# Edmondo Rossoni and Tresigallo. An Atypical Case of a Regime Town

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### Abstract

In the last 30 years, the town of Tresigallo has to come to terms with the legacy of its dissonant heritage. The rediscovery of its history happened gradually. It began in 1985 with the organization of conferences that encouraged a public debate about its founder Edmondo Rossoni, a minister during the fascist era, and the buildings he commissioned in Tresigallo. The town's historical and architectural value, in that its unique identity in relationship with a denied past, had to be first recognized at a community level. Public administration's take-over has not always granted the protection of these rationalist structures: some demolitions happened even in the early 2000s. Between late 1980s and 2000s, an increasing number of architects, local historians, photographers, and artists became interested in the town's history due to its almost wholly preserved 1930s architectural and urban features. Restoration works and raising research on rationalist architecture have pointed out that the town should be considered a cultural asset to be preserved and valued. This paper examines some urban regeneration projects undertaken by the public administration, such as the former G.I.L. (Gioventù Italiana del Littorio) being converted into a public library and Public Baths made into an exhibition space. It also investigates the touristic and cultural development of the territory through the organization of cultural events and the use of social media.

Keywords: Heritage, Fascism, Identity, Urban Regeneration, Rationalist Architecture

### Introduction

Tresigallo, a small town of five thousand inhabitants near Ferrara, has been on national historiography fringes for a long time. The fundamental essay by Riccardo Mariani (1976) titled Fascismo e Città Nuove (Fascism and new cities) has given it its actual place of prominence among the planned cities. The character and the story of Edmondo Rossoni, the deus ex machina of Tresigallo, are still unclear, making it hard to understand this atypical case of regime city. The local power dynamics, the relationship between Rossoni and the Prime Minister and leader of the National Fascist Party Benito Mussolini, the source of money poured into Tresigallo, are among the numerous topics that still today do not have

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a specific answer. The absence of a biography of Rossoni, who is often addressed as one among 'converts' from revolutionary syndicalism to Fascism, makes finding these answers even more difficult.

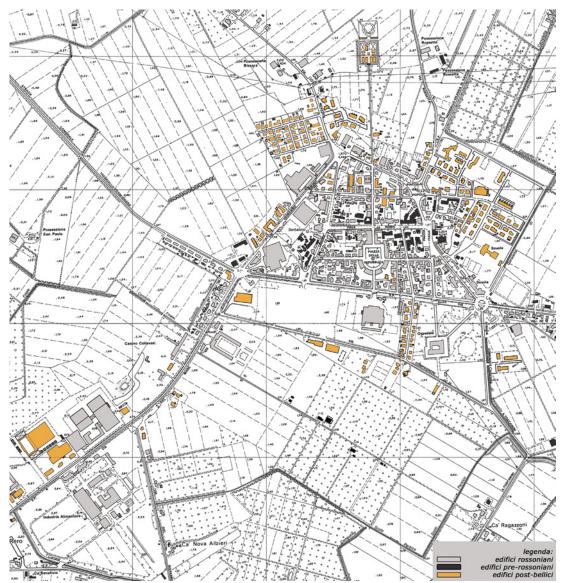


Figure 1. Map of the site. Tresigallo after Brugnatti D. 2012. *Identità Ritrovata. Tresigallo Rossoni.* Ferrara: Italiatipolitografia

## Ancient times till 1939

Tresigallo is a very ancient settlement. In *Statuti*, an ancient document written in 1287, the church of Tresigallo is mentioned. Most probably the village, which could count few houses around the church and around 500 inhabitants, was existing much before and it has not had any evolution until 1935 when the re-foundation works started. Tresigallo is a peculiar case study, a unique reality, and probably the most crucial example of rationalist architecture with no celebrative purpose. Unlike other planned cities, neither the O.N.C. (*Opera Nazionale Combattenti*) nor parastatal entities took part in the operations, nor did the corporations (*aziende*) that built planned towns during the autarchy such as A.R.S.A.

(Anonima Carbonifera) guided by Guido Segre or S.N.I.A. Viscosa, chaired by Franco Marinotti. Furthermore, no famous architect was involved in the planning as well.

Tresigallo was an act of authority by Edmondo Rossoni when the odds were in his favor. In September 1930 he was appointed member of the Grand Council of Fascism, in 1932 Undersecretary to the Ministers Council's Presidency and eventually, Minister of Agriculture and Forests from 1935 to 1939. The regime's economic guidelines for rural areas implied non-well-structured planning of 'new cities' and sometimes an inaccurate and improvised intervention system. At the beginning of 1934, after the foundation of Littoria (one of the significant new town founded near Rome) on 18 December 1932 - and while the construction of Sabaudia (an international renown resort in the Circeo area) was about to be completed, the place for Pontinia's foundation, one of the focal new town, was not yet decided.

