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# The Regime and the Opera House

## A study of Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

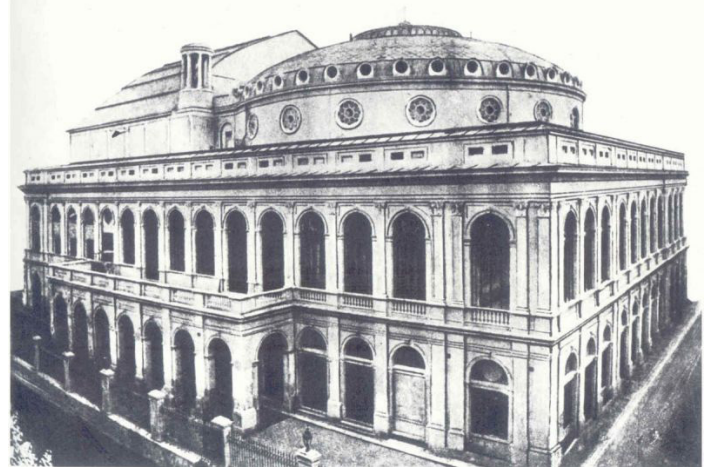
Yifan Shen  
architecture, 2025

### Abstract

This essay delves into the multifaceted role of the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma during the Fascist regime, with a specific focus on its pivotal 1933 renovation under architect Marcello Piacentini. The opera house served as a propaganda tool, a leisure management instrument, and a platform for promoting consumerism, aligning with the political ideologies of its time. Through architectural analysis, the study draws parallels between Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, the Nanking Theatre in Shanghai, and the Radio City Music Hall in New York, revealing how these opera houses mirrored contemporary crises and cultural shifts.

Examining the architectural evolution of Teatro dell'Opera, the essay dissects its design choices, including the reorientation of entrances and the creation of grand foyers, illustrating a deliberate effort to magnify the opera house's role in social stratification and wealth display. By connecting these design elements to global counterparts, the research demonstrates the enduring influence of consumerism and political agendas on opera houses, even in the modern era. This study offers a comprehensive analysis of how opera houses have functioned historically as agents of political influence and cultural consumption. Through this exploration, it constructs a compelling atlas of political impact on social and cultural activities, shedding light on the continued resonance of historical ideologies in contemporary opera house practices, ultimately enriching our understanding of the interplay between architecture, politics, and society.

Teatro dell'Opera, 1879



Teatro dell'Opera, 1933



Teatro dell'Opera, 1961



One evening in 1939, the darkness of the eve of the Second World War was creeping across the European continent. In front of the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, a lively crowd was delightfully gathering, expecting to watch Puccini's celebrated opera, *Turandot*. Entering the theater, which had been renovated by the fascist regime just a few years prior, one would see the lobby filled with well-dressed people – many of them members of the Italian elite who supported the fascist regime – chatting and mingling, showing off their latest fashions and jewelry, and discussing politics and culture in a space framed with grand columns, marble floors, and intricate mosaics on the walls and ceilings. At the same time, *Turandot*'s exotic portrayal of an East Asian culture and its focus on competition and individuality resonated with the capitalist values that were gaining prominence in Italy during the fascist era (Crisenberry 2023).

Above is a re-imagination of a typical night at Teatro dell'Opera in Rome during the Fascism regime. It offers an overview of how this entity operated through the lens of a participant. This essay will examine an opera house in the Fascism regime as a multi-layered entity, choosing Teatro dell'Opera di Roma's 1933 renovation as an example. I argue that Teatro dell'Opera di Roma was simultaneously a propaganda machine for an ideology, a tool to manage people's free time, and a venue for promoting consumerism through social gathering events. In the second half of this essay, I will contextualize Teatro dell'Opera by analyzing other contemporary opera houses and discuss how Teatro dell'Opera aligns with the agenda of opera houses built in the 1930s around the world.

