



Nalut: the Berber Castle with mainly blind walls on the sides more exposed to the sun (and for defensive reasons). All inward looking, following the criteria of a medieval citadel. Tower at the centre resembling skyscrapers (PELLEGRINI 1936 b, caption translated by the authors).

Experience, theory, practice. The Manifesto of Colonial Architecture by Giovanni Pellegrini

Cristina Pallini, Vittoria Capresi

Giovanni Pellegrini graduated in Architecture from the Politecnico di Milano in 1931 and moved to Libya soon afterwards, hired by Alberto Alpago Novello, Ottavio Cabiati and Guido Ferrazza – members of the Milanese Club of Town Planners (*Club degli urbanisti*)¹ – to supervise the construction of the new cathedral in Benghazi. Later on, he started working in Tripoli for private clients and public authorities. The beginning of Pellegrini's career in the early Thirties paralleled a renewed focus on colonial architecture, whose relevance for the broader architectural debate became clear with the 1930 competition call for the Cathedral Square in Tripoli, challenging participants to blend local costumes with the Italian artistic tradition and achieve “a sense of modernity”².

Carlo Enrico Rava, among the founders of *Gruppo 7*, argued that contemporary colonial architecture was all but Moresque, revealing instead specific aspects of modernity “from the point of view of rationalism”³. In 1933, the Italian architect and town planner Luigi Piccinato, responsible for the “Edilizia coloniale” entry in *Enciclopedia Italiana*⁴, proposed the prototype of a modern colonial house for the V Milan Triennial Exhibition, harmonizing modernist aesthetics with local solutions, mainly concerning the orientation and inner layout⁵.

That same year, the Italian architectural journal *Rassegna di Architettura* began publishing works by Italian architects in Libya. After covering Giovanni Pellegrini's early works, the magazine published his *Manifesto of Colonial Architecture*, along with two of his articles, on Roman architecture in North Africa and recent town planning in Tripolitania⁶.

¹ Revisiting Pellegrini's academic training, Giovanna D'Amia traced his interest in urban and territorial planning back to the course on Urban Planning (*Tecnica Urbanistica*) held by Cesare Chiodi; see D'AMIA 2011.

² ACS, Fondo “Ministero per l'Africa Italiana,” b. 95, Direzione Generale Affari Civili, fasc. 5, Tripoli. Concorso Piazza della Cattedrale. This was the first official acknowledgement of the need for a new Italian colonial architecture; see CAPRESI 2011-2012.

³ RAVA 1931, p. 39, 89. Rava suggested that Italian colonial architecture should be rooted into the Libyan tradition, epitomised by Roman vestiges and by the «cubist influences» to be found in the south of the country.

⁴ PICCINATO 1931.

⁵ For the extensive press coverage of Piccinato's colonial house see GODOLI - GIACOMELLI 2005, pp. 290-291. See also MAGLIO 2016.

⁶ For a list of Pellegrini's works and related publications see GODOLI - GIACOMELLI 2005, pp. 269-273. See also. PELLEGRINI 1936 a, PELLEGRINI 1936 b, PELLEGRINI 1936 c.

The Manifesto in pictures

Rassegna di Architettura published Pellegrini's *Manifesto* in August 1936⁷. It consisted of a rather short text, followed by pages and pages of photographs – mostly his own – complemented by accurate and sharp comments. His *Manifesto*, in reality, reads as a set of solutions to draw practical guidelines for a number of concrete problems. To do this, he structured his thoughts in nine points, supplemented by an appendix (*corollario*) which address the master plan of a city and the resulting townscape, as well as the appearance of new buildings.