Behind the propaganda facade, which was amplified by the foreign press especially in England, the first problems began to show: water issues, struggling industrial production, the physical discomfort of the population that moved there, and the rising fear of malaria.

On the contrary, Tresigallo stood out for its complexity and the social vision; this derived from Rossoni's ideas for the Italian economy and society's renaissance started a decade before 1935.

In the 1920s the former revolutionary trade unionist had tried to set up a project capable of transforming the nascent Fascism into a labor movement. Labor thus, was to play a central role.

Giuseppe Parlato stated that Rossoni's project embodied the 'global trade unionism' (*sindacalismo integrale*): that formula implied the creation of a confederation of fascist corporations and a unitary trade union where all the categories would be represented, including both employers and workers. A corporate model of collaboration between social classes that, therefore, would overcome the opposition between employers and workers.

It was a kind of social revolution that was difficult to implement: both *Confagricoltura* (confederation of the agricultural sector) and, above all, *Confindustria* (confederation of the industrial sector) rebelled against Rossoni's project and made it fail. Doubts and oppositions were seen even from fascists: Giuseppe Bottai (1940), Undersecretary to the Corporations Ministry, had his own project; Augusto Turati, secretary of the *Partito Nazionale Fascista*, wanted to incorporate the union in the party - while, for Rossoni, the union had to be outside the politics. Mussolini, on the other hand, wanted to regain the consent of *Confindustria* and other influential players. Rossoni found himself, therefore, in the crossfire and lost the game: in December 1928, with the so-called 'sbloccamento' (unlocking), the 'Rossoniana', the unitary confederation wanted by Rossoni and nicknamed after him, was disassembled and reorganized into different confederations according to the branch of work. It was the defeat of the future minister's political project, albeit only a momentary setback. In that period, Tresigallo was a small country village of about 500

inhabitants on the edges of the late nineteenth century's Big Claimed Land area. The ideal place to bring Rossoni's project to life, after Mussolini reinstated him.

Tresigallo was re-founded as an 'other' project: a twentieth-century ideal city, corporative, steeped in the contradictions of the regime, in which a radical political vision and personal power met.

Rossoni surrounded himself with esteemed personnel and trusted friends: Carlo Frighi, an engineer who converted in actual projects and implemented the ideas that he received as rough sketches from the Ministry of Agriculture; Livio Mariani, the butcher of the village and companion in political struggles during his early days, was the intermediary of Rossoni for the trading of assets.

The minister's long arm, the real estate company S.E.R.T.I.A. (*Società Emiliano-Romagnola Terra Industria Agricoltura*) based in Rome and registered in his uncle's name, played a role comparable to the one that the central government had in Sardinia and Pontine Marshes. Between 1933 and 1935 expropriations, demolitions, and the first housing units' foundations happened. Then began the large-scale construction of public and private buildings on one side and the other's industrial area. Rossoni made the most of his position by proposing incentives, which were hard to refuse, to private businesses.

The Genoa-based firm Belloni for example, which undertook the street paving works in Tresigallo, obtained later a large commission for roads' construction in East Africa. Or the Modena-based company Orsi, a manufacturer of agricultural machinery, that was contacted directly by the minister to base a part of the production in the new town. To reconnect all the underground activity of S.E.R.T.I.A. is complex. For sure it became the privileged interlocutor of private individuals, businesses, and public bodies. A confidential report, with photographs attached, eventually got to Mussolini in the spring of 1937. Rossoni, recalled, by the Duce, responded by defending himself and justifying his actions. The process was started and was unstoppable: alongside the new rationalist villas, squares and meeting places, houses for workers, industries, and sports and leisure facilities rose. The construction of new buildings and filling up of spaces went on with the following facilities: girls' school for embroidery, the aqueduct, the hotels Italia and the luxurious Domus Tua, the kindergarten (already existing and embellished with a new gate and an arcade), the house of Balilla, that later became the house of G.I.L. (the fascist youth association, a place for ideological and physical education), the public toilets, the dancing hall, the elementary school, the Corporate Theatre, the building of the insurance offices company Assicurazioni Generali Venezia. Just outside the settlement's central core, which follows the city's trapezoid shape, industries' citadel rose. It included ten agricultural factories: the C.E.L.N.A. (that produced cellulose from canapulo - a residue of hemp), the I.N.T.A. (Industria Nazionale Tessili Autarchici that turned rags into artificial wool), the MA.LI.CA. (Manifattura Lino Canapa - for the processing of green hemp) the Consortium of Hemp Producers (that selected white hemp), the Ca. Fioc. (for the transformation of hemp into tuft), the S.A.D.A plant (Società Anonima Distilleria Agricola- built for the extraction of alcohol from beets), the A.N.B. (Associazione Nazionale Bieticoltori - a sugar

