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di Storia Urbana

SU

LA CITTÀ GLOBALE

La condizione urbana
come fenomeno pervasivo

THE GLOBAL CITY

The urban condition
as a pervasive phenomenon

INSIGHTS

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La condizione urbana
come fenomeno pervasivo

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The urban condition
as a pervasive phenomenon

a cura di

Marco Pretelli
Rosa Tamborrino
Ines Tolic

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PATRIZIA BATTILANI
ANDREA MAGLIO
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FROM THE “BOURGEOIS CITY” TO THE “NETWORK CITY” AND THE “VACANT CITY”. URBAN “DISPLACEMENT” AND REGENERATION PROCESSES AS DRIVERS OF CHANGE. THE EX-RAVONE FREIGHT YARD IN BOLOGNA AS BENCHMARK

NICOLA MARZOT

Abstract

The recent history of the former Ravone freight yard is described through “displacement”. This definition alludes to its origin as brownfield and to the ongoing oscillation of its intended use as it passed through the hands of an array of parties, both private and institutional, claiming a role in its development. This analysis also offers an opportunity to reflect on the role of urban design, from the rise of a modern bourgeois culture to the contemporary state of crisis of the building market.

Keywords

Crisis; Displacement; Regeneration

Introduction

The economic-financial crisis, as the conclusion of the social *fiction* promoted by the credit system, provides us with a cumbersome legacy, which manifests itself through the accumulation of abandoned spaces.

Suspended between what is “no longer” and what is “not yet”, cities find themselves in metaphysical limbo, the expression of a technical-economic and political-institutional vacation. The former derives from the drained forces that claimed a role of civil leadership during the previous phase. The latter is due to the obvious inadequacy of the tools used so far to deal with already changed reality. A critical reflection on the recent past is therefore necessary to open up a horizon that makes sense in the future.

An argument in support of the above considerations is the paradigmatic case of the former Ravone freight yard in Bologna, abandoned by R.F.I. (Rete Ferroviaria Italiana) in 2010 and subsequently sold to the subsidiary FS Sistemi Urbani, to handle its real estate development. Moreover, through a closer observation of its master planning, it is

possible to develop a critical reflection on the modern legacy of urban design, discussed in relation to what literary had been implicitly resisting to its unfolding, simply because of its preexistence to Modern principle absolute application. In that respect, the paper’s narrative is internally articulated according to three main phases, to whom its title directly refers. Each of them represents a specific interpretation of an unprecedented attitude with respect to the existing city and the set of rules of which its morphology was explicit evidence. The new status was neither achieved by directly intervening into it, claiming for its transformation from the inside; nor by disregarding the conquered site, through the abandonment and/or disruption of its own spaces but, more subtly, by subverting its principles from the outside, delegitimizing its morphology through the conscious creation of a condition of *displacement* with respect to it. This condition was, more precisely, achieved by systematically superimposing to the existing city a totally extraneous set of rules, coherent to changing model, forcing it to behave accordingly.

The “bourgeois city”

Following a tender, awarded in 2010 to a joint venture made up of Studio Performa A+U, Nomisma Srl, Unipol Merchant Bank and Delli Santi&Partners law firm, once the Municipality’s administration phase was completed and the new administrative board was set up, in 2012 the Administration asked the commissioning body to draw up a Masterplan to replace a previous Detailed Plan (*Piano Particolareggiato*), which was no longer adequate for the Structural Plan’s new objectives (*Piano Strutturale Generale*).

According to the Municipal will, the new proposal, while keeping an urban mixed-use purpose, is to be integrated into the design and scale of the adjacent Porto district. It is a piece of consolidated urban fabric, dating back to the 1889 Plan, built into urban blocks closed at the perimeter, and aligned with the street front. The mentioned Plan was the first appearance in Bologna, in the second half of the XIX century, of so-called *Piano Regolatore*, intended as the technical-administrative device through which the already emerged bourgeois society was intended to claim a leading role in ruling the city’s growth according to capitalistic premises. The request from the Municipality was explicitly mentioning the reference to the related urban morphology as the expected result, but in the reality, it was implicitly referring to the city planning culture of which the *Piano Regolatore* was the coherent pioneering interpretation.

