

# The construction and the reconstruction of the Maritime Station of Naples in the chronicles of the time from the Neapolitan newspaper libraries

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## Abstract

The construction of Naples' Maritime Station was carried out during the Fascist regime; it was part of a much greater and more ambitious plan, including the complete renewal and improvement of the city's harbour, in order to transform it into one of the main harbours of the nation and of the whole Mediterranean basin. As the strength of the regime was based on a wide propaganda, all the main works carried out during the two Fascist decades have been thoroughly documented in the newspapers of the time, reporting the placing of the first stone, the works' progress and the inauguration ceremonies. The construction of Naples' Maritime Station is no exception, and from the newspapers of the time we can unveil many details related to its erection.

During the Second World War, Naples was one of the most bombed cities in Italy, especially the harbour, being a military target; all the area was completely destroyed, including the Maritime Station. During the period of reconstruction, the problems of the harbour, occupied by the allies, were constantly treated in the newspapers of the time, as it was regarded as a main element for the recovery of the local economy. As soon as the allies left the harbour area to the new Italian administration where the Maritime Station was, it was decided to rebuild it as it was, and the newspapers of the time give us much precious information about the evolution of its re-establishment.

This study is a complete historical picture of all the events concerning the building of Naples' Maritime Station from 1933 to 1946 through the documents of the regional newspapers of the time, kept in the two newspaper libraries of Naples.

*Keywords:* heritage architecture, Maritime Station, Cesare Bazzani, fascism.



## 1 Bibliography and criticism on Cesare Bazzani's Maritime Station in Naples

The harbour has always been a source of richness and power for the city of Naples because of its commercial, tourist and military implications, and as a consequence many studies have been dedicated to this subject. Nevertheless, the bibliography dedicated to the Maritime Station by Cesare Bazzani is not as wide and exhaustive. As a matter of fact, the Italian Academic and architect of the Fascist regime Cesare Bazzani was charged with a very negative criticism by some very influent personalities in the architectonic field between the '30s and the '70s, so that its work has always been regarded with scepticism and intolerance until a few years ago, and only recently it has been reconsidered with a new interest, without prejudices and more objectively [1].

During the first quarter of 20th century, Cesare Bazzani worked a lot, and with a general success of criticism and public as his works were always welcomed by enthusiastic judgements, but its frenetic activity was probably due to his ideological bonds with the Fascist regime and to his personal connections with Mussolini, more than to his undoubted capacity, which caused the envy and the resentment of his contemporary colleagues, judging his works as the fruit of political matters more than of his architectural merits. Moreover, there were also ideological and stylistic reasons influencing the criticism on Bazzani's work: at that time, the artistic and architectural debate was very lively, and many public discussions arose about "modernity" not only among the specialists, but also within the public, and both architectural reviews and newspapers argued about the question of the "national style".

In Europe the architectural debate concerned Modern Movement, Rationalism and International Style, but in Italy, because of the political situation and the nationalist and imperialistic propaganda of the regime, it was requested the development of a style which would have represented the "Italianity" in the world without borrowing foreign tastes and fashions. The problem was about how to be really modern staying essentially Italian: a first current supported a rigid rationalism, while a second one suggested the use of the classical architectural style (arches and columns), which symbolised the golden age of the Italian supremacy in the world, creating a parallel between the Roman Empire and the Fascist Empire. Cesare Bazzani belonged to this current, polemically arguing several times against pure Rationalists, but also trying to mediate between tradition and modernity; inevitably, he was targeted by the supporters of modernity at all costs, whose current with time became the strongest. As a consequence, Cesare Bazzani's fortune became to fall, and from the second half of the 20's he was hardly criticised. In particular both Piacentini and Bazzani [2] and Pagano [3, 4] expressed a very bad judgement on his work, while Bruno Zevi slated Naples' Maritime Station with an extremely poisonous opinion, not properly motivated or really justified ("Cesare Bazzani makes the still existing '*fetenzia*' -Neapolitan word indicative, in the artistic pre-laconic criticism, of the ugly- [...] The Maritime Station of Naples could have been a simple, sane, pleasant building. It is a disgusting, pretentious and terribly poor pavilion. Near



*the Angevin castle, it wants to be a ‘monument’: just the ambition is revolting’)* [5].