Teatro dell'Opera is a specimen of fascist propaganda manifesting in architecture due to its multiple interventions before, during, and after the regime. From the three major forms it took throughout history, we can interpret the political agenda it served. In the late-19th century, when the theater was built, Italy underwent significant political and social changes, as the country had only recently become a unified nation-state. The construction of the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma was supported by the Italian monarchy, which saw the theater as a way to promote Italian national identity and prestige (Carlson 1988). The architect Achille Sfondrini was directly influenced by the design of Opéra Garnier, which included a grand entrance hall, ornate decorations, and a large central chandelier. The grandiose and ritual circulation of Teatro dell'Opera conceptualized the

building as a venue for the bourgeoisie to socialize and show off their consumption of luxurious outfits and accessories.

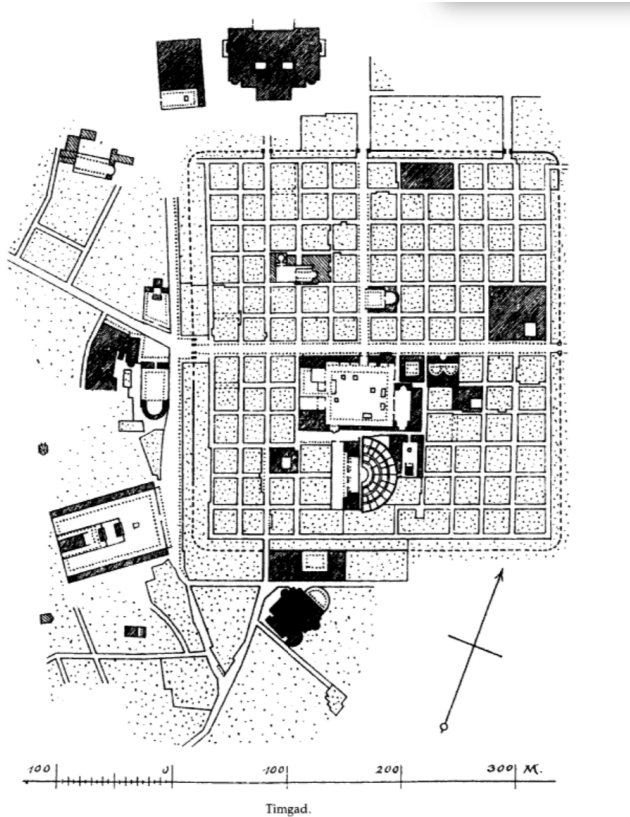
In 1933, Marcello Piacentini was commissioned to renovate the opera house. This renovation was particularly intriguing as one can decipher multiple design techniques that reinforce the fascist idea of a functional city and the management of citizen's after-work life. The renovation of the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma was part of a larger effort to modernize the city's infrastructure and to create grand public spaces that would showcase fascist achievements (Baxa 2004). The Fascist regime's Roma Termini Masterplan from 1925, drafted by architect Marcello Piacentini, who also led the renovation of the theater in 1933, imposed a gridded urban fabric to the east side of the Roma Termini. On the plan, the Termini, Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, and the opera house formed a triangle, as if symbolizing the trinity of the transportation infrastructure, religious infrastructure, and cultural infrastructure, overlooking the territory of the gridded residential blocks. One can discover its similarity to the planning of an Ancient Roman city, with ancient theaters, temples, and transportation infrastructure (*cardo* and *decumano*) as anchors and axes regulating the planning.

Drawing connections to closer examples, one can relate Haussmann's planning of Paris to the planning of Roma Termini. Their emphasis on the management of urban circulation with accessible streets and modern lifestyles were similar. Piacentini re-oriented the entrance from the south to the east side of the opera house in order to make the front facade with the main entrance directly face the new urban development. By doing so, the entrance was also expanded, and circulation leading to the audience seating area was prolonged, with the addition of a new grand staircase and a spacious foyer that was intended to create a sense of grandeur and modernity, meaning there was more space for the elite to socialize and showcase their wealth (Leicester 1998).

