as a hospital and not as a bathing camp. In 1925, it opened a prophylaxis section for summer bathing cures and permanent care for children suffering from lung diseases. South-facing terraces

and extensive sunbathing areas characterised the complex. Dr Filomena Corvini's article was one of the first to deal with the subject of children's heliotherapy facilities. Her report served not only as a propaganda tool for the regime's actions, but also to assess how many buildings were operational and how many more could be built.

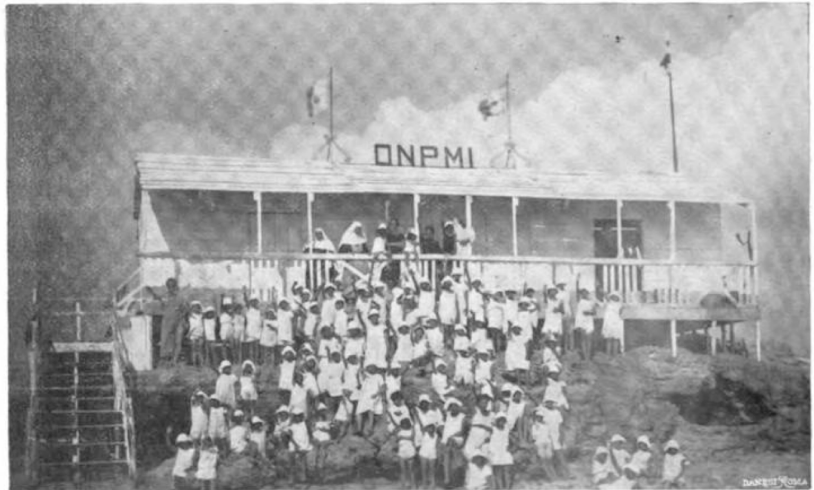
Health engineers and reformist architects had long fought to propagate the importance of architectural spaces designed for health. Thus, thanks to their efforts, by the mid-1920s, sunshine and fresh air were considered essential for the care of children.⁷ Furthermore, the regime was beginning to understand how the physical health of the so-called "Italian race" could be improved through physical activity and outdoor sports. These would ensure the invigoration of the puny children, the future faithful young Balilla.⁸

In the newsletter on welfare activities published in the ONMI's magazine in April 1927, the role the organization had in this regard was also clarified for the holiday camps. Just as for assistance more generally, the ONMI had the duty to take a census of the camps that were already active and then to coordinate, supervise and supplement them, in a way that was entirely supplementary and never a substitute. To respond as effectively as possible to this task, the ONMI presidency appointed a special commission, whose fundamental task was to spread awareness of the



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Colonia di Castro. — Sede della colonia della Croce Rossa.



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Colonia di Gallipoli. — Il baraccamento a Lido S. Giovanni ove i bambini passano l'intera giornata.



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care that could be administered in the holiday camps to the largest number of children – at least 100,000, as Mussolini had wished in 1927.

To carry out the census of summer camps, ONMI sent a questionnaire to the provincial Federations and Patronage Committees. The questionnaire asked the presidents of the provincial Federations for essential information, including the number of facilities in each province, the organisation or committee promoting them, the location, the nature of the camps and the total number of children they could host. **Fig. 4** Renato Ricci, president of the Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB), Alessandro Messea, general director of Public Health, Cesare Baduel, general director of the Italian Red Cross (CRI), Attilio Lo Monaco-Aprile, general director of ONMI services, Gallo Garbini, Baroness Blanc and Elisa Mayer Rizzoli, delegate for the welfare works of the FF are appointed members of the commission. Together with them, the president and vice-president are also part of the commission, respectively: Gian Alberto Blanc, scientist, professor of geochemistry at the University of Rome, member of the management of the PNF and convinced supporter of the social policy of fascism, and Francesco Valagussa, well-known professor of pediatrics and head of the Bambin Gesù Hospital in Rome.⁹

The data show that in the summer of 1926, 67 temporary sea summer camps and 40 mountain summer camps were organized under the patronage of the ONMI and the FF, in addition to the 63 permanent structures for tuberculosis patients set up directly by the ONMI.¹⁰ Between 1927 and 1929, the activity of surveying, and at the same time advertising to the population the role of the camps, worked.¹¹ From this moment onwards, ONMI became the main interlocutor for the reception of children in care institutions. The organisation also intervened in the criteria for choosing those who were to be sent to summer camps, through the provincial committees and doctors who assessed which children were most in need.¹²

The result achieved in this field was so remarkable that there was an overload of applications and prompted ONMI to point out that the camps were set up for needy children and not for those who aspired to a holiday.¹³ It's important to highlight that there was still enormous confusion in the conception of these institutions, given the mixture of therapeutic and holiday camps organized by the PNF, and the FF. In 1928, it was decided to distinguish between therapeutic structures, generally open all year round, and general prophylaxis and summer heliotherapy holiday camps, destined to welcome infants from poor families at risk of illness because they were debilitated, frail or undernourished. The ONMI was entrusted with the establishment of permanent camps, given their prophylactic nature, and the FF were entrusted with the management of temporary camps and, from 1929, heliotherapy structures directly founded by the PNF.

The column *Istituti e Colonie* in the ONMI magazine collected several reports on the welfare activities of climatic camps, and their great variety, including rural (Solarino), marine (Terracina and Segni), and urban types (Verona,

Florence, Turin).¹⁴ Among the buildings was the complex that Luigi Giuseppe Pisa donated to the ONMI in 1928, in memory of his father Senator Ugo Pisa. The complex had been built on the seashore in Massa Marittima, designed by Arrigo Cantoni, between 1913 and 1914, and comprised vast plots of land, pine forests and a large sandy shore, as well as four large buildings, including the villa donated by Dr Camillo Hayek. **Fig. 5**

The good results achieved in this field were also made possible thanks to the establishment in 1928 of a specific budgeted funds for childhood anti-tuberculosis prophylaxis intended exclusively for permanent structures. The fund was divided among the provincial federations, taking into consideration the actual needs assessed on the basis of child mortality statistics on tuberculosis. Given their importance also for propaganda aspects, these activities of such wide organizational and economic scope were transferred to the Ente Opere Assistenziali (EOA) in 1931, although in some cases they continued to be promoted and financed by ONMI. Initially in the management of the summer camps, the regime's wish was to proceed on a double track: on the one hand the State and on the other the Party. Later, in the early 1930s, the camps were seen as one of the most important tools to bring the younger generation closer to Fascism and remove them from the influence of other organisations such as the Catholic Church.¹⁵ Furthermore, in 1931, the first holiday camps regulations were promoted, and they distinguished the different kinds of institutions according to the place where they were established (seaside, mountain, lake, rural or agricultural) and according to the length of stay (permanent, from 3 to 6 months; temporary, from 30 to 40 days; daytime, without overnight stays).