So the scarce bibliographical attention dedicated to Naples’ Maritime Station is due to a critical heritage of the past, based on ideological and political considerations over properly architectural ones. As a consequence, today the history of the construction of Naples’ Maritime Station and the understanding of its architectural meaning is made much clearer by the pages of the regional newspapers of the time than by the architectural reviews or by the existing bibliography about Neapolitan harbour and about Italian architecture in the 20th century. For this purpose, extremely useful have been the two newspaper libraries in Naples: “Matilde Serao”, belonging to the National Library, and “Vincenzo Tucci”, belonging to the Journalists’ Syndicate [6].

## 2 The construction of the Maritime Station in the political situation of the time

The two Fascist decades have been documented with extreme zeal by the newspapers. In spite of the fact that newspapers were made with a very poor number of sheets, especially if compared with modern ones (they had between six and twelve pages), the lively artistic and architectonic debate of the time found a wide space in them, as much as every new scientific discovery or technical invention, especially if carried out by Italians. The absence of any political discussion and the necessity of a constant propaganda for the government’s work put the basis for a broad diffusion of every news concerning public works approved by Mussolini for which funds had been put aside or projects drawn. Every governmental initiative was divulged, exalting the genius, the far-sightedness, the efficiency of the regime with the typical emphatic and magniloquent rhetoric style properly Fascist. More than anything else it was divulged the planning of urban and building works, which were publicly discussed concerning the executions’ costs and times, the architectural and technical details, constantly updating the citizenship about the works’ progressing, from the plan to the construction and from the laying of the first stone to the put in use, including all the visits (always inevitably “long” and “meticulous”) carried out by Mussolini or other authorities to check the works’ progressing.

As a consequence, nowadays we can easily review all the events about the public works of those years through the pages of the newspapers.

Particularly emphasised were the laying of the first stone and the inauguration ceremony, that became the occasion for a solemn celebration: most of the public works were to be concluded by the following 28<sup>th</sup> of October, being this date the anniversary of the Roman March, beginning of the Fascist era. On this day, solemn ceremonies were carried out throughout the state, officially inaugurating all the public works in the main cities. The newspapers, always quoting the progressive year of the regime era after the usual date, at every anniversary published a complete report of the works and the activities carried



out by the government during the whole year, underlying how all the promises made were punctually kept.

Among the enterprises on which Fascism embarked there was the complete restructuring of the Neapolitan harbour. Because of its geographical strategic position, Naples was an important connecting point inside the Mediterranean and with America and the East, so in the imperialistic and expansionistic views of the regime the harbour of Naples was going to become the main stop in the Mediterranean and the main commercial station between Italy and its colonies, apart from the rest of the world. Besides, the development of the harbour was going to create a wide profit due to the increased tourist movement, contributing to the economical raise of the city. So it doesn't surprise Mussolini's decision of renewing, enlarging and improving Naples' harbour enriching it with new structures, infrastructures and services, to put it at the same level as the main European harbours as for extension and importance: this decision was manifested by Mussolini himself ever since his speech on the 24<sup>th</sup> of October 1922, even before the Roman March.

In fact, a "*Master plan for the enlarging of the harbour of Naples*" had been prepared ever since 1909, and successively modified and integrated but, also because of First World War's breaking out, an effective works' program was approved and financed only in 1924, during the Fascist era [7]. Therefore, the construction of the new Maritime Station to replace the former one, considered too old and inadequate to suffice to the increased and increasing traffics of the harbour, is part of a wider plan concerning the whole area. Since 1925 and for the whole 30's, the harbour underwent many innovations, among which the new Maritime Station represent just an episode, all of which were punctually reported and documented through the pages of the regional newspapers (besides, journalists liked to emphasise the news about the works in progress with enthusiastic expressions such as "great", "majestic", "monumental", "colossal", "cyclopean", "superb", "sumptuous", "powerful" and the like).