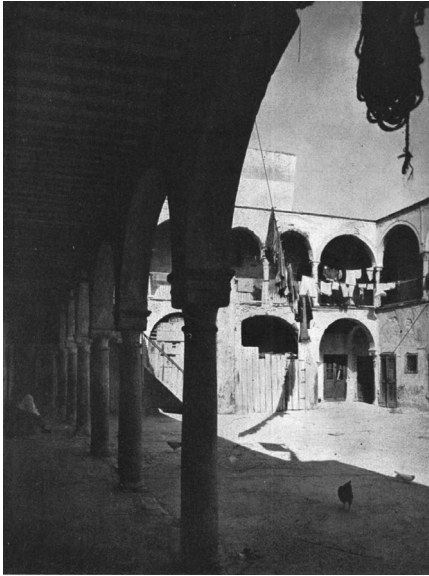
Pellegrini's photo selection depicted different thematic subjects avoiding any reference to cultural disparity between the colonisers and the colonised. His unbiased approach emerged when depicting Berber settlements as the ultimate example of the close relationship between the work of nature and that of man. The fortified granary of Nalut, where local tribes stored their grain in times of conflict along the road from Tripoli to Ghadames (p. 355), looked like a medieval citadel, due to the combination of blind defensive walls and inner towering structures "similar to skyscrapers."

The mountain village of Kabaw on the northern edge of the Tripolitanian Plateau (p. 362), outstandingly well defended from the inside and from the outside, appeared as carved from solid block. The village of Jefren and the oasis of Jalu in Cyrenaica (p. 363) well exemplified the "plastic harmonisation" of settlement and topography.

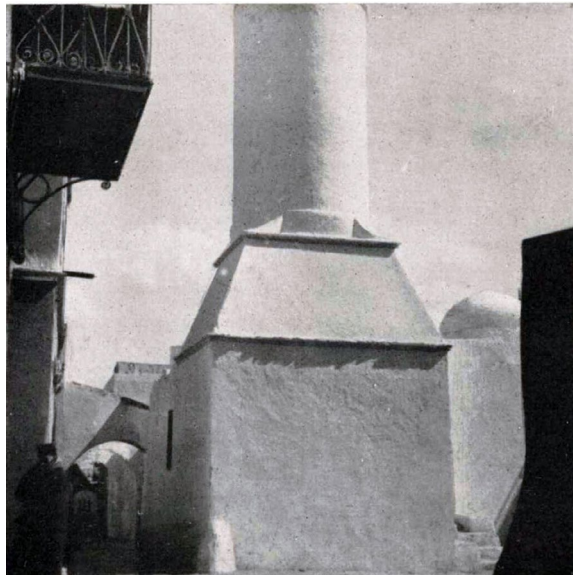
Travelling across Libya, Pellegrini was looking for paradigmatic examples of the rational response of man to climate and functional needs. To face problems of road-shading, for instance, tradition provided a vast repertoire of solutions: integrating vegetation into the built environment (p. 351, fig. 1; p. 357, fig. 2), adopting narrow staggered paths (p. 357, fig. 3-4), placing low-vaulted porticoes along the street (p. 351, fig. 1), bridging structures or bracing arches as shading devices (p. 358).

Surprisingly, rather than analysing mosques as a building type, Pellegrini tried to capture their architectural character as built-up masses and their urban role as transition spaces. Two small mosques, at Tajura and Janzur, featured a fine access courtyard which Pellegrini considered ideal: "You may notice the narrow entrance leading into an open space shaded by a high wall: on entering, you feel like home" (p. 352, fig. 2-3). The small mosque at Gharyan (p. 358, fig. 3) and that of Sidi Amrouss (p. 361, fig. 2) well exemplified the sculptural value of thick solid walls, an aspect that the buttressed mosque at the Dahra of Tripoli expressed at the highest degree (p. 365, fig. 2). Some mosques presented a fine geometric layout in their elevations (p. 353, fig. 1). Others instead stood out as compositions of pure volumes, such as the Great Mosque at Derna (p. 364, fig. 1) and the Murad Agha Mosque

⁷ A few months later, Pellegrini presented his *Manifesto* at the National Congress of Italian Architects held in Naples in October 1936. This was the first official debate on colonial planning and architecture, at a crucial time when Mussolini had proclaimed the Italian Empire; see NUZZACI 2013, pp. 29-40.