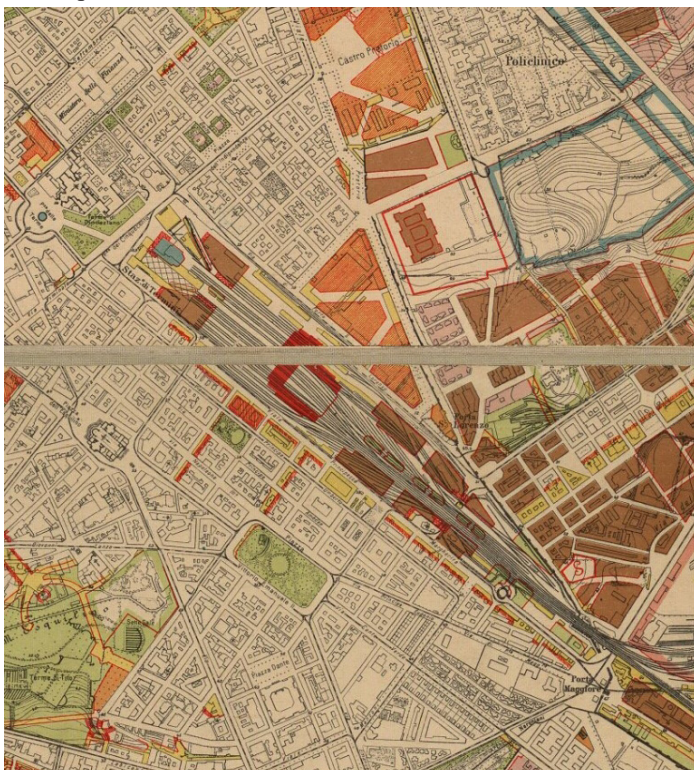
Taking a closer look at the plan of Teatro dell'Opera, we are able to see its connection with contemporary opera houses such as the Nanking Theatre in Shanghai and the Radio City Music Hall in New York. Three of these opera houses could all be seen as a reaction to a contemporary crisis. The Nanking Teatro opened in 1930, was designed by Chinese architect Fan Wenzhao, who received a Beaux-art education from the University of Pennsylvania (Cody 2011). The theater aligned with the



