

# PICTURESQUE MODERNITIES

## ARCHITECTURAL REGIONALISM AS A GLOBAL PROCESS (1890-1950)

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German Center for Art History Paris  
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CRIHAM (University of Poitiers)  
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### **Ambientamento: Neo-vernacular Architecture as Solution to the Question of the Conservation of the Urban Heritage in the Writings and Practice of the Venetian architect Duilio Torres (1882-1972)**

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#### **Abstract**

Duilio Torres (1882-1972), one of the most active and influent architects in the Veneto region during the interwar period, is now largely forgotten, arguably because of his eclectic approach, which ranged from functionalist to neo-vernacular designs. Yet, the pragmatism with which Torres resolved the formal problems of his buildings is nothing but the prevalent attitude that dominates Italian architectural practice before World War II. The theoretical reflection associated to his activity reveals the array of problems and pressures to which Italian architects were exposed, as well as the source of some of the solutions provided. In particular, Torres' main preoccupation was the historical city: Venice, in his case. When not commissioned with spaces located in the outskirts of metropolitan areas designed for modern activities such as heliotherapy (Solarium in Lido, 1922-23) or flying (Hangar of Linate airport, 1936), he had to face an impending question: how to interfere with a living built environment that architectural history had sanctioned as valuable testimony of history and civilization? Drawing on concepts developed within the Roman School of Architecture by Gustavo Giovannoni (1873-1947) and Marcello Piacentini (1881-1960), his solution was the 'ambientamento', which consisted in recurring to a neo-vernacular language able to merge the new buildings within the existent fabric of the city. Torres responded to a debate, entirely modern, that acknowledged that the historic centres were less and less the places where contemporary citizens normally lived, to become instead locus of symbolical, aesthetic and cultural values; in a word: heritage. Such shift had been originated from the destructions of the Great War, the pressure of urbanization and industrialization, and, crucially, the need to fix a still uncertain Italian national identity. The phenomenon was enhanced by Fascism, but also, significantly, put aside when exigencies of self-representation needed modern architecture to express visually and symbolically the new authority (via dell'Impero, Rome, 1932). Torres' picturesque modernism, evident in the design for the Riva dell'Impero in Venice (1937), was carried out with the aim of disguising the new for the sake of the past, while preserving, with careful interventions, both the landmark and the humble pre-existence. It provided also a viable answer to the ambiguous patronage of Fascism, satisfying both its poses as allegedly revolutionary movement and defender of Italian traditions.



Duilio Torres, Ponte delle Guglie, Riva dell'Impero, Venice, 1937 (author, 2014)

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