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Remains, Fragments and Relics: the New Materials of the Contemporary Urban Design

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In the urban transformations a growing attention is given to the issue of the land-consume, and the disciplines of urban planning seem to progressively move towards strategies of reuse and recycling of existing constructions. In this scenario, the numerous abandoned landscapes in the contemporary cities become a resource and a opportunity for the urban design practices.

In Italy one finds a specific kind of these dismissed works: the remnants of the Late Modern Italian architectures. These are public buildings signed by renowned authors, built in Italy between 1960 and 1980 which are now abandoned, fallen into disuse, never finished or in the verge of demolition. The presence of these materials raises the issue of the management of these ruins, and therefore the evaluation of the possible intervention strategies. These realities reveal the real needs to improve the reuse and recycling practices, both in terms of awareness and with a new legislation, able to regulate the operations on the existing.

Remains, fragments and relics: the new materials of the contemporary urban design

From the last twenty years the contemporary cultural debate seems to show a growing attention to the theme of the discard, the waste and the abandoned body. This cultural tension involves also the field of architecture that, faced with the problem of occupied land, orients more toward strategies of reusing and recycling of parts of existing city. Abandoned areas, architecture in disuse or remains of buildings become the new frontier for the urban transformation.

In December of 2011 is displayed in the rooms of the MAXXI Museum of Rome the exhibition *Re-Cycle. Strategies for architecture, city and planet*¹, a survey on the topic of recycling, declined in a transversal manner in all the spheres of expression of contemporary culture. The amount and intensity of works displayed demonstrate the pervasiveness of the phenomena that, from an operational strategy it has gradually been transformed into a category that interprets reality. Among the things displayed there are designs for the reuse of buildings and interventions on an urban scale and on the landscape:

«that represent the response of the visual and design culture to the problem of sustainability: *re-build* instead of build: *build above under around inside on, with waste materials, instead of building, live the ruins instead of building, re-naturalize* instead of re-urbanize.» (Ciorra, Marini, 2011; pp. 27-28)

Ecology, waste disposal, the urgency to limit the building expansion and the relative use of land makes it necessary to consolidate a culture of recycling, that knows how to orient the growth and transformation of the city, and contribute to a new awareness of the existing heritage.

Contemporary ruins

Within the contemporary cities a real landscape of abandonment emerges ever more clearly: we refer to the presence of buildings in disuse and discarded construction in the verge of demolition. Within this scenario, it appears, in Italy, a specific condition of these realities: the remnants of the Late Modern Italian architecture (Picture 1). Many of the projects realized from the sixties to the eighties of the twentieth century are then transformed into architectures never completed or never used, abandoned in a very short time and now in a serious condition of decay.

In most cases they are renowned projects, recognized and appreciated by national and international critic, published in architectural books and journals. Unfinished or finished but never came into use, if not for a very short time, these works languish today in total neglect, many on the verge of demolition. Far from the romantic idea of a ruin, without history or a glorious past to narrate, they constitute the discard, the waste deposited by a recent past. It refers to the *Marchiondi Spagliardi Institute* (1954-57) by Vittoriano Viganò, *Convent of the Passionist Fathers* (1957-71) by Glauco Gresleri, the *ENEL-SIP Holiday camp* (1961-1963) by Giancarlo De Carlo, the *Marchesi Institute* (1972) by Luigi Pellegrin, the *Sciaccia Popular Theatre* (1976) by Giuseppe and Alberto Samonà, the *Student House* (1976) by Giorgio Grassi and Antonio Monestiroli, the *Mother Church* in Gibellina (1980-2010) by Ludovico Quaroni, the *Terminal S. Cristoforo* (1983-1989) by Aldo Rossi and Gianni Braghieri, the *Palasport Cantù* (1987-1992) by Vittorio Gregotti (Picture 2).

What has increased the attention on this situations have been two fundamental and common aspects of all the *ruins* identified: they all belong to the same historic-cultural context and they all are architectures signed by renowned designers.

The first factor reveals that all of the works arose in the same years, in a specific moment of architectural production, characterized by a thrust to find an identity, an *Italian way* within the crisis of the last phase of Modernism. In the research two temporal references are identified that define chronologically and culturally the period in examination: the number 251 of “Casabella” of 1961 with the editorial *Il passo da fare*

1 Re-cycle. Strategie per l'architettura, la città, il pianeta, edited by Pippo Ciorra, MAXXI Museum, Rome, December 2011-April 2012



by Ernesto Nathan Rogers, and *La Presenza del Passato*, the first *Venice Architecture Biennale*, curated by Paolo Portoghesi in 1980.