The filling and the clearance of Mandracchio area and the other fillings which completely redrew the coastline, the construction of the "Duke of Abruzzi" dam, the creation of the new dry dock capable of hosting high tonnage ships (constantly quoted by the newspapers as "the greatest dry dock in Europe"), the new radio-telegraphic station on St. Vincent's dock to communicate with ships in all the Mediterranean, the "new great" and "modern" Maritime Station (here also the attributes were never neglected while quoting, even marginally, the building), the prophylactic station for the passengers' disinfecting, the numerous docks, were all part of a wide plan to make Naples' harbour more modern and better equipped. Besides, the landing in the harbour of the greatest transatlantic ships such as the most quoted "Rex" or the several "Conte di Savoia", "Empress" and the like, whose arrivals, departures, goods' loads and passengers' carriage were exactly reported by the city's chronicles, were a reason of pride and hope for the whole citizenship. At those times, air travels were still pioneering adventures, and the connections among the countries were carried out mainly by sea, so the giant ships connecting Italy with other continents, mainly America and the Far east, were the real leading characters of



the harbour's life, mobilising "oceanic" crowds at any arrival and departure. Besides, the profit guaranteed by these events could not be ignored, and allowing an easy landing for these sea giants and making Naples more attractive for tourists from all over the world (and especially British, as in 1934 they were the majority of the tourists landed in Naples) was a priority not only generated by the citizenship's vanity or by the regime's ambitions.

In this political situation took place the events concerning the construction of Naples' Maritime Station, whose works caused not a few problems to the politicians ordaining its execution, both at the beginning and at the end. The construction of the new building had been decided ever since 1929; not only was it conceived to be an arrival and departure point sited in the core of the city for the passengers and the tourists, but also an important junction element: in front of it an air-maritime station was going to be erected (its project had been drawn, but it ended up in nothing), and inside of it a train station was going to be placed, connected with the main railway, so that its presence in the historic and administrative centre of the city would have represented an important connection point among the areas of the city, beyond being a fundamental stop in a strategic tourist position.



Figures 1-3: A view of the Townhall square before the construction of the Maritime Station (*Il Mattino*, Napoli, 8/5/1934), a Cesare Bazzani's drawing representing the same view with the Maritime Station (*Il Mattino*, Napoli, 29/9/1936) and the same view in a postcard taken in 1950.

Nevertheless the choice of the area was controversial and caused some discussions, even on the pages of the regional newspapers. The old Maritime Station, on the Pisacane dock, was going to be replaced by the new one, and this was a good chance to choose a better position for the building, moving it on another dock. Luigi Greco, Chief Inspector of the Engineer Corps belonging to the High Commissariat, was charged with the previous study on the viability of the construction, and he chose to place it in the square on the Angevin dock, which had just been enlarged; as it has already been said, this site was strategic by a logistic and tourist point of view and the new building, planned as a monument, would have been a perfect counter-attraction to the Angevin castle, which had just been "restored" and isolated releasing it from "all a world of misery and ugliness obstructing its sight". But just a short time before the beginning of the works, a polemic was arisen by the Municipal Aesthetic Commission and by the Artistic Circle about this site, because the demolition of the old lighthouse to make space to the new Maritime Station was considered as

an “attack to the beauty of Naples”, for an “element of supreme charm” was going to be demolished and replaced with a building obstructing the sight of the Vesuvius and of the Gulf from the Town Hall square. But in a few days the polemic was cut off, and the Municipal Aesthetic Commission itself withdrew its statement, so that the works could begin undisturbed in the designed site.