The Roman City of Timgad



Masterplan of Roma Termini



Google Map of Teatro dell'Opera

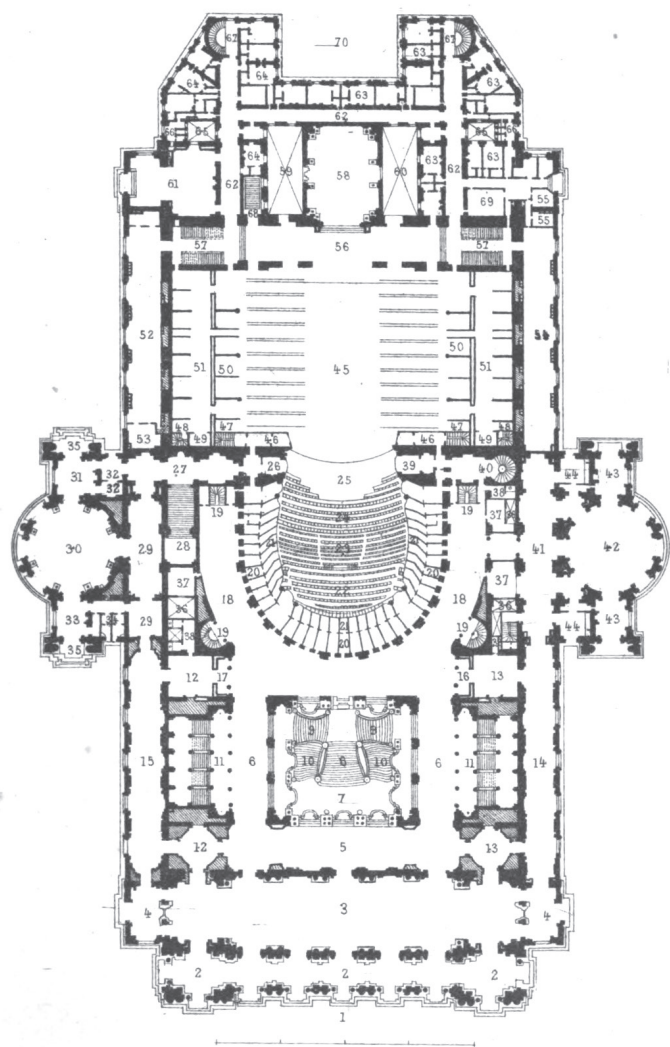


neo-enlightenment movement in China, reacting against the traditional Confucius values and promoting a modernized cultural awareness and living habits (Yang 2015). With a Neo-classical facade, Nanking Theatre was also a symbol of colonial forces, intending to replace the outdated culture (Xue and Huang 2014). In fact, the notion of an 'opera house' was imported from the West, differing from the traditional Chinese performance venues. At the other end of the world, in New York City, the Radio City Music Hall was opened in 1932. It was built during the Great Depression when President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies aimed to boost the economy through public works projects and job creation. The completion of a modern theater as such was intended to largely boost people's cultural confidence and drive people to consume (Thompson 2002). Comparing their plans side by side with Opéra Garnier, we can see the stunning similarities. All of them had a monumental entrance, a spacious foyer for socializing, and a monumental circulation leading towards the Saddle-shaped Concert Hall, spontaneously celebrating a ritual of consumption and the capitalist culture.

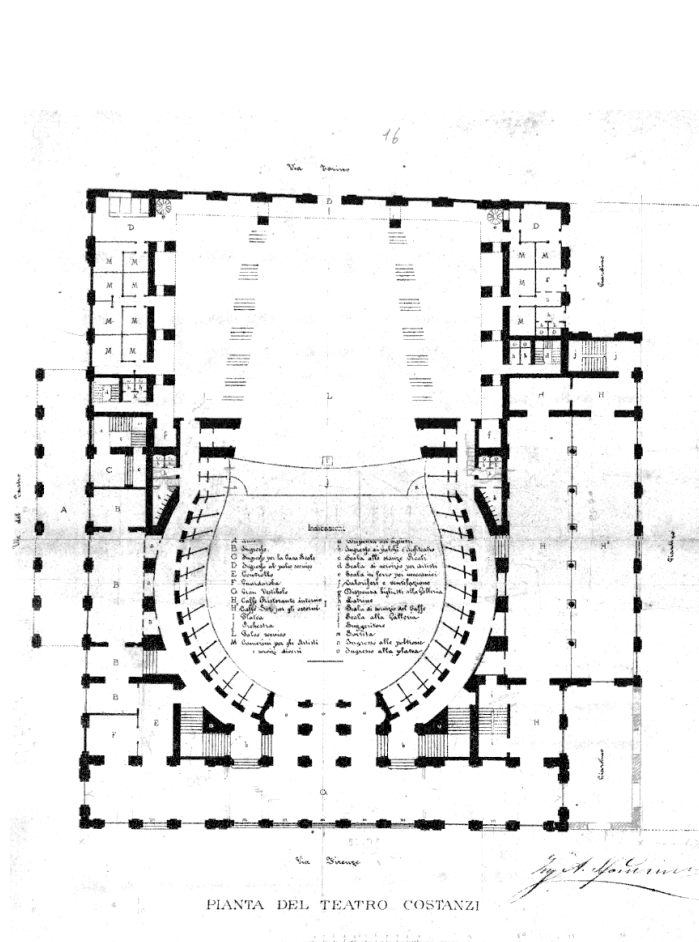
After looking at these various aspects of Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, it is clear that, as we step into the third decade of the twenty-first century, the opera houses being built are essentially still operating in a similar fashion to those of the past. In a sense, they are still relentless celebrators of the culture of consumerism, still a means of government's intentional management of after-work life, and still serving a certain political agenda, give it neoliberalism or conservatism. Studying the relationship between the fascist regime and the opera house is a way to construct an atlas of political influence on social and cultural activities around the world and in contemporary history.