The second aspect concerns the authorship of these ruins, the fact that the masters of those years produced such *manque* architecture. This factor raises the question of the value of the bequest that this cultural moment, renowned for its contributions in the intellectual sphere, was able to give to future generations in terms of real and functional structures.

To this is added the sheer number of ruins identified in Italy: it is not a question of episodes or sporadic cases but of a consistency that reveals they represent a manifestation of a real phenomena.

Within the selected architectures very different and distant aspects are found, involving both the current state of disuse and neglect, and the idea of the project, and the history of the realization. Some works were never completed, others came into use for very short periods and then were abandoned, other were demolished. The *Popular Theatre* by Samonà, the *Passionist Father Convent* by Gresleri, the *Student House* by Grassi and Monestiroli and the *Terminal* by Rossi and Braghieri are architectures that are still waiting to be finished. The condition of incompleteness, due to very different reasons, prevented these works to be used and to begin their life cycle, and then blocked any further development. Within the selected architectures will also place those which, once finished, started their life-cycle, but very quickly fell into disuse. The reasons for abandonment are varied, but in most cases this condition was caused by the functional connotation of the building, which is projected in very rigid structures, both spatially and in the materials. Once stopped the use for which they were designed, works as the *ENEL holiday camp* by De Carlo or the *Marchiondi Institute* by Viganò have fallen into disuse and were abandoned in the light of the difficulty of adapting the structures to new uses and other destinations.

Within very different backgrounds, the stories of these works highlight some common features typical of the design thinking in that moment, that in part have influenced the fate of these famous architectures. Their current condition moves to reconstruct the causes and reasons that led to such design production, and to place such materials in the contemporary urban scenarios.

City of paper

These remains of architectures were designed by those *masters* who inspired the cultural debate between the Sixties and the Eighties. Beginning in the 1960s urgency for a global renewal spreads in Italy, which seeks to modify the current conditions in politics, economics and culture. Architecture gathers the hopes and illusions of these strongly utopian projections. The plan, the program and the design become devices that prefigure future scenarios, soon to be, almost impossible to come true. The utopia responds to a common feeling, a widespread sensation that searches for new solutions in a renewed design of reality.

The centrality of the urban theme in the cultural debate also emerges in the intense production of published texts between 1965 and 1967: *Origini e sviluppo della città moderna* (Carlo Aymonino, 1965), *L'architettura della città* (Aldo Rossi, 1966), *Il territorio dell'architettura* (Vittorio Gregotti, 1966), *La torre di Babele* (Ludovico Quaroni, 1967), *La costruzione logica dell'architettura* (Giorgio Grassi, 1967). The abandoned architecture proved a weakness of these reflections on the city in providing an operational tool in urban design and architecture that often, as in the cases cited, showed a sort of inability to interact and change contexts. The theoretical lesson of these great authors seems then summarized in the design of buildings essentially conceived as objects, detached from the urban context. Often conceived with purely ideological coordinates, the story of these works tells of how, in the impact with the disorder and the complexity of the real-world, they have proved the abstraction and the virtuality of a urban idea frozen in a purely theoretical matrix. The theories of the city by parts, the composition of urban facts, then translated into these projects, prove inadequate to describe the dynamics and the complexity of reality, and the transition from the design to the building is particularly difficult in the architecture of that period.

These works manifest themselves as monads, forgotten objects in their isolation, distant from the flow of traffic and often from the consolidated urban fabric. In most cases the works are located on the outskirts

of the city, on the margins of provincial towns. The processes of growth and urban transformation have occupied new areas and invested in other fronts with respect to those that were initially foreseen by the architects. The fabric of the city was generally developed elsewhere, aggravating a condition of isolation of the works that seems to derive from the projects themselves.