For Studio Performa A+U this position was not acceptable at all, since it did not offer any chance to reflect consciously on the real nature of the existing brownfield, thus manifesting a clear ideological prejudice with respect to it. To get confirmation of an instrumental use of urban morphology, for political purposes, the first site-specific analyses were revealing that, after the Second World War, the model of the middle-class city became progressively disintegrated in favor of a Rationalist system, alternating iso-oriented buildings and related open areas. Notwithstanding the administrative condition were in the meantime clearly changed, nonetheless they were confirming the overwhelming power of the city planning culture inaugurated almost a century ago.

The designers at Studio Performa A+U, taking note of the restrictions imposed by the Municipality, launched a preliminary reflection of the existing premises, searching inspiration for a counterstrategy. They almost immediately founded it in the above-mentioned Rationalistic premises, assuming them as a pioneering environmental oriented interpretation, to some extent coherent with the contemporary society's matured expectations, of the *city planning*, undoubtedly affected by the XIX century Spanish "ensanche" model. Therefore, they deliberately took on the environmental system – water, air, earth and sun – as the generative matrix of the new proposal, which radically changed the meaning in which to integrate the initial morphological data. In such a way the reference model was subject to a radical transformation from the inside, not anymore subject to the overlapped plan's rule, but coherent to the assumption of the nature as its framework. Through a considerable change of scale, with the same building density compared to the reference model, an urban block was proposed that altered the ratio between built and unbuilt spaces, in favor of the latter. This provides the center of the block with a first-rate public green area, in terms of shape and size, safeguarded by the indirect control of the frontists, which rejects the separation of the functionalist zoning, in favor of an integrated system of usable and safe spaces. In such a way the Municipal will was literary subverted: the brownfield was not subjugated to the absolute superimposition of an abstract grid, the street network", and its implicit proportion, the urban block.

The public request was clearly legitimized by widely shared precedents. In fact, since the 1970s, the *post-industrial reconversion* of production systems has generated an increasing number of "voids", interpreted as gaps to be filled with respect to a system of values that is supposed to be shared. The abandoned areas are presented as a "problem" to be resolved (with reference to Italy, we report the emblematic experience of the 1985 Florence Urban Plan), by applying the *assimilation criterion* to that which already exists [Campos Venuti, Costa, Piazza, Reali 1995].

This phenomenon reveals the ideology concealed in a practice widespread on the European continent (founding its fullest expression in Italy, Germany, France, Spain and the Netherlands throughout the 1980s.), intended to stake a firm claim on the architectural discipline. The operational economic system, pursuing the principle of *programmed obsolescence*, extends its development to the management of that same crisis generated by its own growth. Through a "hypothetical" process, it imposes laws of transformation of the territory to be verified in evidence. The extension of the scientific method to the traditional city removes the idea of history as a responsible design and construction, thus confirming the strategy of Modernity.

Consistently, we witness the preventive conditioning of the demand for cities, opting for arguments in favor of an assumed permanence of values. Urban design becomes autonomous technique, recognized and shared by the State and the Market. The building type, despite the wide range of interpretations, especially if reported to the Italian context and its well-recognized cultural leadership on an international level [Marzot 2002, 59-73], is identified as the object's *ideal rationality*, independently of its becoming a part of history. The dialogue between *urbs* and *civitas* is interrupted. The symbolic relationship between content and form is dissolved, *fiction* replaces history; *storytelling* replaces the social narrative.



1: General layout of the Ravone area [Author's map].



2: Masterplan of the area in the final version of the Operational City Plan [Author's drawing].