factory for the processing of chards), the company S.I.A.R.I. (which dealt with the processing of milk and butter, textile casein and synthetic wool), the warehouse of the Provincial Agricultural Consortium (that managed grain storage), the C.A.L.E.F.O. (for the collection and selection of fruit to export), and the S.A.I.M.M. (which produced agricultural machines).



Figure 2. Republic Square, 2010. (Cultural Association "Torri di Marmo" Archive).



Figure 3. The church's porch, 2010. (Cultural Association "Torri di Marmo" Archive)

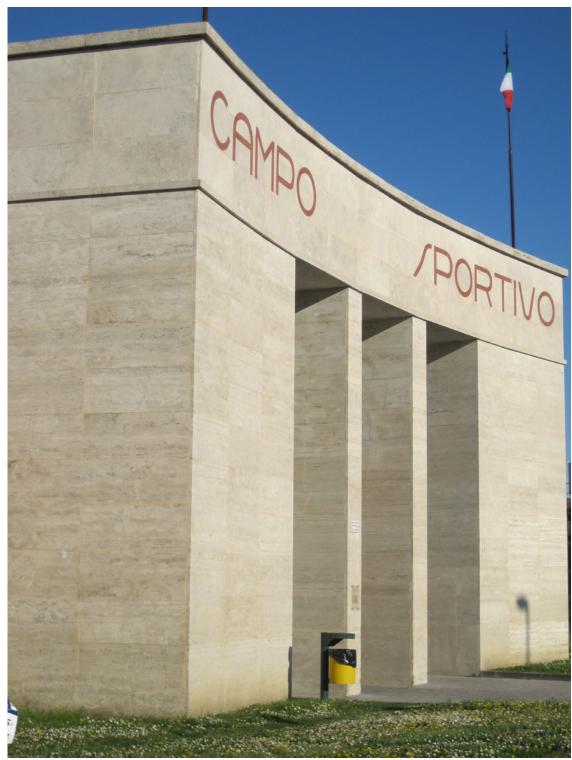


Figure 4. Stadium, 2010. (Cultural Association "Torri di Marmo" Archive)



Figure 5. E. Boeri Sanatorial, 2010. (Cultural Association "Torri di Marmo" Archive)



Figure 6. Catexil factory (processing of green hemp), 1938 (Private Archive).

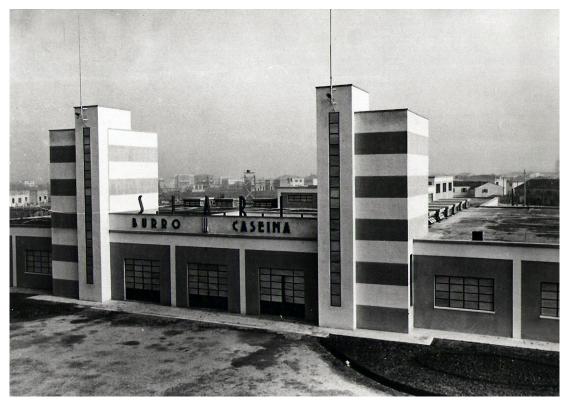


Figure 7. S.I.A.R.I. factory (processing of milk and butter), 1937 (Private Archive).

Rossoni's humongous development plan was based on the processing industry supported by the surrounding fields' products and made Tresigallo become one of the largest planned cities in terms of built areas. Tresigallo soon attracted skilled labor from the local district characterized by intense emigration and widespread poverty: the population registered unprecedented growth, reaching over 7000 units. Rossoni had revolutionized the territory anthropologically, eroding the regime's secular history, changing the rhythms of life, traditions, work prospects, and dreams.

## WWII to present

At the beginning of the war, the project of Tresigallo came to a standstill. It made sense during the autocratic economic regime of the fascist government and the prominent role assumed by Edmondo Rossoni. But the end of the war, hence of Fascism, destroyed the basis of that development project. The new municipal council also imposed further restrictions. Tresigallo, in the post-war market economy, went back to be a peripheral area not particularly profitable for investments.