The move under the direction of the PNF, on which the organization depended, came at a time when the high propaganda potential of the holiday camps was defined. Their number and then also their quality were relentlessly pursued in the following years, as they were not only an instrument of propaganda, but also a sensor of the activities of the provincial federations, which were also judged on the basis of the good or bad functioning of the camps.

It is interesting to note that at the first International Congress of Summer Camps, Institutes and Outdoor Schools, held in Pau in April 1929, with the participation of delegates from Belgium, France, Holland, Poland, Switzerland and Yugoslavia, it was the need to create an "International Institute for Field Exchange" emerged. This was supposed to make it possible to intensify the circulation of children between countries of different languages.¹⁶ The official representative of Italy and its institutions (ONMI, ONB, Ministry of the Interior, CRI, FF) was the pediatrician Francesco Valagussa, who showed some reservations. Although he accepted the principle, he maintained that Italy already provided care for the children of the ten million Italians abroad.¹⁷

This position had already been reiterated by the Italian doctor at the VI International Conference against tuberculosis, held in the Campidoglio in Rome in September 1928, in conjunction with the anti-tuberculosis



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exhibition at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni.¹⁸ However, only at the beginning of the 1930s did the regime see a turning point in the construction of new health buildings in urban centers and on the coasts. These buildings had a modern character and reflected the most up-to-date rationalist theories on the architecture of care. At the same time the question of the physical health of the breed emerged, which could be achieved by living in suitable environments or predominantly outdoors.¹⁹

RATIONALISM AND RATIONAL BUILDINGS FOR CHILDHOOD

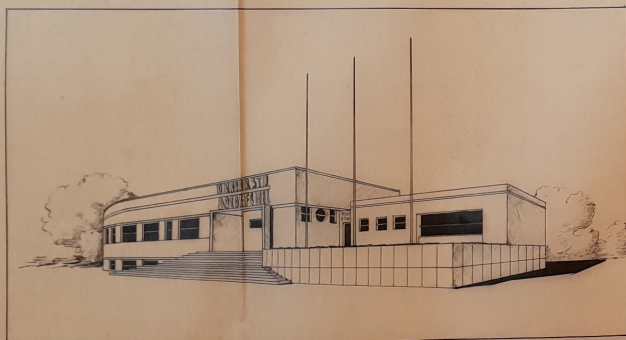
The unstoppable decline in the birth rate and the incessant infant mortality did not support the government's directives. However, in December 1931, the arrival on the scene of the lawyer Sileno Fabbri represented a turning point. This concerned both the management of the ONMI, until then considered ineffective, and the construction from scratch of buildings that could solve the long-standing health problems.

The lawyer moved to Rome from Milan where he had been president of the Province (as well as of the Milanese federation of ONMI) and where he had given a strong impetus, both to the issue of roads and infrastructure, and to the solution of hospital and welfare problems. Already in Milan, Fabbri had been actively involved in launching a series of initiatives in favor of maternity and child protection with the creation of the Asilo provinciale (provincial kindergarten), inaugurated

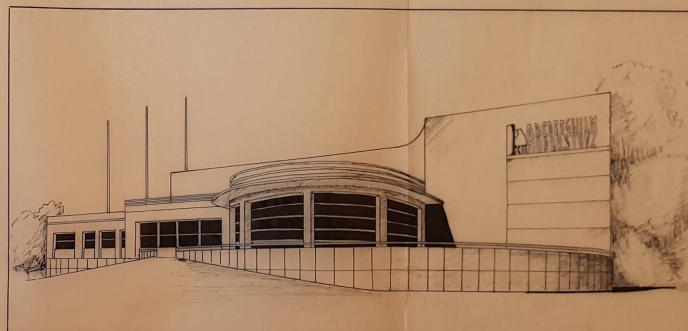
on 1st December 1928,²⁰ and with the foundation of the Ente autonomo per l'Assistenza al fanciullo (Autonomous Agency for Child Welfare) in the province of Milan. One of the objectives of this latter institution in Lombardy was to spread an awareness of hygiene and preventive healthcare, according to the assumption that thinking about sick children meant protecting healthy ones in view of the progress of the so-called "Italian race." In his writings, Fabbri used the term rationalization to refer to the set of "methods of technique and organisation that, by keeping losses to a minimum, increase yield, improve working conditions, lower cost prices."²¹ Fordism and Taylorism were having wide resonance in Europe and Italy²² and concrete rationalisation had to aim, as he wrote in 1933, at two aspects. On the one hand, rationalisation had to "give work the maximum effectiveness with the minimum effort and to facilitate with the least variety of types, if this variety does not offer obvious advantages, the study, manufacture, use, price interchangeability and sale;" on the other, it had to "avoid the waste of raw materials and energy; simplify the distribution of materials; free from illogical transport, excessive financial burdens, the unnecessary overlapping of intermediaries."²³

The various institutional actors, both public and private, continued to set up and run summer camps on the Italian coasts according to established practices, useful for the care and rejuvenation of children and adolescents. At the same time, Fabbri began a relentless propaganda work in the

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DAL GIARDINO

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area, through a series of public meetings and conferences, but above all by inaugurating a series of facilities in small and large towns. Having acquired more power, in the two years following his appointment Fabbri – also based on the experience he had gained during his years of management of the Province of Milan – dealt with the renewal of the body's funding by setting up the "pupillary fund," and he also promoted the replacement of the itinerant chairs with stable assistance centres and consultancies with specialized technical personnel. He associated the scientific organization of work with the training of the spirit and the body (emphasized in his writings) and created a permanent facility in every urban and rural center for maternal infant care. These buildings were named as the "Case della madre e del bambino" according to the regime's nomenclature, and required a rational rethinking of the rooms that had hitherto been roughly used for the new functions by the patronage committees in eclectic buildings that had been created for other purposes. It was necessary to study a new typology, a mixture of spaces with medical-prophylactic, welfare, educational and scholastic characteristics.