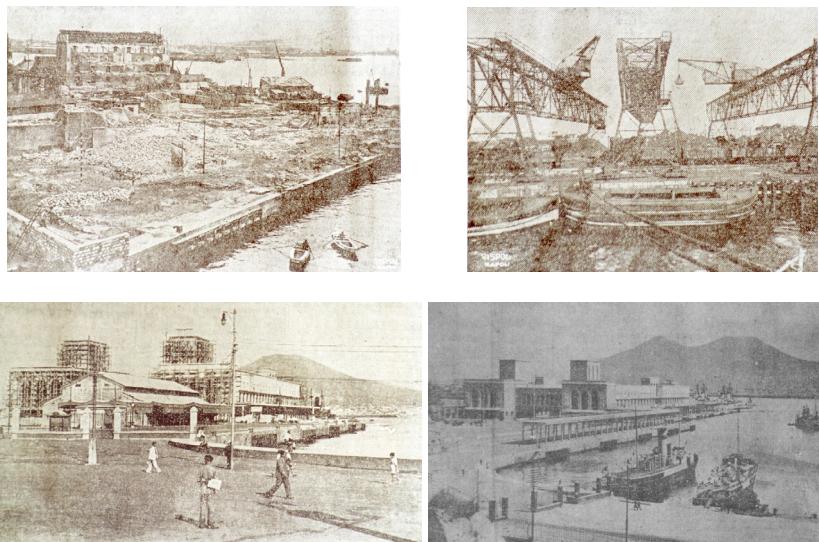
For the erection of the building a contest-tender had been called on the 30<sup>th</sup> of January 1933: the practice of the public contest for the choice of the projects was widely applied during the two Fascist decades, and many important works of Italian Rationalism were produced in this way, included Naples’ Maritime Station, but the joint procedure of the contest for the choice of the best project and the tender for the choice of the firm executing the works at the cheapest price arose some perplexities, because in this way the planning and the executive phase were going to be mixed, confusing the quality of the project with the cheapness of the construction in choosing the winning work.

Strangely enough, there is no news about the contest-tender procedures in the newspapers of the time. As the matter ended up with no official winner, but in effect with the approval of Bazzani’s project, probably this reticence is due to the scarce satisfaction provoked by the whole matter, both for the jury’s aesthetic and practical criteria and for the public’s transparency and convenience exigencies. But if the news about the genesis of the building is poor, it’s not the same as for its construction, whose progress was frequently reported.

For the construction of the Maritime Station 15 millions liras were invested (to have a comparison, for the new Custom-house building 2 millions sufficed), while for the arrangement of the whole area it was necessary to invest 20 millions liras, further on increased as the works were in progress: in July ’36 500.000 liras more were needed to complete the Maritime Station’s quays, 550.000 to construct the lifts and the platforms and to arrange the front square and the access to the building; when the construction was almost finished, 600.000 more liras where needed to furnish the interior, also with the contest-tender procedure; moreover, even after the opening of the building, 2.700.000 liras were used to complete the decoration and the finishing of the building, to set up the departure and arrival installations, to pave the front square and complete the quays. In the end, the Maritime Station coasted around 20 millions, just as much as the arrangement of the whole area!

The lighthouse demolition begun on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 1933, the consignment of the works to Ferrobeton, the winning firm, took place on the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 1934, under the direction of the engineer Broccardo. According to the newspapers, the construction was being carried on always “quickly” and “promptly”, but it was not enough as the deadline for the work’s conclusion was postponed four times: at the beginning it had been fixed before the end of May 1935, to celebrate the visit of Mussolini to Naples, but afterwards this date shifted to October 1935, to celebrate the anniversary of the Roman March, but actually the building was still in construction both in the spring and in the autumn of 1935, so the deadline shifted again to the 24<sup>th</sup> and then to the 29<sup>th</sup> of May 1936, but neither this date was adhered to, as only on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 1936 the Maritime Station’s construction was finally concluded.