Suk of the Maltese in the area near the Arch of Marcus Aurelius. A very elegant portico reminiscent of Laurana, and with great breath. Thus, we find here a fine Italian courtyard (PELLEGRINI 1936 b, caption translated by the authors).



Classic cubism of the base of a minaret (PELLEGRINI 1936 b, caption translated by the authors).

at Tajura: "Mosque of Marad Agha (a renegade Christian of the first half of the 16th century who was born in Ragusa) 48 columns in *cipolin*, various *breccia* stones, banded Greek. A triumph of cubism: a rational structure in relation to means. Lined barrel vaults crossing at right angles along the perimeter wall, with bracing arches for a greater height, following the typical system of multiple arches borrowed from the Moresque (Seville, aqueducts of Toledo, Alcántara, etc.);" (p. 360, fig. 1).

The term "cubism" recurred in many of Pellegrini's comments, whenever praising the plastic effect of the built environment, or the iconic combination of simple volumes, flat roofs and white walls. This was particularly evident in Tripoli, so much so that Pellegrini adopted sub-categories. The old town as a whole epitomised "uncompromising cubism" (p. 361, fig. 4), whereas many individual houses exemplified "basic cubism" (p. 360, fig. 3). The transition from a cubic base to a truncated pyramid into the cylinder-shaped shaft of a minaret depicted instead "classic cubism" (p. 261, fig. 1).

Engaged in fieldwork, Pellegrini was tirelessly looking for elements of modernity in Libyan architecture. In this operational intent, he dedicated a special attention to traditional houses, mapping a wide range of solutions to filter light and air and cope with climate conditions. He traced each stylistic element (portal, recessed façade, inner portico, railings,

meshed gratings, etc.) back to its functional role, praising the Arab house as the architectural solution, tested by time, for human life in a harsh climate, strongly supporting its modern adaptation.

The Arab house has a central plan: the actual living spaces face onto a patio which serves as a living room. Generally, walls are without openings, characterised by a single fine portal. The whole house is introverted, inviolable from indiscreet looks. This solution, however, is not merely due to morality, but rather derives from the need to cope with heat and wind. The patio is like a gulf opening upwards, so that the wind, especially if the house is well oriented, does not penetrate it at all [...]. Now, once for all, it is obvious that Europeans can very well live in houses like these, and that this type of construction can be adapted to multi-storey structures. On the understanding that perimeter walls must be as blind as possible, particularly where exposed to the sun, the central courtyard could include a series of sloping loggias and terraces. This system, currently used at the ground and first floor of many existing buildings, preserves the advantage of ventilation and protection on the upper floors. Inner courtyards should include gardens, leaving room for circulation, closed by large walls and barriers even where there is no actual building behind them⁸.

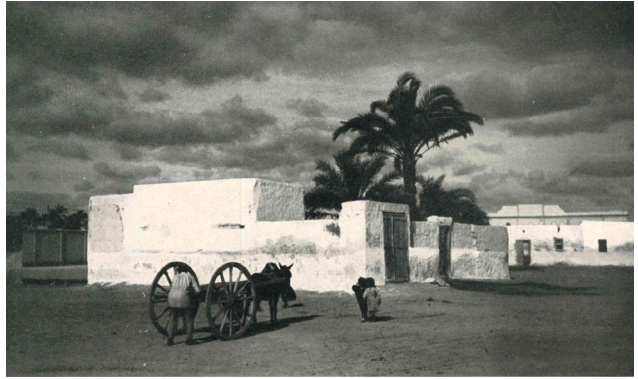
Some basic guidelines for town planners

Pellegrini believed that modern Libyan cities were to establish specific town planning criteria exportable to other African cities with a similar climate. Such criteria, however, were quite basic, listed in the *Manifesto* as rules to follow. Major arteries, whose crossings provided ideal locations for public buildings, were to be wide, possibly lined with trees or low-vaulted porticoes. Secondary roads instead, as in traditional settlements, were to be narrower and covered, following a staggered path to reach local shops and housing units. These latter had to alternate with gardens, possibly avoiding suffocating masses along the main roads. Matching the colourful Mediterranean sky, vegetation could add fine notes of colour to the ubiquitous white walls, enhancing their plastic value.