For the design of the buildings in Lodi and Mortara, he immediately turned to the services of a talented architect such as Luciano Baldessari, author of works that were undoubtedly considered rationalist. If the former was not built, the latter became a reference model for a typology that until then had not yet been well defined in its functions. The ONMI headquarters in Mortara was built entirely thanks

to funding from Quinto Bossi, president of the company of the same name. **Fig. 6** Grand Officer Bossi had secured all the resources to create a building dedicated to his daughter Emilia. Baldessari drew a scheme in Mortara, as he had done in Lodi, which included two consultatories (obstetric and pediatric), a nursery for 35 children and a mother's refectory, but gave the project formal recognition from the outset. Baldessari devised a volumetric device by fitting a parallelepiped divided into two levels with a half-cylinder. His interest was focused on the expressive potential of the insertion of the bodies of different heights, the lower one intended for the paediatric and obstetrical consulting rooms. The two entrances placed at an angle, at the intersection of the volumes, were joined by a single canopy cut to allow the insertion of a ladder useful for reaching the roof, clearly visible in the period pictures. Today, only the upper part of the ladder remains.

Several elements – the long balcony-terrace connected to the garden by a flight of steps, the skylight-windows in its lower part and the large openings of the lounges for infants and weaned children – characterised the south-facing *façade*. This functionalist vocabulary was used in those years in numerous architectural works, not only dedicated to children, to allow light to enter the large spaces. The building was initially called just an *asilo*, but Bianca Fabbri, recommending "the precision of the wording," asked on 11 August 1932 that it be called the Maternal and Infant Care Centre. In the magazine of the ONMI, the nature and

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Luciano Baldessari, "Casa della madre e del bambino," Mortara 1932-33 (author's private collection).

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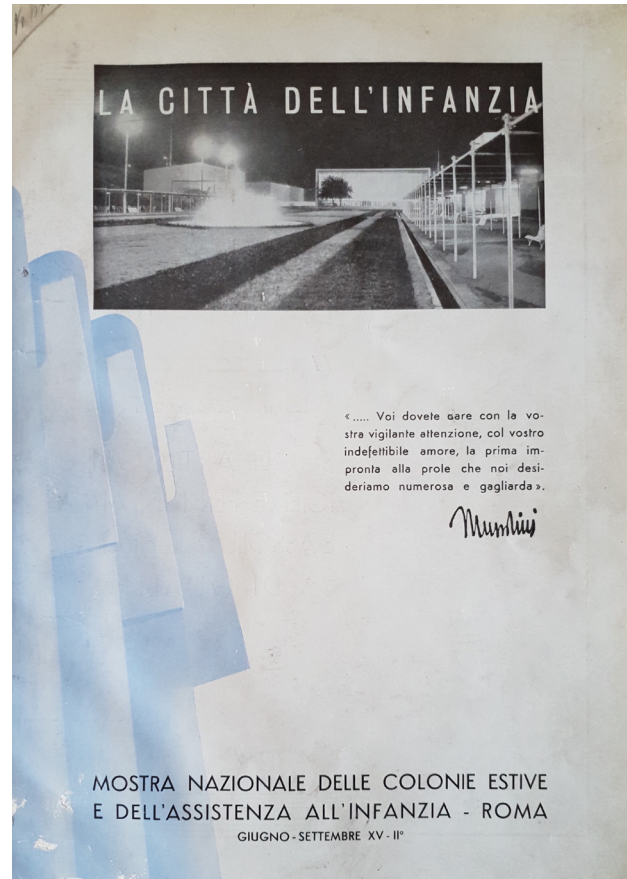
Eliseo Mocchi, Project of "Casa della madre e del bambino." Pavia 1938 (Fondo Eliseo Mocchi, Archivio di Stato, Pavia).

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Mostra nazionale delle colonie estive e dell'assistenza all'infanzia, *La città dell'infanzia* (Roma, June-September XV-II) (Milan: Gino Salocchi editore, 1937). Book cover.

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King Victor Emmanuel III visits the ONMI pavilion. Mostra nazionale delle colonie estive, e dell'assistenza all'infanzia (*La città dell'infanzia* (Rome, June-September XV-II) (Milano: Gino Salocchi editore, 1937), 25).



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functions of these centers were clarified in a text excerpted from the report of the president's wife, given when she had ruled the provincial federation of Milan.²⁴ It was not until 1934 that the name "Casa della madre e del bambino" proposed by Sileno Fabbri was made official.²⁵

The prototypical experiences in Lodi and Mortara perfected a scheme that was to serve as a model for buildings to be set up in the various Italian provinces, but at the same time could be adapted to different contexts and vary according to different requirements from different parts. On the basis of Fabbri's indications, Baldessari defined the characteristics of the model building that was to accommodate a space for 20 infants and about 20 *divezzi* (later to become 50 at Fabbri's request), and a refectory for 40 (later 50) mothers. Baldessari immediately began to study a project based on the already prepared scheme, which would also take into account the indications of the different patrons, as for example with the Governorate of Rome or the Provincial Federation of Brescia. In fact, between 1935 and 1937, Baldessari was commissioned to build the Roman building on Via Cassia Vecchia and the Brescia building.