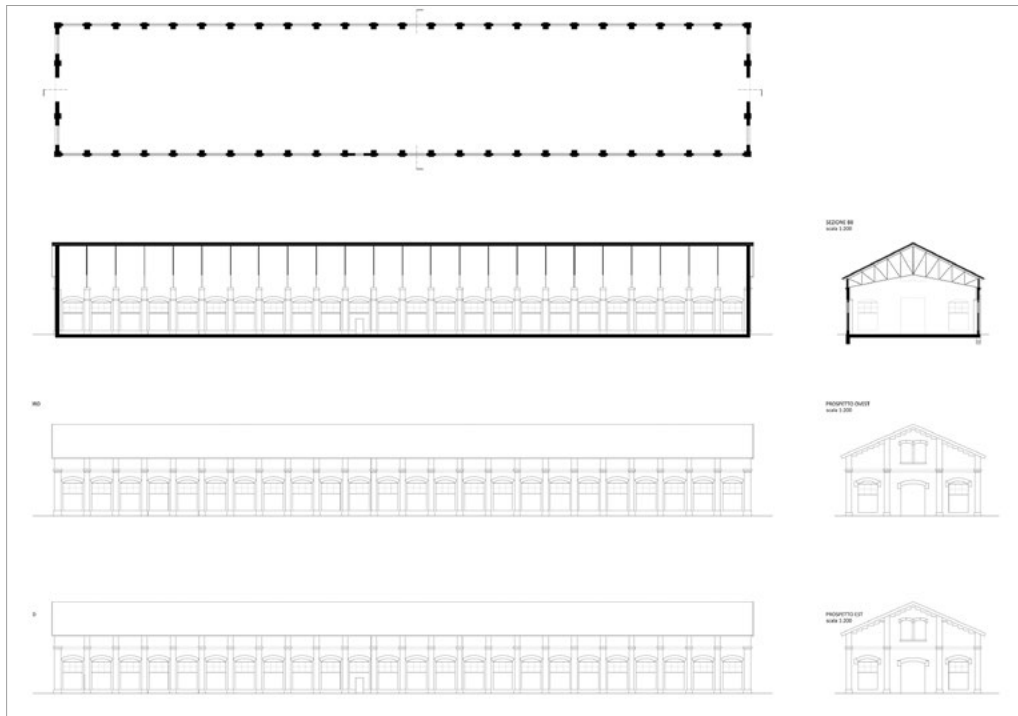
The “network city”

Contextually, the designers recognize how the presence of a train stop in the Metropolitan Railway System, on the opposite side of the urban limit of the brownfield, allows to achieve a high density by offering hybrid buildings open to the so-called *Area Vasta*, as considered necessary by the rising Metropolitan City, established on 1 January 2015. What was potentially *displacing* the brownfield from its own site-specific condition, by opening it to an endless field, was intentionally related to the adjoining presence of one of the most important Medical Regional hub, the Ospedale Maggiore and to the work in progress development of the new urban district Lazzaretto, which encompass mixed-use areas with the institutional presence of the prestigious local University. In such a way, the “hubris” of the complex aims at keeping connected a supposedly unlimited market potential with the peculiar quality of the existing facilities around. The brownfield is therefore assumed as an opportunity of investment realistically supported by the presence of strategic infrastructures for health and education. This choice tries to deal with a new phenomenon emerging since the end of the 1990s, which addresses a peculiar meaning to urban “void” developed accordingly. If the concept of *flaw* implies the *unity of what is broken*, confirmed by the primacy of *restoration* – which justifies itself only disregarding the overwhelming power of the city planning culture, always claiming for urban “reinvention” – the notion of “exception” expresses the change taking place and the nature of the forces that promote it.

This is about financial capitalism taking over from industrial capitalism, initiated on a global scale in the mid-1980s [Sassen 2000]. The primary aim of production is no longer a service or an object, but technology, insofar as it multiplies opportunities. Territories become the object of infrastructure investments on an unprecedented scale that programmatically destabilize their borders, bringing about the estrangement of the settled framework and generating the clustering of cities or urban networks. The saturation of the urban voids favored by the nodes of the intermodal system causes a “principle of competition” with respect to the existing city, fostering *Bigness* [Koolhaas 1995, 494-517] through intense building redevelopment and congestion. The subject, which is forced to pursue a reference horizon, systematically deferred, in space and time, by the financial mirage, is deprived of any form of social authorship and condemned to live in a condition of permanent atopy.