The city was to follow a geometric urban layout choosing the best possible orientation. The grid would not be monotonous “because a colonial city, resembling a park, necessitates gardens and green areas everywhere”. Intensive, semi-intensive, low-density areas with Mediterranean villas were to characterize the division in zones differing in function and density, allowing specific locations for sport facilities. Public buildings could take the shape of skyscrapers, possibly concentrated at major road intersections and surrounded by



An isolated house in the oasis of Tripoli: notice the role of the portal set in the blind wall along the road. We should do that too, avoiding setbacks and bad fences (PELLEGRINI 1936 b, caption translated by the authors).



A typical Arab house at Benghazi (PELLEGRINI 1936 b, caption translated by the authors).

a sort of modern Forum: large parks with theatres and public venues, banks, chambers of commerce, etc.

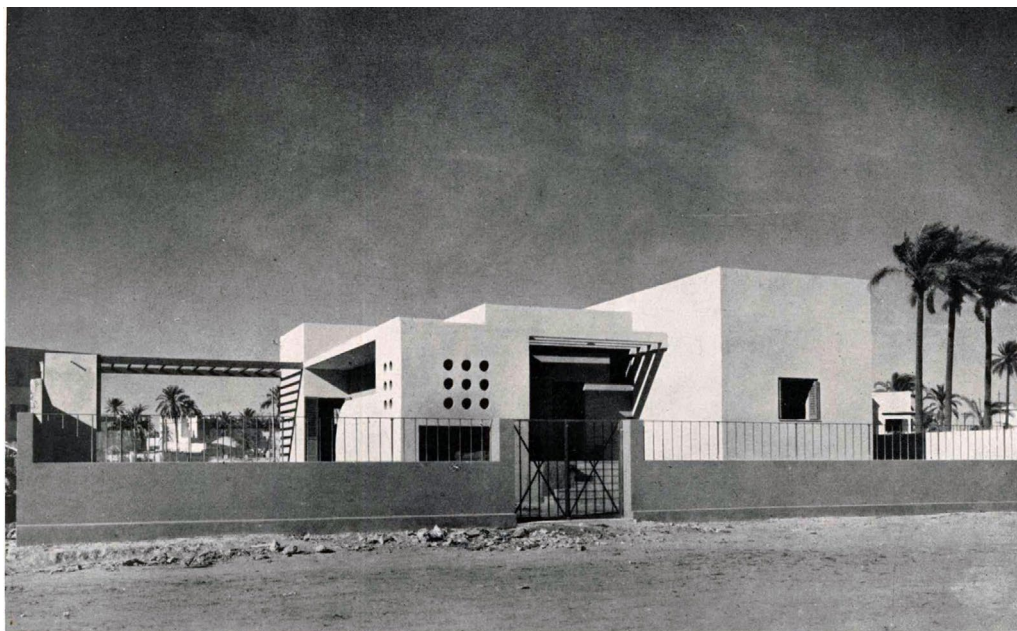
Following the indigenous courtyard type, dwellings were to integrate with private gardens, whose perimeter fences, covered with flowers, were to act like shading windbreaks. A common feature of indigenous courtyard houses, blind walls occasionally interrupted by monumental portals also characterised most of the street fronts: “We should do that too, avoiding setbacks and bad fences” (p. 351, fig. 2). Narrow streets, courtyard houses and blind walls, however, were to be “resolutely adapted” through modern aesthetics and modern technology, solving problems of thermal and acoustic insulation.