Other architects tried their hand at constructing rationalist buildings for ONMI guided by Fabbri's prescriptions, and in some cases, perhaps, having as a model or adapting the model-scheme prepared by Baldessari. It is not known to

what extent, in reality, the many drawings sent by Baldessari to Rome and from there forwarded to the peripheral offices were followed by local technicians. Nevertheless, since 1933 there were many inaugurations, not always recorded in the organization's official magazine, which demonstrate the widespread dissemination of ONMI buildings that drew on Baldessari's hypotheses and their forms.

Even architects and engineers who until then had shown no particular interest in the new language, adopted the rationalist language for this type of building. **Fig. 7** Gio Ponti designed a complex in Bruzzano, with the collaboration of Countess Ida Borromeo, president of the Milanese provincial federation of the ONMI, and Professor Carlo Alberto Ragazzi, head of the Milan Municipal Health Authority. The building was designed with three floors, one of which was underground. This alluded to the experiments of architects such as Giuseppe Terragni and Baldessari, the latter at the time a partner of Gio Ponti in designing the Italcima factory in Milan.²⁶ The covered and uncovered terraces, long balconies and surrounding green spaces recalled some solutions found in the designs of modern open-air schools built in Germany. Among these, the building also features a porch – leaning against the main body – surrounding a square courtyard, which can be used as an outdoor classroom. The "Casa della madre e del



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bambino” built in 1935 in Trieste by Umberto Nordio,²⁷ or the one built between 1936 and 1938 by Ettore Rossi in Via Volpato in the area surrounding the Trastevere station in Rome were also presented as “the typical example of a rational layout that adhered as closely as possible to hygienic requirements, functional needs and the most economical management.”²⁸

THE PROTECTION ON DISPLAY: THE ONMI AT “MOSTRA NAZIONALE DELLE COLONIE ESTIVE E ASSISTENZA ALL’INFANZIA”

In the public spotlight for many reasons, the issue of care had become crucial by the mid-1930s. The infant mortality figures were not comforting, and this trend occurred despite the actions promoted by Fabbri. Thus, in *Foglio di disposizioni* no. 699 of 23 December 1936, it was announced by Achille Starace, secretary of the PNF, that a large national exhibition dedicated to summer camps and childcare would be set up in Rome from June to September 1937 in the Circus Maximus area, with the aim of illustrating “the activities carried out by the Regime for the health of the bloodline.”²⁹ It was a crucial opportunity to show the world the social and political role of childcare in the fascist regime and at the same time to take stock of a fifteen-year period of initiatives aimed at the physical and

moral education of Italians, and at solving health problem.³⁰ The climate care sector went beyond sanitary needs, and was now aimed at social citizenship, as conceived by the fascist state: there was a widespread conviction that “Case della madre e del bambino,” as well as the holiday camps established and run by the fascist party, no longer had only a sanitary aim, but they also had a “hygienic, social and political purpose,” as Giovanni De Torni stated in the pages of the magazine *Difesa sociale*.³¹

In order to make the event more effective, the PNF also promoted 18 scientific congresses, mobilizing the ONMI and ONB, the two forces that acted in the field of care and were considered the fundamental instruments of the demographic battle. Renamed *La città dell’infanzia* [The City of Childhood] in the press, the exhibition was inaugurated with pomp and circumstance on 20 June 1937 in the presence of Mussolini.³² **Fig. 8**

It was undoubtedly an exceptional venue to showcase what had been done so far in terms of architecture for women and children, precisely because a large audience was expected. In fact, some 60,000 women from all over Italy attended the inauguration on 20 June:³³ an extraordinary “women’s mobilization” event, as had already happened with the rally in Piazza Venezia on 7 May 1936 on the occasion of the invasion of Ethiopia and Mussolini’s proclamation of



the fascist empire, which had involved, in particular, fascist organizations, rural housewives and workers.

The ONMI pavilion showcased the life of a model “Casa della madre e del bambino:” a kind of living documentation, which entrusted the presence of festive children and nursing mothers with the task of illustrating the functioning of an ONMI office. **Fig. 9** In addition, the demography room documented the actions carried out to encourage marriages and births, as well as to combat denatality and infant mortality. The panels on the walls, made up of photo-mosaics, and a series of models explained what was done for working mothers and mondarises. Large photographs, drawings and models of 164 existing buildings and 42 under construction accompanied the numerous publications published by the ONMI.³⁴ **Fig. 10** As a brochure put it: “the ‘Casa della madre e del bambino’, the ingenious institution created by the Opera Nazionale represents the complete, rational organism that meets all the needs of a vast preventive action against the causes of death.”³⁵

The PNF, in agreement with the ONMI, also announced twenty exhibition-competitions, including architectural competitions. Among others, they asked for the design of a kiosk for the Italian toy exhibition (competition 1); gardens and enclosures for children (competition 2); a

rational cradle model (competition 5); rational children’s clothing including footwear and headgear for both urban and rural environments and for climatic summer camps. Architectural projects for the construction of permanent and temporary climatic camps and heliotherapy structures were also called for (competition 8). The exhibition-competition for buildings with 200 to 600 beds was organized with the collaboration of the fascist unions of engineers, architects, and doctors, in agreement with the national fascist federations of industrialists and specialized tradesmen. It is interesting to note that to give the competition scientific rigor, the announcement required that the projects be accompanied by reports drawn up by doctors; collaboration with the medical class was considered indispensable for the purposes of “the protection and development of the physical health of the race,” both in the field of discussion and investigation, and in that of the consequent practical realisations.