Financial «turbo-capitalism» [Magatti 2009] leads to operating in an environment devoid of any determination. The creative class is the result of this *reductionism* and the Internet is its cultural paradigm. From this *immersive condition*, already predicted by Marshall McLuhan and advocated by Derrick de Kerckhove through the concept of «immersive reality» [De Kerckhove, Tursi 2006], emancipation is not allowed. It repeats the *false movement* evoked by Schopenhauer: Zoé (like the network) pursues no other will than its own will to grow [Schopenhauer 1982], thus updating the tragedy of Sisyphus.

If the fiction of mature industrial capitalism assimilates the middle-class city to one of the possible “hypotheses” (literary what stays underneath a superimposed power), the new version feeds an anti-urban spirit, a multiplier of seemingly unlimited opportunities, through a permanent condition of instability.



3: Disused railway depot that can be used for innovative experiments [Author's drawing].

The “vacant city”

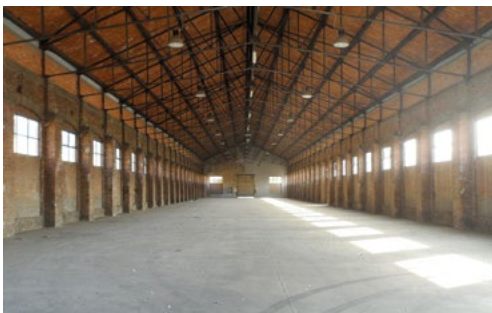
However, the continuing economic and financial crisis wide spreading all over the world, did not allow for the feasibility of the Ravone’s proposal in its entirety. On 9 July 2014, the Municipality signed a memorandum of understanding with the major stakeholders in the transformation of the city: Agenzia del Demanio, Ferrovie dello Stato, Cassa Depositi e Prestiti, Invimit, and started to draw up an Operational City Plan (POC - *Piano Operativo Comunale*,) specifically dedicated to public property, the first of its kind in Italy, which includes the aforementioned Masterplan proposal.

From the outset, a drastic reduction in quantitative forecasts of around two-thirds was necessary, to be implemented during the five-year period of validity of the POC. Therefore, a process is being studied that differs from the Masterplan forecasts over time, in order not to further jeopardize an already stagnant market. Such a compromise enables stakeholders to preserve the nominal values recorded in the financial statements, through the plan’s legitimizing action.

However, there is now a widespread belief that not even the minimum conditions are met for a development in compliance with the rules of the Plan. The designers had already suggested to the Administration and the commissioning body, while awaiting their development, to make use of the existing industrial buildings and the relative

maneuvering areas, acknowledging their good state of repair and immediate availability for minor improvements. Aware of the dramatic economic and financial crisis, this intuition proved to be the only way forward. In fact, technically supported by the design advisor, the client was finally launching a first manifestation of interest request in July 2018 in order to find a private entrepreneur to temporarily manage the Ravone's vacancies. Since the proposed time framework was not considered sufficient to guarantee a feasible break event, thanks to the delivery of one offer in the meantime, a new request was launched in February 2019, based on a four-year allocation term. The new offer was considered formally acceptable and the contract signed in March 15th. Contextually, an invitation competition was launched in order to find the advisor to ultimately develop the new Executive Plan (PUA - *Piano Urbanistico Attuativo*) of the all area. Studio Performa A+U was officially indicated as the winner on March 26th. Because of this unique coincidence, since that moment onward started a new fruitful collaboration between the client, the designer and the facility manager, also inaugurating a new system of Governance, which is in the due course of experimentation. Since the Open Day, expected for May 10th, with a temporary three-day event dealing with outdoor sport facilities end street food festival, an unpredictable process is under development. This allows the vacant building stock to be provided with an additional option, in the short term, thus transforming the "void" as a true "laboratory" of exploratory practices on the potential city, offering emerging forces the opportunity to experience a role in the future community.