Figures 6-9: The Maritime Station at the very beginning (*Il Mattino*, Napoli, 19/8/1933) and at the very end (*Il Mattino*, Napoli, 31/8/1935 and 1/10/1936) of its construction.

The new building was finally inaugurated in the presence of various authorities, with a solemn ceremony in which a stele dedicated to Luigi Razza, Minister of Employment fallen on the 7<sup>th</sup> of August 1935 during the Africa Campaign, also by Cesare Bazzani, was unveiled in front of the Maritime Station, whose dock was entitled to him. By a twist of fate, also the timetable of the ceremony shifted, from 10.30 a.m. to 4.00 p.m.! Anyway, the ceremony probably took place on the 1<sup>st</sup> and not on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October, as it was usual, to avoid remarking the delay for the consignment of the building. As the newspapers themselves quote, the construction had lasted one year and a half, employing more than 1.000 workers for a total of 285.000 working days of 8 hours each. So the Maritime Station could finally be opened and come into operation, for the comfort and the satisfaction of the numerous tourists visiting Naples.

Anyway, although the renovation and the enlargement of the whole harbour and the wide propaganda about the development of the city's economy through the works carried out, the wished take-off didn't take place: the goods' traffic and the passengers' movement increased enormously (in 1935 Naples' was the first harbour in Europe for passengers' movement and in 1938 its goods' traffic was one fifth of the national importations), but Naples' harbour was far to be the most important connecting point inside the Mediterranean, being still the third for importance in Italy, after Geneva and Trieste. Moreover, soon enough, because of the bursting out of the Second World War, the harbour became the object of interests quite different from the improvement of the tourist attractiveness, as it could be easily transformed in a powerful military

installation. Just because of the presence of a big harbour, Naples was heavily bombed during the war, counting more than 100 air raids and conquering the not-longed-for title of the Italian “great crippled”.

### **3 The destruction of Naples’ harbour and the Maritime Station’s reconstruction**

Both the regional and the national newspapers went through a very hard period at the end of the Fascist regime, both because of the enduring of the war and because of the changed political situation. The main regional newspapers, *Corriere di Napoli*, *Il Mattino* and *Roma*, were unified in a single one, *Risorgimento*, since the 4th of October 1943, and one of the main national newspapers of the time, *Corriere della Sera*, suspended its publications from the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 1945 (Liberation day) to the 7<sup>th</sup> of May 1946, apart from a single exit on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 1946 (Liberation day’s first anniversary). Also the number of pages was further reduced to two/four, and the news became obviously mainly dedicated to the war events.

Also here, a wide populist propaganda was carried out to sustain the war, with a strong denigrating campaign against the enemies; for political reasons, the news about the bombing underwent and all the destructions and the casualties suffered were hushed up, while data and figures about the damages caused to the enemy were dwelled on. Victims of bombs had little space in the newspapers, while much more space was dedicated to “happy” news, such as frequent births in the air-raid shelters. Anyway, news about the destruction of monuments or important public buildings was reported, emphasizing the “enemy barbarity” and labelling these events such as “crimes of the air-bandits”. This hate, formerly concentrated against the English, later on, as the historical situation changed, became actual fierceness towards Germans, formerly faithful allies and afterwards quoted as “masters of destruction” as no one else.

As Italy was plagued by the war and freed from the dictatorship, Germans’ crimes were not hushed up as formerly had happened for the casualties provoked by the English; the destruction of the Building of Studies, with the fire in its library, and the explosion of the Prefecture, caused by the Germans withdrawing on the 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> of September 1943 were reported, as much as all the ruin they left behind during their retreat, from the Marina to the Industrial Zone, from St. Elmo to Capodimonte and Capodichino, included the harbour’s devastation, as it was an important military installation and so one of the main targets. Nevertheless, the harbour wasn’t just the target for the English bombing and the German destruction, but also the object of strange “accidents” and “sabotages”, most of which still unclear, that caused more damages and casualties than the enemy war attacks. This is the case of the explosion, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 1943, of the ship “*Caterina Costa*”, moored at Vittorio Emanuele dock, which was set on fire with a load of 2.000 bombs: the deflagration was extremely violent, causing a high number of casualties and invaluable destructions to Naples’ buildings. Strangely enough, no news was given at the time about this accident neither on regional nor on national newspapers: only a little article appeared