As with the exhibition-competition dedicated to rational floor and wall coverings in climatic and heliotherapy camps (competition 9), the projects were expected to select different construction systems. These had to fit the numerous camps already built or under construction. The solutions chosen had to guarantee aesthetic qualities, as

well as practical and hygienic-sanitary qualities, capable of “creating a cheerful and attractive environment for the child, whose stay in the colony should benefit both physical development and education of the spirit.”³⁶

Among the various competitions there was also one dedicated to a model project for a “Casa della madre e del bambino,” and a project for the headquarters of the ONMI patronage committee in a rural municipality (competition 15). The projects presented showed how much the criteria on which the buildings were based, evidently also those that were built during Fabbri’s term of office, were still to be clarified. Immediately after the Roman exhibition, under the chairmanship of Carlo Bergamaschi, an attempt was made to define once and for all the objectives of buildings that were to be closer to hospital facilities, rather than schools, simple kindergartens, or buildings for after-work activities. In 1938, in the magazine *Architettura*, the guiding principles of the buildings were illustrated organically and in a very detailed study, by Alessandro Laurinsich, expert of paediatrics, university lecturer, clinician and scientist.³⁷

On the occasion of the enactment of the racial laws, Laurinsich made known the architectural features that the ONMI buildings were to have. These included the layout of the individual sections, the rules for the internal and external distribution of the various rooms, down to the scale of the technical installations, the materials to be used and the furniture to be provided. The outpatient clinics played an important role as a place for the dissemination of prenatal and child hygiene norms and methods, while the counselling centers were engaged in educating women about venereal diseases. It should be remembered that abandoned mothers, as well as needy mothers who could not raise large offspring, were protected until their children were five years old. For this reason, in addition to crèches for working mothers, the architect had to provide spaces within the buildings for theoretical and practical childcare schools for future mothers, as well as rooms suitable for anti-tubercular prophylaxis of children. It is interesting to note that in the normative indications Laurinsich paid particular attention to the waiting rooms, which were to have direct access to the clinics.

After the 1937 exhibition, and even more so after the prescriptions published in 1938, numerous other “Case della madre e del bambino” were built. Completed according to ONMI directives, for example, the Udine building was characterized by absolute symmetry and cold rigor. The architect Provino Valle tried to evoke the themes of Mediterranean architecture, equipping the large garden-terrace with pergolas. The monumentality of architecture, until 1937, was not contemplated as a goal, at least programmatically. However, from this moment onwards there was a change of course, as happened for example in Asti,³⁸ Frosinone or Pontecorvo: the tower with some bas-reliefs was one of the main emblems of this monumentality.³⁹

In Milan, too, there was an attempt to create a building structure that fulfilled the functional logic listed in the prescriptions and did not rigidly follow rationalist formal

language. Thanks to a donation from Baroness Giselda Weil Weiss of Lainate, Alberto Cristofori and Bruno Sarti were commissioned to design a “Casa della madre e del bambino” to be erected in Piazzale Lugano.⁴⁰ The reasons why the Milanese building was not built are still unclear, presumably the pressures of the war. The fact remains that by the end of the 1930s, the ONMI buildings had to all intents and purposes become places exclusively dedicated to the care, prophylaxis and health of the race.

CONCLUSION: A FORGOTTEN ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

The survival of the “Case della madre e del bambino” after the Second World War must be read in the difficult context of the postwar reconstruction. Between commissarial management, laborious revival of the bureaucratic machine, failed purges and ordinary administration activities, the life of the ONMI continued, despite its scarce funding and despite the fact that it had been one of the most active institutions of the regime and its questionable and racialized ideologies. This was because, as seen earlier, the symbolic meanings that had been decisive at the time of its establishment and during much of its existence had gradually diminished. In fact, the aims of the institution – which by the end of the 1930s had become mostly welfare, prophylactic and sanitary after various managements – were deemed important both by the High Commission for Hygiene and Public Health, immediately after 1945, and later, from 1958 onwards, by the Ministry of Health.

In 1950, a publication by the ONMI, using data and statistics, recounted the assistance provided in its 3700 paediatric advisory centres, 2300 obstetrical advisory centres, more than 100 crèches, 800 maternal refectories and 198 “Case della madre e del bambino”, which annually assisted hundreds of thousands of pregnant and nursing mothers and millions of children.⁴¹ In the aftermath of the conflict, the issue of the so-called lineage improvement, which was a legacy of a government to be quickly forgotten, was overcome. In the general situation of misery, help for poor women and needy children, as well as for the civilian victims of the war, becomes a priority. If racism, the pillar of the organization’s foundation, was soon and quickly forgotten in communications and propaganda tools, the social and humanitarian values of the ONMI buildings remained central to assistance in the area, at a time when financial resources were scarce. The buildings were thus used for intervention in favor of populations suffering from precarious housing, lack of education and food, and, lastly, the absence of adequate basic healthcare.

Thus, in addition to the pre-existing buildings, shelter and summer camps (Pedrengo, Marina di Massa, Sedico Bribano, Monterotondo, Asti, Acuto), in 1948–49 the ONMI created and strengthened five other permanent institutes (Vibo Valentia, Rome, Viareggio, Marino, Modena). They were by then structures, some old while others recently built, devoted to welcoming poor and orphaned children, as well as those in need of care, such as the mountain camp

in Acuto, near Fiuggi, entrusted to the Benedictine nuns, or the “Maria Pezze Pascolato” camp in Sedico Bribano near Belluno. Some were buildings that had been adapted with simple rational interventions (for example, the fitting of new refectories with luminous windows or outdoor spaces for play), others had been purchased and immediately refurbished or enlarged (such as the children’s prophylactic institute in Marino, converted from the Villa Dolazza and in operation since November 1946, or the one in the Fossalta area on the Via Emilia near Modena). Among the newly constructed buildings, the Viareggio Marine Institute and the “Figli d’Italia” refuge stand out. The former was built along the dock towards the large pine forest and was characterised by open terraces on each refectory and dormitory. All the terraces looked towards the sea. The second, built in Monterotondo in 1939, was designed by Ettore Rossi.⁴²

The summer camp at Marina di Massa became a permanent *preventorio*: already at the time organized in pavilions, with all the windows facing the sea, the complex enhanced the farm that included many hectares of land cultivated with vineyards, orchards and vegetable gardens. They were no longer temporary summer camps, but real institutions for children, children of political victims, orphans, abandoned children of Julian refugees from Zara and Pola. The law no. 698 of 23 December 1975, which effectively abolished the ONMI and divided its tasks among the regions, provinces and municipalities,⁴³ thus ended the history of the institution dedicated to mothers and children, but not that of its buildings. These passed into the hands of local authorities, who in some cases allowed them to survive (see the “Casa della madre e del bambino” in Udine and Mortara), while in others exposed them to decay or insufficient maintenance. Regardless of the individual cases, the question of minor, non-rhetorical, “current” architectures in the meaning given to them by Giuseppe Pagano in 1935,⁴⁴ to be saved or not, remained open until today, when the appropriateness and feasibility of their preservation is still being debated, given their unquestionable contemporary value and their being “ordinary quality buildings.”