A period of abandonment and oblivion had begun. Emigration, neglect, demolitions, and tampering hit the regime's architecture, deleting the symbols of a past that was no longer accepted. The wounds suffered by the architectural heritage are still noticeable, not just those caused by the damages of war but also those caused by incorrect restorations. Improper extensions and renovations happened under a motto of *damnation memoriae*. To cite a few examples: the Ca.Fioc.'s tower knocking down; the original 1935 street lamps -

about a hundred - were replaced; the facade of the elementary school's tampering with; so much so even the cemetery's alteration by demolishing two side chapels, and so on.

A considerable amount of time and the fall of certain ideological obstacles allowed a new era of historical and architectural studies to open, void of political positions. The rediscovery of the heritage, however, happened slowly. A conference "TRESIGALLO il passato – il futuro" (Ammirati & Chendi 1990) held on 13 April 1985, played a pivotal role in opening a public discussion. It brought forth the awareness that the town did have historical and architectural significance; however, this realization by the public administration did not translate to the protection of its rationalist buildings. Demolitions earlier announced continued to take place as scheduled. Ideally, urban enhancement should have been the second step, the first being acknowledging and recognizing the town's historical and architectural value and its unique identity due to its denied past at a community level. Between the end of the 1980s and the 2000s, an increasing number of architects, local historians, photographers, artists and amateurs became interested in the history of the town, starting with Flavia Faccioli, Giancarlo Martinoni, Amos Castaldini, Piergiorgio Massaretti, Antonio Pennacchi, Arrigo Marazzi (2008) and Stefano Muroni.

It was not until 2003 that Tresigallo was recognized more widely for its valuable heritage and the awareness that this must be valued and protected. Among the key initiatives in this direction, we can count the brand identity of 'Città del Novecento' and the designation of Tresigallo in the 'Città d'arte' circuit by the Emilia-Romagna Region. In 2005 a project of cataloging of the Rossonian buildings started. Experts teams involved produced "urban sector" cards for describing the plan blocks and 'A' cards for buildings, according to the Central Institute for Cataloging and Documentation's (ICCD) methodology. In collaboration with the Municipality of Tresigallo, the Superintendency for Architectural Heritage and Landscape of Ravenna undertook the project granted by regional funding. As an outcome of this process, it was possible to compare today's building's situation with the original ones and spot incongruous additions. Secondly, it enabled to study with greater precision, from a material point of view, the elements that characterize the local architecture of the 1930s.

An important conference, "Identità Ritrovata. Tresigallo Rossoni", where historians and architects talked about the restoration works carried out in Tresigallo, took place in 2008. For the first time, the process of identity recovery was the topic of the discussion, starting from the reuse of regime architecture as community spaces. In 2009, Tresigallo became part of the Associazione Nazionale delle Città di Fondazione and, the following year, the CE.S.A.R. (Centro Studi sull'Architettura Razionalista) in Rome, dedicated a monographic issue for the distribution in Europe area on the attractive urban-architectural model of Tresigallo.

From 2003 to 2015, 'great works' of rediscovery and restoration on endangered buildings took place within a few years. To cite a few examples: former *Casa della G.I.L.*, former public baths and *Domus Tua*, former stadium portal, kindergarten and its portal, nursery

school, former S.A.A.T., *piazza Italia* and its parvis, former *piazza della Rivoluzione*, former Carabinieri barracks.



Figure 8. Casa della G.I.L. Conservation status from the post-war period to the 2000s. (Private Archive).

The process of awareness has also been encouraged by the forward-looking (optimistic) proposals of the mayor Maurizio Barbirati. He involved private citizens with participatory projects such as 'Colora la tua città' (2005-2010), allocating funds to rediscover the original color of historic buildings.

Public meetings dedicated to the new citizens, who now lived in the city center's historical buildings, were organized. These meetings aimed to firstly, educate them about the foundational process and the local industrial history and secondly, highlight their houses' architectonical features. Many of these people have recently settled into the town, substituting the original inhabitants who moved in Italy's major industrial cities after the end of the Second World War. The new population is now composed of a melting pot of first and second-generation immigrants from abroad, employed mainly in seasonal fields work and nearby industries, and is totally unaware of the town's history. The result of this is that valuable architectural buildings have often been considered as just old and not as something worth preserving.