about the opening of an enquiry about the explosion of a “munitions storage” at Naples’ harbour, while only five years later the truth about what actually had happened was finally published. Probably the event was covered by military secret, but it’s also possible that in a city so proved by the war such as Naples, admitting to have committed such a mistake allowing such an accident to happen was unacceptable by the population.

However, newspapers show reticent again about the explosion of Naples’ Maritime Station; probably, among all the ruinous events of those days, this episode was not considered so relevant to dedicate a special article to it. Although there is no information about the epilogue of the building in the newspapers, its reconstruction according to the original project by Cesare Bazzani has been documented.

After the Liberation and for a long time, much over the end of the war, Naples’ harbour stayed a heap of rubbles, with all its installations destroyed and many sunken ships. Naples was the first city to rise up against the Germans, and one of the first to be liberated and where the reconstruction works could take place. Nevertheless, as the alleys took possession of the city, and as the city had a useful harbour to carry on military attacks and operations throughout Europe, where the war still went on, Naples stayed military zone until the end of 1946, and its harbour was divided in three zones, respectively under the American, the English and the Italian administration. Italian government pushed to recover the possession of the whole harbour as soon as possible to start the necessary reconstruction operations, recovering its installations and reactivating its economical and commercial activities; Naples’ harbour needed even a wheat silo and some food storages, as they had all been destroyed, and to face a population reduced to poverty and hunger was of course the first priority. The Harbour Office, the Local Harbour Organization, the Chamber of Commerce and Naples’ Liberation Committee long asked to the Italian government and the alleys commands the harbour’s restitution, and at the end of ’45 an Inter-ministerial Commission for the Naples’ Harbour’s Reconstruction was instituted, with the task of studying the works and the funds necessary to the so-longed reconstruction.

Actually, the alleys, with the help of the local workers, had already carried out a partial and efficient reconstruction, but it was finalized only to the immediate use of the harbour as a military base, and only the Italian government financed a real recovery of the harbour, with a former fund of 600 millions liras, inadequate to the real need, and a latter fund of 1 billion and a half to complete all the necessary works. Beverello dock, where the Maritime Station once was, was under the American administration, and was returned to the Italian’s on the 1<sup>st</sup> of March 1946, while the rest of the harbour was returned only in November of the same year; as a consequence, the works in this area begun earlier. Actually, Neapolitans hoped for the restitution of the eastern area, better preserved and easier to recover, and moreover nearer to the railway and to the industrial area, therefore more important; anyway, because of this disappointing decision of the alleys’ commands, the Maritime Station’s reconstruction works could begin very soon, even if they could have waited.



For the partial recover of the building, consisting in the demolition of the tottering structures and in the removal of the rubbles, a first plan costing 100 millions liras was prepared, and at the end of March '46 the works had already begun, but for a long time these were the only operations carried out, as there was a lack of funds for the reconstruction. Only when the final, more consistent fund was invested, the Maritime Station's actual reconstruction could begin, under the direction of engineer Basso, director of the Maritime Section of the High Commissariat; the works went on until November '46, when they were momentarily interrupted because of the restitution of the whole harbour to the Italian administration, which arose the urgent problem of the eastern area recovering, so that the new Maritime Station was completed only around the half of '47.

## 4 Conclusions

Although the omissions by the newspaper about both the genesis and the epilogue of Naples' Maritime Station, the research at the newspapers library for what concerns the history of this Neapolitan building has revealed extremely fruitful, not only for the interpretation of the historical and cultural situation in which this architectural work was stated and sited, but only for the documentation of the different phases of its execution, from its construction to its coming into operation and from its demolition to its reconstruction.

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