¹ Gherardo Ferreri, *L'Italia da redimere* (Turin: Fratelli Bocca, 1916), 209. This article is part of a larger research on the relationship between Euthenics and Architecture in Fascist Italy, particularly on the topic of Welfare architecture for women and children. Regarding the issue of race, which is central to ONMI, and its impact on architecture, I have had the opportunity to address it in my book *Per la donna, per il bambino, per la razza. L'architettura dell'ONMI tra eutenica ed eugenica nell'Italia fascista* (Siracusa: Letteraventidue, 2021). For more information on the various archival references, please refer to that publication. Currently, there hasn't been an in-depth study on the topic of “Architecture, Fascism, and Racism.” However, for a general overview of racism and Italian eugenics, please consult the studies by Claudia Mantovani, Giorgio Fabre, Francesco Cassata, and Brian McLaren.

² See Filippo Frattaroli, *La protezione e l'assistenza della maternità e dell'infanzia nella legislazione fascista* (Alessandria: O. Ferrari, 1927); Federazione italiana donne giuriste, cur., *La donna e la famiglia nella Legislazione Fascista* (Naples: Edizioni La Toga, 1933); Attilio Lo Monaco-Aprile, *L'opera assistenziale del Fascismo* (Rome: Quaderni dell'Istituto Fascista di Cultura, 1934).

³ The law was published in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale* on 7 January 1926. See *Origine e sviluppi dell'Opera nazionale per la protezione della maternità e dell'infanzia* (Rome: Stabilimento tipografico ditta Carlo Colombo, 1936), 29.

⁴ Attilio Lo Monaco-Aprile, “La protezione igienica della razza nella fabbrica e nella scuola,” *Maternità ed Infanzia. Bollettino mensile dell'Opera nazionale per la protezione della maternità e dell'infanzia* IV (January 1929): 40.

⁵ Cesare Alessandri, “Le Colonie marine e montane e la formazione dell'operaio,” *Maternità ed Infanzia* II (April 1927): 42.

⁶ Filomena Corvini, “Gli istituti di assistenza. L'Istituto di S. Corona in Pietraligure,” *Maternità ed Infanzia* I (November 1926): 39–40.

⁷ See Camilla Nervi, “Il sole,” *Maternità ed Infanzia* II (April 1927): 60–3; Vittoria Calogiuri, *Bimbi al sole. Il problema educativo nelle opere assistenziali scolastiche: le colonie permanenti* (Rome: Novissima, 1934).

⁸ See: Carlo Cresti, *Architettura e fascismo* (Florence: Vallecchi Editore, 1986), 87–94; Salvatore Finocchiarì, “L'educazione fisica, lo sport scolastico e giovanile durante il regime fascista,” in *Sport e fascismo*, eds. Maria Canella, and Sergio Giuntini (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2009), 119–32.

⁹ “Notiziario dell'attività assistenziale,” *Maternità ed Infanzia* II (April 1927): 13.

¹⁰ See Foglio Ordini ONMI, n. 1, 18 July 1926.

¹¹ In the April 1927 issue of *Maternità ed Infanzia* see: Oscar Palesa, “Criteri di scelta dei bambini da inviare alle Colonie marine e montane,” 31–8; Mario Bertolani del Rio, “Colonia Scuola ‘Antonio Marro’ (Reggio Emilia),” 39–48; Arcangelo Ilvento, “Colonia estive,” 49–51; Filomena Corvini, “L'Istituto marino ligure Luigi Merello,” 58–67; Gallo Cabrini, “Gli ospizi marini e le colonie estive in Sicilia,” 94–6. See also: Gallo Cabrini, “Ospizio marino ed Istituto pei rachitici ‘Enrico Albanese’ Palermo,” II (June 1927): 52–7; Gaetano Toscano, “La colonia montana di Spoleto,” II (August 1927): 15–22; Paolo Ferraresi, “Il Sanatorio marittimo di Anzio,” II (August 1927): 37–63; Francesco Valagussa, “L'Opera Nazionale per la Protezione della Maternità e dell'Infanzia e le Colonie estive,” II (September 1927): 17–30; Giacomo Rossi, “La colonia infantile antimalarica autoctona di Maccarese,” II (November 1927): 32–43; “Le colonie marine in provincia di Lecce,” III (January 1928): 49–55; Filomena Corvini, “Colonie estive e permanenti nella lotta tubercolare,” III (February 1928): 128–47; Cesare Alessandri, “La colonia marina dei Sindacati bolognesi,” III (February 1928): 173–76; “La colonia elioterapica della piazza di San Faustino al Testaccio,” III (March 1928): 244–48; “La colonia infantile Regina Margherita a Riva,” III (September 1928): 773–78; Bruno Bresciani, “Verona e le sue colonie estive,” III (December 1928): 1091–099; Giovan Battista Allaria, “La colonia solare di Omegna,” IV (February 1929): 190–200; Mauro Gioseffi, “L'ospizio marino di S. Pelagio (Rovigno d'Istria),” IV (February 1929): 201–09; Fornaro Chierici, “La colonia materna di Bari,” IV (March 1929): 301–06; Paolo Errera, “La colonia estiva del Comitato mandamentale antitubercolare di Mirano Veneto,” IV (March 1929): 307–10; “Colonie climatiche,” IV (June 1929): 589–92; Bruno Bresciani, “Per la istituzione di colonie alpine per donne gestanti,” IV (June 1929): 641–42; “Colonie climatiche,” IV (July 1929): 698–700; “Il Duce visita la colonia di Ostia,” IV (July 1929): 710; Francesco Valagussa, “L'organizzazione italiana delle colonie profilattiche permanenti e temporanee,” IV (July 1929): 735–44; “La colonia solare A. Pompili a Tivoli,” IV (December 1929): 1267–268; “Le colonie estive della Cassa circondariale di malattia di Trieste” (December 1929): 1270; “La colonia elioterapica di S. Rocco Castagnaretta (Cuneo),” IV (December 1929): 1271–272; E. Soncini, “Eneo: Colonia alpina permanente della scuola veneta,” IV (December 1929): 1311–315.