Analyzing the designs of the *Gibellina's Church* by Quaroni, the *Popular Theatre* by Samonà rather than the *Student's house* by Grassi seems that this type of architecture was thought of as a form of communication that uses a certain system of signs attributing to them various meanings. The reflection on the language and the semiotics becomes, starting from 1960s, the center of the cultural debate and involves the field of architecture too. This discipline absorbs the cultural transformations and, accepting implicitly that it is meant not to be built, it is transformed in a language. The more abstract the compositions are, drawn from a repertoire of imaginary forms rather than real elements, the more the design becomes a language, an expressive form of a utopian and unreal thought process.

From the stories of these works there emerges the tendency, widespread in the period discussed here, to confer contracts for plans, infrastructure, and other works, economically and functionally oversized, to the most prominent architects nationally, those who the critics identify as the *protagonists*. In this way, with these convocations to direct call of the renowned architects, the administrations create consensus, giving an image which is culturally updated and economically exuberant. Most of the time the contracts did not correspond to a real need for programming, and often, behind the proclaimed need of theaters, stadiums, churches and infrastructure lies the need to build electoral support. Among the most common fates of these projects born in these contexts, there is the sudden depletion of funds and the postponement of the completion of the construction.

From the current conditions of these abandoned works seems to emerge a break between the design process and the real mechanisms that, in those years, take hold in the dynamics between society, territory and urban culture. Starting in the 1960s architecture and urban project seem to gradually detach from the real coordinates and processes of urban transformation underway. The transformations that involved the city in the 1960s further aggravated the situation of these works, isolated and abandoned as remains of contemporary archeology, icons of an idea which is remote from contemporary urban dynamics.

Between the 1960s and the 1980s, the period taken in consideration, a primary role is attributed to architecture in the political and cultural debate; however, from the ruins left to us, a weakness of the design idea is revealed, often evident already on paper, of knowing how to react and modify the real contexts. The condition of the works examined here sheds light on cracks and contradictions of that theoretical scaffolding of that discipline that today, after almost 50 years, appear prominently as uncompleted and abandoned on the landscape.

Re-cycle: survival strategies

The ruins of the Italian Late Modern are analyzed and placed in the urban context of the present moment. The limitations in the availability of land for construction, the economic strength of the country and the attitude that Italian culture has shown to contemporary architecture seem to reduce the opportunities for building ex novo. Design practice is oriented ever more toward strategies of reuse and recycle of the existing patrimony which, in this light, reassesses the ruins and remains as resources and opportunities for intervention. In this context, these remains of the architecture are a resource for the transformation practices of the city, but at the same time they are deeply ambiguous materials and therefore difficult to maintain. These projects were signed by the same authors that have animated the cultural debate at a specific season of Italian architecture and at the same time they appear as remains, concrete skeletons, ruins without use and connotation, which are now a difficult problem to be solved in the management of cities.

Many of the structures have come to the attention of the Superintendent, and thus have avoided distortions and demolitions. Many appeals and campaigns have been undertaken to bring awareness to this issue obtaining, in many cases, the protection requested, in virtue of the historical recognition and fame attributed to



the work and the author. The *Marchiondi Spagliardi institute*, the *Gibellina's Church* and the *ENEL holiday camp* were saved thanks to safeguard appeals and campaigns, and they were protected. For other works it was decided to intervene with the demolition, as the *Student House* by Grassi and Monestiroli or the *Palasport* by Gregotti. In addition to these positions there is a third solution that, “starts from what is left”, it evaluates the possibility of reuse these ruins, extrapolating the structure from the use, the meaning and the context for which it was conceived. In this strategy the value, the critical fortune of the work, and at the same time the disuse and unease provoked are erased by a new operative evaluation that, where possible, tries to re-appropriate, readapt and reuse what remains today. In this sense pieces and fragments of past works are inserted into today's context and manipulated according to the needs of the current moment. In these operations the work becomes a palimpsest, a stratification of events on which one writes the present history. With the task of re-use is limited interventions on the existing and working in and around the structure, building the network of relationships, flows and dynamics that can restore a sense of the building and open a dialogue with the city. The prospect of recycling work opens up prospects for recycling and reuse of spaces, if possible, with minimal and limited use of resources. This kind of operation works in and around the existing structure, building a network of relations, flows and dynamics of use able to give a meaning to the building and permitting it to have a dialogue with the city.