The possibility of assuming the use of vacant building and waiting lands on a temporary term as the "trigger" of the entire valorization process of the area (transforming the district into the largest regeneration area in Italy), as agreed by the above mentioned key-figures, also offers the opportunity to radically innovate the city planning body of knowledge. In fact we cannot underestimate that, up to now, the plan, indifferently Structural (PSC - *Piano Strutturale Comunale*) and/or Operational (POC), as the conceptual instrument through which the Public Administration masters its power over its territorial and urban domain, reacts to change without giving up its own prejudicial rationality. Through the implementation of a "system of protective measures" (the so-called *Regime di salvaguardia*), the potentially dangerous interregnum between one phase and the next is inhibited. In that respect, the plan simply preserves and unfolds its



4: Scenario for the temporary use of the depot for co-working activities [Author's photo and project view].

power by assimilating the existing "vacuum" to one of its predictable "entities", subject to any hypothetical destiny prescribed by the Building set of rules (RUE - *Regolamento Urbanistico Edilizio*). This is even true saying, as the RUE permits since its general variation in 2015, article 74, that within the *transformation areas* (*Ambiti di Trasformazione*, to whose definition all the brownfield have been assimilated), every use is possible during the phase of transition from a vacancy status to the plan approval. In this sense, the critical contribution of recycling, in its relation to the city planning, becomes significant, revealing the implicit aporia.

In fact, the recycling process, summed up in the alternation of phases between *matter* and *material*, transforms the object's form to its originating substance, depriving it of any conventional adjectivation and value limitation, as an outcome of the anthropological process and the foundation of civilization.

Whilst in the definition of *material* the self-determining evolving subject plays a positive role of legitimization, with respect to the *matter* it assumes the negative function of release from the symbolic link with the object.

This fluctuation implies a deep ontological discontinuity. If the passage from the undetermined to the determined involves the emergence of the thing and of new types of thought, without which the construction of a new object is denied, completely different from the initial one, the symmetrical movement returns the latter to its originating condition.

For these reasons, recycling, when applied to the architectural and urban phenomenon, is able to reveal the aporia of a plan whose principle of legitimacy, starting from the Enlightenment, derives from a power intentionally removed from the control of men: legislation and the rule of law.

It follows that the approach of the recycling culture vis-à-vis the problem of the contemporary city, of which we see the urgency today, is the only one able to meet the emerging demand on the part of the new authors of the future community.

The urban void, accelerated by the dissolution of the financial world, is thus recognized as an "opportunity" from which to draw new behaviors.

Conclusions

The recycling culture prevents any form of absolute determinism- derived from the prior identification of the ways in which the city is built- which finds its own outcomes in the course of its own development process.

In addition, recycling guarantees openness to the potential without reservations, as a condition for continuously overcoming preconceived ideas and forms, leading to the identification of clearly defined objectives, limited in space and time.

If urban restoration can *reinstatate the lost unity* of a work in the face of the survival of the values it embodies; while city planning and networking systematically displace the existing city, by resolving it from its own conventional limits, recycling has the much more burdensome responsibility of the *instauratio urbis*, deriving its principles from the critical legacy of an empty heritage, which, in the state of uncertainty in which it finds itself, always presents itself as unprecedented.

This also clarifies that any opposition between representative and direct democracy is fictitious and rhetorically banal. Democracy, since its inception in Athens, was based on the originating protagonist of its members, whose discussed and finally shared decisions were deliberated by representatives of them and then put into action. To this end, it seems necessary to reiterate that the condition of existence of the future city is based on the possibility of verifying in advance its opportunity through the creation of experimental prototypes via a collaborative praxis, as a guarantee of a socially shared resolution, ultimately ratified and applied by the plan.

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