¹² See Giulio Ceresole, *Manuale pratico per il medico delle colonie climatiche* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1930).

¹³ See *Circolare* of ONMI, 8 July 1927.

¹⁴ a.c., “Istituti e colonie,” *Maternità ed Infanzia* III (March 1928): 254–79; III (April 1928): 365–73; III (June 1928): 473–79; III (October 1928): 873–75.

¹⁵ Silvia Inaudi, *A tutti indistintamente. L'Ente Opere Assistenziali nel periodo fascista* (Bologna: Clueb, 2008), 124.

¹⁶ On the issue of children’s colonies in France see Bernard Toulhier, “Les colonies de vacances en France, quelle architecture?,” *In Situ* 9 (2008): 1–54.

¹⁷ “Il congresso internazionale di Pau,” *Maternità ed Infanzia* IV (June 1929): 594–96.

¹⁸ See: “La VI Conferenza internazionale contro la tubercolosi,” *Maternità ed Infanzia* III (September 1928): 685–703. See also the essay by Simonetta Ciranna, and Patrizia Montuori in this issue.

¹⁹ This is not the place to indicate a reference bibliography, which in recent years has been enriched with numerous titles, sometimes including case studies and interesting micro-stories. Among the many general titles, we would like to highlight: Stefano De Martino, and Alex Wall, *Cities of childhood: Italian colonies of the 1930s* (London: Architectural Association, 1988); Gian Carlo Jocoteau, ed., *Ai monti e al mare. Cento anni di colonie per l'infanzia* (Milan: Fabbri, 1990); Valter Balducci, ed., *Architetture per le colonie di vacanza. Esperienze europee* (Florence: Alinea, 2005); Valentina Orioli, ed., *Milano Marittima. Paesaggi e architetture per il turismo balneare* (Milan: Mondadori, 2012); Chiara Baglione, "Educating the youth population: colonies by the sea, in the mountains, and in the city during fascism," *Area* XXIII, no. 176 (2021): 4–13. However, for a primary printed source out of 20 exemplary cases, see the volume of Mario Labò, and Attilio Podestà, *Colonie. Marine, montane, elioterapiche* (Milan: Editoriale Domus, 1942).

²⁰ Giuseppe Grossi, "L'Asilo materno provinciale di Milano," *Maternità ed Infanzia* IV (April 1929): 411–23.

²¹ Sileno Fabbri, *L'assistenza della maternità e dell'infanzia in Italia. Problemi vecchi e nuovi* (Naples: Ed. Chiurazzi, 1933), 37–8.

²² See Charles S. Maier, "Between Taylorism and Technocracy: European ideologies and the vision of industrial productivity in the 1920s," *Journal of Contemporary History* 2 (1970): 27–61; Diana Garvin, "Taylorist Breastfeeding in Rationalist Clinics: Constructing Industrial Motherhood in Fascist Italy," *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 3 (Spring 2015): 655–74.

²³ Sileno Fabbri, *L'assistenza della maternità e dell'infanzia in Italia. Problemi vecchi e nuovi* (Naples: Ed. Chiurazzi, 1933), 37–8.

²⁴ [Bianca Fabbri], "I centri di assistenza materna ed infantile," *Maternità ed Infanzia* VIII (January 1933): 12–3.

²⁵ Sileno Fabbri, "La casa della madre e del bambino," *Maternità ed Infanzia* IX (September 1934): 194–95.

²⁶ See Fulvio Irace, "Un esempio di architettura industriale degli anni Trenta: lo stabilimento ItalCima," in *Costruire in Lombardia 1880-1980. Industria e terziario*, ed. Ornella Selvafolta (Milan: Electa, 1986), 80–93.

²⁷ "Casa dell'ONMI (Arch. Umberto Nordio)," *Casabella* 95 (November 1935): 8–9. See also Fabrizio Civalleri, and Orsola Spada, "The Casa della madre e del bambino in Trieste. The afterlife of Umberto Nordio's fascist welfare building," in *The Routledge Companion to Italian fascist architecture. Reception and legacy*, eds. Bea Jones Kay, and Stephanie Pilat (London-New York: Routledge, 2020), 336–45.

²⁸ "Progetto per una casa della Madre e del Bambino a Roma dell'arch. E. Rossi," *Architettura* XVII (October 1938): 639; P. L., "Un asilo nido a Roma," *Edilizia Moderna*, no. 34-35-36 (December 1940): 38–9; T. Landi, "Architetto Ettore Rossi. Casa della madre e del bambino a Roma," *Casabella* 165 (September 1941): 20–31. On Ettore Rossi see Simonetta Ciranna, and Patrizia Montuori, "Healthy and Beautiful. Italian Colonies during the Fascist Period: two Architectures between Abruzzi's Mountain and Sea," *ArchHistO architettura storia restauro - architecture history restoration* VI, no. 11 (2019): 53–87; Patrizia Montuori, "Ettore Rossi. Opere e scambi professionali tra Ventennio e Dopoguerra," *Studi e ricerche di storia dell'architettura. Rivista dell'Associazione Italiana Storici dell'Architettura* 9 (2021): 54–67.