At the eleventh edition of the *Architectural Biennial* in Venice, in 2008, as part of the exhibition *L'Italia cerca casa*, staged at the *Italian Pavilion*, the studio *Albordi* presents *Ecomostro Addomesticato*, a reuse proposal for the unfinished terminal designed by A. Rossi and G. Braghieri. After economic estimates that showed the suitability of this intervention with respect to a demolition, a decision was taken to work on the existing structure, transforming it so it could be operational. The concrete skeleton becomes the frame, the supportive cage to insert housing cells and services that transforms the ruin into a residence container.

The *Terminal S. Cristoforo* by Rossi and Braghieri is the only one dealt with which was considered in a proposal for reuse: given that only a minimal part was built and then immediately reduced to a concrete skeleton, lends itself to be manipulated more than the other structures, whose massive size seems to inhibit any kind of measure. Regarding the other works, in some cases the heritage protection or the decision to demolish assigned a fate to the abandoned architecture. In other cases the nature of the work is still not well defined, and there is a big uncertainty of dealing with ordinary materials, to be operated by recycling practices without too much respect for the original, or rather dealing with abandoned architecture, in disuse, but somehow famous and therefore untouchable.

Reuse and practices of the ordinary

The recognition and the location of these materials in the categories of the monumental or the ordinary becomes an important issue in the evaluation of an intervention strategy. To overcome the limbo of uncertainty and the state of inertia with regard to these buildings, it is necessary to rethink the restoration practices in Italy, that intervene almost exclusively on the monumental patrimony and in reference to historiographical criteria. The processes of ever more dense urbanization and the physical limits of the land available has led, in some countries of northern Europe, to a gradual awareness of the practices of recycling and reuse of the existing structures.

In Holland, since 1988, urban planning is oriented to consolidating the residential fabric, so as to respond to the housing demand without creating a sprawl. Similarly in Germany, the theme of the occupation of the ground for urban use has become part of a political agenda on the federal and local level. In Italy in 1999 the *Regional law n. 22* (19 November 1999) was passed that allows the variation of the roof inclination in order to make the attics habitable, regulating the reuse of attics; a new national proposal (Gibelli, Salzano 2006) was also drafted that foresees the limited use of the ground, giving building permits only where it is not possible to reuse the ground or the existing materials. In Italy there is a delay with respect to other European countries in codifying and regulating the operations of reuse of constructions and of the territory. The interventions on the existing patrimony in Italy are mainly tied to restoration of the Modern, and thus

have to do with exceptionally valued structures, on which they work with historical perspectives and safeguard *criteria*. With regard to reuse and restoration for ordinary constructions on the other hand, there is not enough widespread practice and consolidated knowledge of such operations. Restoration usually tends to renovate a work by referring to a time zero, restoring the building to its initial condition, before degradation and neglect. For interventions into the ruins analyzed, on the contrary, the attention is oriented not so much to restoring the work to its earlier stage, many of which never functioned, but rather the possibility of overwriting these works, rendering legible their history, the attempts of use, the periods of neglect, the forms of rejection or repossession that the work was subjected to in the immediate present and in the recent past.

In this perspective we situate the strategies of recycling, the parasite architecture and the reuse for other meanings and functions; in general we mean all those interventions that can revive the building by working on the existing structure, to reanimate it with minimal interventions without being concerned to restore it to a prior state of completeness and integrity. In these strategies the architecture in disuse becomes an open work, lending itself to having overlapping functions and interpretations that succeed each other over time, and are capable of revealing the transformations of the context that occurred over its lifetime. The building is no longer a fixed object, defined and resolved, it isn't a concluded work, which bears a signature that attributes merit, but rather becomes a device, an ongoing process that does not reveal the authorship of the artifact but the intelligence of the recycling and reuse strategies that guarantee their survival.

The Italian remains of the Late Modern represent an extremely complex and meaningful presence. Evidence of a recent past, which still survives in the present moment, these materials provide resources and opportunities for the processes of growth and transformation of the city. Their ambiguity makes particularly complex the evaluation of the possible intervention strategies, and it also makes even more evident the need for practices of reuse and recycling of this patrimony in disuse. Given this scenario, these remnants of architecture highlight the urgent need for a revised legislation, that can regulate and implement the tools and knowledge in the strategies of the contemporary design that work with existing materials.



Figure 1 | Map of famous architectures realized in Italy from the sixties to the eighties of the twentieth century and now abandoned and in disuse.



Figure 2 | The nine architectures selected within the Italian landscape of contemporary ruins.

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