Since the 1980s local administrations, cultural associations, and local history aficionados have carried out educational activities, paired with the collection of the last verbal accounts of the people who lived during the 1930s. These new lenses showed public places that were previously ignored with a new awareness. Since the local city administrations for the past eight decades have been almost entirely managed by the political Left, the attitude

towards research and renovation projects could not be nostalgic and more importance was given to how the renovated building could serve as an asset to the community. Moreover, Tresigallo is an example of a balanced and non-monumental architecture, far from the Mussolini's propaganda.

Following is one of the best outcomes of how the renovated building could serve as an asset to the community.



Figure 9. Casa della Cultura (House of Culture) after the restoration, 2003. (Cultural Association "Torri di Marmo" Archive).

The restoration of the former *Casa della G.I.L.* which is now the *Casa della Cultura* is of particular importance as it allows us to understand better the mechanism of synergistic collaboration between the administration, authorities, and the local people. The recovery intervention was incredibly complex since only the perimetrical original walls survived the abandonment. The primary step was to gather information about the building from peoples' memory of the building, coupled with careful research about the building's history and historical context of the Tresigallo's re-foundation plan. It was done by interviewing the population and encouraging its involvement. On the bases of the recovered data, operators oriented the archive research on the project from the 1930s, the planimetric study, the identification and classification of the original materials, the examination of the chromatisms and methodologies of the realization of the fixtures, the microscope surveys, the petrographic and stratigraphic analysis of the remaining plaster blocks, the design of the project, the identification of the original intended use of buildings, and the search for compatible materials and technologies. As a result, the renovated building underwent an invasive but necessary planimetric variation.

#### Conclusions

The restoration of modern architecture is a rather complex subject. An aspect of it that is important to discuss here is the change in the 'usage' of a public facility. A restoration project has changed a building's use: a former gym, perceived by the population as a degraded place, became a library. A peripheral, but yet very central, space transformed for the public benefit and social inclusion. By making this choice, the public administration pursued the road to accessibility and enhancement of the entire area that has now become a focal point in the urban fabric of Tresigallo. Today it is home to conferences, film forums, exhibitions, book presentations, and educational and pedagogical activities. It is a virtuous example of redevelopment that saw the participation of the local community and local businesses.

After the restoration work and growing research on rationalist architecture, it has come to light that the town should be considered as a cultural asset to be preserved and valued. The area has almost entirely preserved the 1930s architectural and urban features. The 'Rossonian Tresigallo' peculiarity is a diffused urban quality, visible in valuable architectural details: the coating in cipollino, travertine or opal glass. The way forward for the restoration of private rationalist buildings lies in the realization and adoption of a code of practice: a series of functional indications to operate related to the buildings' conscious conservation - from the details of the molding to corner solutions, from faux travertine to original fixtures. Reaching out people on a much bigger scale with the sensitivity towards any restoration work on modern buildings is a priority. This attitude must come from the core of the population conscious of the value of their heritage. Acknowledging its history and weight of the heritage, the town envisioning as a tourist place began. In 2006 Tresigallo entered the circuit of Borghi Autentici. In 2015 it joined the A.T.R.I.U.M. (Architecture of Totalitarian Regimes in Urban Managements) a Council of Europe cultural route involving eighteen different institutions (universities, ministries, N.G.O.s, local administrations) and 11 European countries with architectures from totalitarian regimes eras. In 2017 the Associazione Torri di Marmo, winner of the regional call of bids on the Memoria del Novecento Law, presented a new branding: Tresigallo La Città Metafisica (Tresigallo The Metaphysical City), including a new dynamic logo, website, brochure and map with recommended itineraries. It was a new brand identity for Tresigallo and social media channels, namely Facebook and Instagram, were used to spread the word. Moreover, the dissemination of the historical and architectural heritage of Tresigallo was once more under the spotlight with a panel discussion 'Urban history, architecture and community projects' at the first national conference of the Italian Association of Public History, held in Ravenna in 2017.

Taking cognizance of its own past, of the historical and architectural identity brought to Tresigallo, has been a long process of maturation for the entire community, a process that has had its share of hurdles. The problems connected to low birth-rates afflicts the rural territories, such as Tresigallo, reverberate on public spaces and their maintenance. Buildings that have been returned to the community for public purposes now risk going back to the oblivion, maintenance expenses and sustainability topping the list of reasons for this. Preservation of Architectural heritage plays a pivotal role in the relationship

between 'public and private' and is a crucial challenge that small towns will have to face soon.

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