To the Editor

In his otherwise fairly interesting article on Gio Ponti’s work for the Montecatini firm (“The Aestheticization of Mechanical Systems: Gio Ponti’s Montecatini Headquarters, Milan, 1936–39,” JSAH 77, no. 2, June 2018), Manfredo di Robilant exonerates the architect from active involvement in the Italian Fascist regime by quoting a descendant of the Ponti family as saying that “unlike other architects, including Terragni, who presented their own architecture as explicitly Fascist, Ponti was never considered a camicia nera, or Blackshirt—a Fascist militant” (188). Contrasting Ponti with a “camicia nera à la Terragni” is at best off the mark, and at worst defamatory. The source cited without qualification is an email communication, hence not in print, and therefore anecdotal—that is, intrinsically unreliable. Not only is the use of the term Blackshirt unclear, but also “camicia nera à la Terragni” does not explain but (falsely) attributes to Terragni a behavior he studiously avoided, never parading in party uniform at official ceremonies but always attending in civilian business attire. The standard “Blackshirt behavior” among architects was set by Ponti’s promoter Marcello Piacentini, who wore the party uniform at numerous occasions (see the thoroughly documented new biography by Paolo Niccoloso, Marcello Piacentini: Architettura e potere: Una biografia, Gaspari, 2018).

Not only did Piacentini invite Ponti to collaborate, but he also returned, after a brief period of exclusion, to his university post after World War II under the aegis of the Christian Democrats. Ponti likewise managed to safeguard the publication of his elegant journal Stile (1941–47) across political sea changes, such as the Badoglio Armistice and the end of the war, without therefore deserving “blacklisting” or failing to make, as a singularly talented architect, a successful career after the war.

As for Giuseppe Terragni, he was on tense terms with the party and failed to realize important projects in Rome, instead serving as an artillerist in the Balkans and for two winters on the Russian front as a soldier in the Armata Italiana in Russia. He did not volunteer for service and returned to Como, thereafter part of the Repubblica di Salò, a broken man in 1943, dying a few months later as the undisputed genius of his generation at age thirty-nine. To use his name as a litmus of Fascist mentality and allow vindictive rumors to diminish his character may fit the age of Twitter diplomacy, but it hardly demonstrates the spirit expressed by the JSAH editor in his editorial in the same issue, that today it is “more crucial than ever that scholarship once again prioritize objectivity and balance, all the while acknowledging that we rarely if ever hold all the facts and that we might well be wrong.”

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Manfredo di Robilant’s reply to Kurt Forster

Though both men worked for Fascist patrons, Ponti’s and Terragni’s different political attitudes represent varying relationships between architecture and power. Ponti was imbued with bourgeois moderation, politically and culturally, and therefore stood outside the Italian avant-garde. He presented himself in Domus—the journal he founded in 1928—as an architectural reformer, not as a revolutionary. By contrast, from 1928 to 1931, Terragni and his fellows of Gruppo 7 and Movimento Italiano per l’Architettura Razionale (MIAR) campaigned to convince Mussolini that rationalism was the fittest architectural response to the Fascist agenda—that is, to a regime that presented itself as revolutionary, they presented themselves as fellow revolutionaries. Giorgio Ciucci, in his deeply researched essay for the book Giuseppe Terragni: 1904–1943 (Electa, 1996), acknowledges Terragni’s desire to be seen as a militant Fascist architect. Likewise, Paolo Niccoloso, in his pathbreaking Mussolini architetto (Einaudi, 2008), provides evidence of Terragni’s commitment to Mussolini. Following these essays, I mention Terragni as a “Blackshirt” to indicate his radical interpretation of architecture as a politically charged profession.