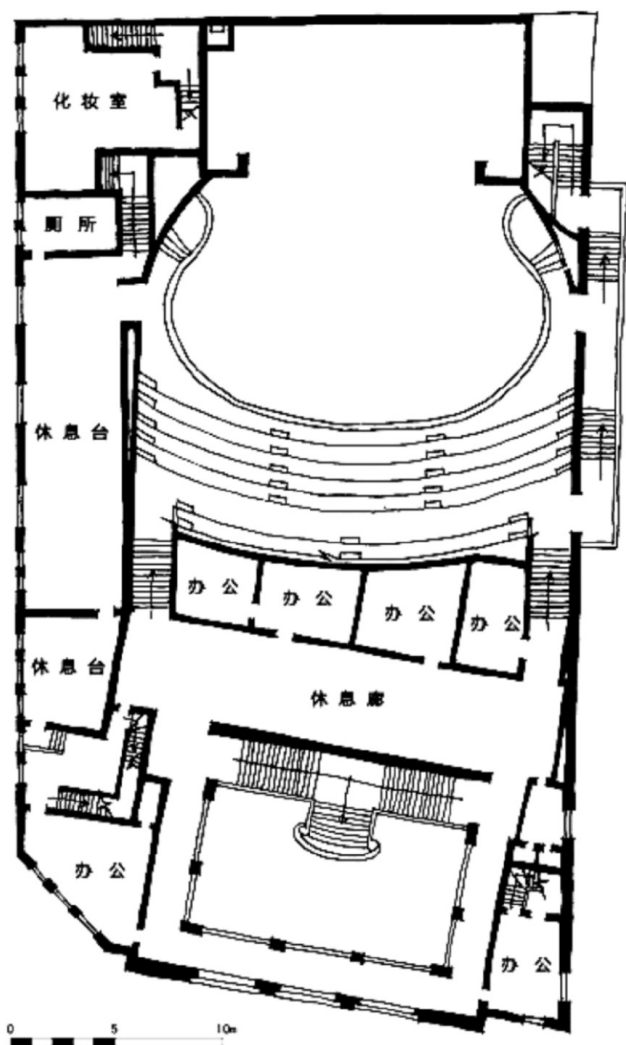
Palais Garnier, 1861-1875



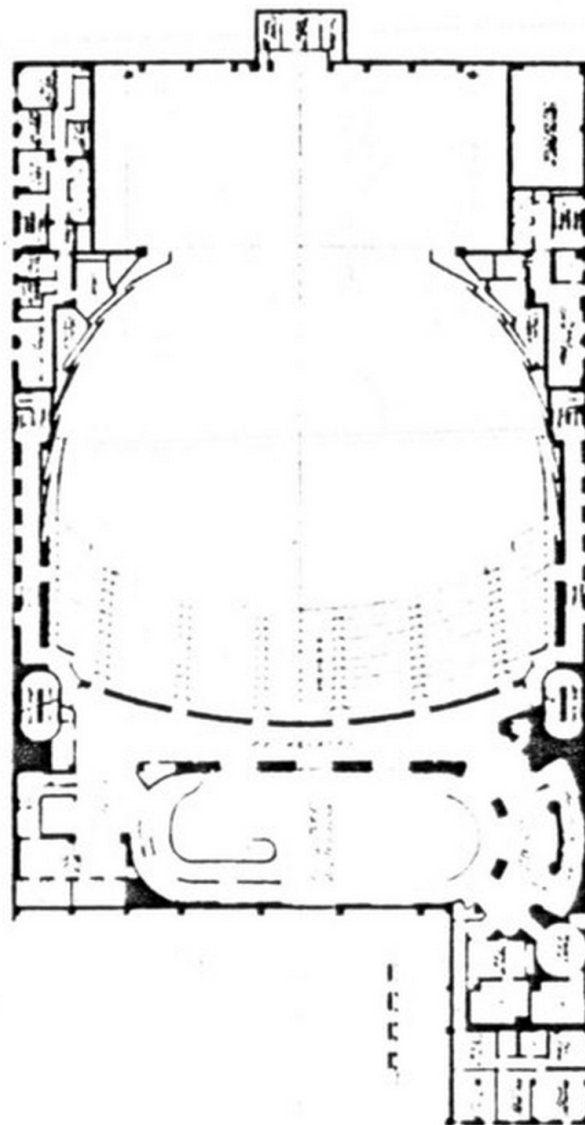
Teatro dell'Opera di Roma



Nanking Theatre, 1930



Radio City, 1932





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