Pellegrini reiterated the notion of cubism to outline the aesthetic values of the modern city, which should achieve a “plastic effect, non-metallic cubism, interplay of building masses and polychromy”.

Theory into practice: the villas and the new rural settlements

His architecture is truly Mediterranean, animated by the sun and the light of the place, responding to that tradition in the lines and masses, in the play of solids and voids, while taking advantage of the latest materials and technical achievements to meet the particular needs required by the Libyan climate and atmosphere⁹.

⁹ See «Nuove costruzioni a Tripoli, Arch. Giovanni Pellegrini», *Rassegna di Architettura*, 1936, August, p. 6.



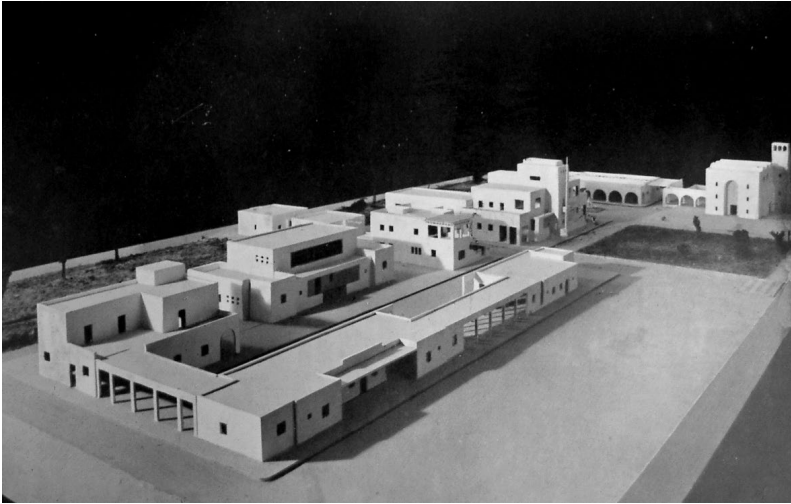
G. Pellegrini (in collaboration with engineer V. Agujari), Villa Salvi at Tripoli (from *Rassegna di Architettura*, August 1936, p. 8).

Early-thirties residential architecture by Giovanni Pellegrini was intimate and introverted, featuring a “rationalism” devoid of any rhetoric. Evoking spontaneous incremental construction, his Villa Salvi at Tripoli exemplifies how Pellegrini avoided symmetry, adopting instead a functional layout, which often produced recessed surfaces and irregular fenestrations¹⁰.

As described in the *Manifesto*: «Private dwellings [...] must follow the indigenous central-courtyard type, with several floors where necessary, blind walls on the sunny sides, loggias and terraces on the others» (p. 349).

The theme of the central core, as a courtyard or a distribution hub, appeared in several projects, as in Casa Zard and Villa Burei, whose entrance halls marked a symbolic and functional core.

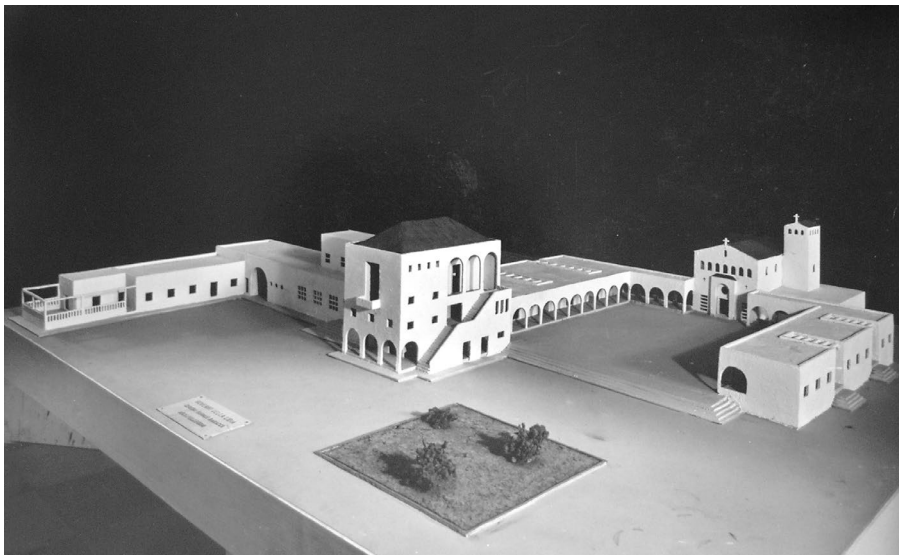
While many villas in Tripoli adopted the formal solution suggested by the *Manifesto*, in the rural centres for mass colonisation Pellegrini had the opportunity to elaborate his theoretical observations even further, experimenting with the role of architecture as a key identity feature of a settlement in the making, although in line with the political objectives of the Fascist regime.