²⁹ "La Mostra delle colonie estive e dell'assistenza all'infanzia in Roma," *Architettura* XVI (June 1937): 307. The exhibition was the first of four set up at the Circo Massimo; the others were: Mostra del Tessile Nazionale (1937–38), Mostra del Dopolavoro (1938), Mostra Autarchica del Minerale Italiano (1938–39). See: Maddalena Carli, *Vedere il fascismo. Arte e politica nelle esposizioni del regime (1928-1942)* (Rome: Carocci, 2020); Aurora Roscini Vitali, "Un accento di viva modernità al Circo Massimo. Relazioni tra artisti e architetti nella costruzione di immagine del Regime," *Studi e ricerche di storia dell'architettura. Rivista dell'Associazione Italiana Storici dell'Architettura* 8 (2020): 50–65.

³⁰ V. Montesi, "La Mostra delle Colonie estive e dell'Assistenza all'infanzia," *La Stirpe* XV, no. 9 (September 1937): 279–81.

³¹ See: Giuseppe De Toni, "A proposito di due possibili pericoli delle colonie estive," *Difesa sociale* 12 (1936): 1048; Gaetano Rossi, "Profilassi antitubercolare e colonie climatiche," *Difesa sociale* 2 (1937): 149–58.

³² See the catalogue: *La città dell'infanzia. Edizione riassuntiva illustrata a ricordo della Mostra delle colonie estive e della assistenza all'infanzia* (Milan: Gino Salocchi editore, 1937); Giuseppe Pagano, "La Mostra Nazionale delle Colonie Estive e dell'Assistenza all'Infanzia," *Casabella* 116 (August 1937): 6–7.

³³ See: "Mussolini inaugura la Mostra delle colonie estive. L'adunata delle donne fasciste," *Il Lavoro Fascista*, 21 June 1937; "Il Duce parla alle 60.000 donne fasciste," *La Stampa*, 20 June 1937, 4; "L'alto elogio del Duce alle 60.000 donne acclamanti in piazza Venezia," *La Stampa*, 21 June 1937, 1.

³⁴ See "Il padiglione dell'ONMI," *Maternità ed Infanzia* XII (June 1937): 3–6.

³⁵ Opera nazionale maternità e infanzia, *Mostra delle colonie estive e dell'assistenza all'infanzia. Roma giugno-settembre - XV* (Milan: Arti Graf. Navarra S.A., 1937).

³⁶ Partito Nazionale Fascista, *Programma generale delle mostre-concorso e dei concorsi nazionali organizzati in occasione della Mostra nazionale delle colonie estive e dell'assistenza all'infanzia* (Rome: Stabilimento tipografico Europa, 1937), 27. Other competition-exhibitions always concerned colonies, from rational fixtures (competition 10) to sanitary installations (competition 11).

³⁷ Alessandro Laurinich, "Definizione della Casa della Madre e del Bambino," *Architettura* XVII (October 1938): 625.

³⁸ See "Concorso per il progetto della Casa della Madre e del Bambino in Asti," *La Stampa*, 3 August 1937, 3; "Concorso per la Casa della madre e del bambino con annessa maternità 'Pietro Badoglio' in Asti," *L'architettura italiana* XXXIII (February 1938): 60–5.

³⁹ The building in Frosinone was built in 1940 (the project is dated 27 June 1938), while the one in Pontecorvo was dedicated to Bernardo Bergamaschi in 1941; see Giannandrea Jacobucci, *Giovanni Jacobucci architetto 1895-1970* (Rome: Edizioni Kappa, 1996), 33.

⁴⁰ See: *Casa della madre e del bambino da erigersi in Milano al nuovo parco di piazzale Lugano in memoria del barone Giuseppe Weil Weiss di Lainate. Il progetto* (Milan: Edizioni Ariel-Officine grafiche Esperia, 1940); Giorgio Nicodemi, *La Biblioteca e la casa della Madre e del bambino, donate al comune di Milano in memoria del Barone Giuseppe Weil Weiss di Lainate* (Milan: Edizioni Ariel, 1940).

⁴¹ [Gemma Gagliardini], *Istituti e preventori dell'Opera nazionale maternità e infanzia* (Rome: Stabilimento tipografico ditto Carlo Colombo, 1950), 3.

⁴² See: Massimiliano Savorra, *Per la donna, per il bambino, per la razza. L'architettura dell'ONMI tra eutetica ed eugenica nell'Italia fascista* (Siracusa: Letteraventidue, 2021), 143–50.

⁴³ The law was published in the *Gazzetta ufficiale* on 31 December 1975.

⁴⁴ Giuseppe Pagano, "Architettura nazionale," *Casabella* 85 (January 1935): 34.

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L'ONMI e l'architettura per la maternità e l'infanzia (1925–75): un patrimonio dimenticato

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KEYWORDS

ONMI; architettura del fascismo; edifici per il welfare; colonie per l'infanzia; salute femminile

ABSTRACT

Sulla base di una ricerca in parte ancora in corso e in parte già pubblicata, il contributo presenta il ruolo dell'ONMI nella gestione, nel coordinamento e nella realizzazione di edifici per la protezione dell'infanzia, in particolare colonie e case della madre e del bambino, realizzati in Italia durante gli anni del fascismo. La riflessione nata intorno al ruolo della committenza, inoltre, permette di mostrare taluni aspetti legati al concetto di architettura razionalista come rappresentazione delle istanze sanitarie razziste del fascismo, attraverso la ricerca di una correlazione fra i progetti, le costruzioni e i programmi funzionali e simbolici originari. Ciò considerando che dopo la Seconda Guerra Mondiale tali architetture per l'infanzia sono sopravvissute con le stesse funzioni (a differenza delle Case del Fascio e delle Case del Balilla), continuando a esercitare in qualche misura le funzioni per cui erano nate, sebbene con nuovi significati. Tali edifici furono, infatti, oggetto di una risignificazione assolutamente necessaria, giacché avevano nella loro genesi una componente ideologica, nel caso specifico razzista, non più accettabile nel mutato contesto storico-politico.

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