G. Pellegrini (in collaboration with U. Di Segni), model to scale of Crispi village in Tripolitania, 1938 (Ente per la Colonizzazione della Libia / Libya Colonisation Authority, *I nuovi centri agricoli "Crispi" e "Gioda" in provincia di Misurata (Libia occidentale)*, Rome 1939).



G. Pellegrini, Crispi village (today Tumminah) in Tripolitania, the former Casa del Fascio (a building housing the local branch of the National Fascist Party) as seen from the market (photo L. Pezzani, 2009).



G. Pellegrini, model to scale of Baracca village in Cyrenaica, 1938 (former Archive of ISIAO – Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente, Rome, photo collection).

Part of a broader plan for agrarian colonisation of Libya, rural centres were to introduce modern agricultural life on the so-called Fourth Shore, empowering colonists as guardians of Italian sovereignty¹¹. In 1938, following four experimental settlements in Cyrenaica (1934), the Governor of Libya, Italo Balbo, launched a mass colonisation programme, which envisioned an Italian colony of 500,000 by 1960. The project initiated with the first transfer of 20,000 settlers in October 1938. More settlers followed in 1939 and, by 1940, there were approximately 110,000 Italians in Libya, distributed in 27 settlements built along the coasts of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica¹². In a disperse settlement system like that of Libya, new rural villages were meant as “logistic centres” equipped with some public buildings for basic administrative, political, commercial and religious functions. These embryos of modern agricultural life on the so-called Fourth Shore were to empower colonists in their role of securing Italian sovereignty over Libya, defining a new territorial hierarchy. Farmers settled in the surrounding areas, each family holding a farmhouse on the plot of land to be cultivated, in a dispersed pattern meant to reinforce the peasant attachment to the land he had “to redeem.” The Libya Colonization Authority (Ente per la Colonizzazione della Libia,

¹¹ See PERGHER 2017.

¹² Decree n. 701, of 17 May 1938, entitled *Provisions for a Plan of Intensive Demographic Colonization in Libya*, enforced a special programme for intensive colonization of State-owned lands financed by direct State funding. The outbreak of the Second World War prevented the third transfer, which was almost ready to start.



G. Pellegrini, Baracca village (today al-Farzucuh) in Cyrenaica, view of the former Casa del Fascio (photo V. Capresi, 2009).

ECL) and the National Fascist Authority for Social Security (Istituto Nazionale Fascista della Previdenza Sociale, INFPS) were in charge of land reclamation and construction of model villages. The Public Works Departments for Cyrenaica and Tripolitania were in charge of the planning and construction of the new settlements, designed by architects working there as employees or hired for that purpose.

As such, rural settlements represented an ideal testing ground for Giovanni Pellegrini, who could explore first-hand the operational effectiveness of his own interpretation of Libyan architecture. In this sense, a study of these projects is fundamental to understand the ideas put forth in the *Manifesto*. Pellegrini clustered his public buildings to form a sort of “open square” facing the surrounding landscape (portrayed as empty by the regime rhetoric, but actually marked by a pre-existing territorial organisation). In collaboration with Di

Segni¹³, Pellegrini planned the centre of Crispi (now Tumminah, 1938) and Tazzoli (now Sidi as-Sayyid, 1939) in Tripolitania, where he also designed the core of the rural settlements of Corradini (now al-Ganima, 1939) and Marconi (now Uadi Gsi'a, 1939). In 1938, Pellegrini designed the centre of Baracca (now Al-Farzuga) in Cyrenaica.

Almost all new settlements focused on an “open square” surrounded by buildings and arcades. In all his projects, particularly those for Marconi and Crispi, Pellegrini interpreted this theme as a key planning feature, arranging buildings on one or two sides and leaving the others open to the surrounding countryside. Rather than enclose an abstract space, his “open squares” almost embraced nature, framing it so that settlers, from the centre, could perceive a fine view of the surrounding landscape. At Marconi, Pellegrini carefully exploited the topography of the landscape, arranging buildings on the hilltop and placing the church on the highest spot to conclude the composition. In line with traditional Libyan streets as described in the *Manifesto*, Pellegrini made extensive use of arcaded paths to define the new centres and establish an atmosphere of intimacy. At Corradini, he adopted an uninterrupted portico, set at right angles to solve the facades of all public buildings, whose entrances were hidden in shade. Marking a visual and compositional axis, the chapel appears as generated from the one of the arches.

In his rural projects, Pellegrini made extensive use of the arch – either round or trabeated – not just as a stylistic feature, but also as a basic element for the definition of a spatial syntax. In the case of Corradini, the round-arched path is a unifying formal and functional device of the “open square” onto which Pellegrini grafted all his buildings (including the chapel), thus empowering the connecting path as the key architectural theme.

At Crispi, Pellegrini experimented with this idea of the portico as a unifying architectural element, a connection and a transition space from the “open square” to the single buildings. Once again, he put into practice the solutions presented in the *Manifesto*, envisaging small roads shaded by brise-soleil, reminiscent of the Medina. Significantly, his Church recalls the compositions of pure volumes, which he had appreciated in the architecture of many Libyan mosques.

Conclusions

In 1936, Pellegrini worked with Giuseppe Pagano and Guarniero Daniel for the exhibition on Italian rural architecture held at the VI Milan Triennale, which was to root modern architecture in “a world where the house is a necessity rather than an aesthetic game – a result

¹³ The professional relationship between Pellegrini and Di Segni still awaits clarification. We do know that they signed jointly several projects. The lack of primary sources, however, renders almost impossible any further clarification. Di Segni was in fact working as a member of the Public Work Office, while Pellegrini was running a private office in Tripoli. In the projects for new rural settlements, he possibly acted as a consultant of OOPP; see CAPRESI 2009.

to be achieved with the minimum waste of energy”¹⁴.

Pellegrini's *Manifesto*, however, remained largely overlooked in the years following its publication. His commented photographic survey offered a key to unlock all the potential of the Libyan building culture. In fact, Pellegrini carefully selected his examples as precedents that could easily feed modern reinterpretations, empowering colonial architecture and town planning with fresh ideas: solutions dictated by necessity and tested by time, an antidote to any aesthetic game embedded in rhetoric. Photos and captions, more than the actual text, bear evidence to Pellegrini's extensive experience of the local context and abiding interest in Libyan architecture, a great receptiveness of local culture at a time of strong nationalist rhetoric. According to him, architecture played a fundamental social role and tradition had to evolve, avoiding any form of imitation or folklore.

Major Libyan projects were entrusted to architects like Florestano Di Fausto (in Tripoli) or Ottavio Cabiati and Guido Ferrazza (in Benghazi), who also showed some familiarity with vernacular solutions. Their projects, however, were more in line with the official rhetoric. The subtle and precise observations emerging from the *Manifesto* were not to pave, as promised, the future of Colonial Architecture. Yet, they showed a mature, and unbiased, reflection on Libyan architecture and town planning.

¹⁴ PAGANO - DANIEL 1936.