



**Living Landscapes - Landscapes for living
Paesaggi Abitati
Conference Proceedings
Florence, February-June 2012**

Planum. The Journal of Urbanism, n. 27, vol.2/2013
www.planum.net | ISSN 1723-0993
Proceedings published in October 2013

Urban Places and Public Space: the Luzzi Case Study

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In May 2006 more than 350 people occupy the ex Hospital "Saverio Aloigi Luzzi", placed at the gates of Florence. Luzzi represents one of the most emblematic situations faced during the activities research and interactive design in which the Michelucci Foundation had been engaged.

Together with Department of Urban and Regional Planning of the Faculty of Architecture and in harmony with the "Movimento di Lotta per la Casa" we tried to oppose the local decisions that wanted to force the occupants to leave the building and the sell of it. Through the "Luzzi" experience we propose a radical changing course, a case of innovation in the public housing politics and in the forms of urban democracy, through a participant process finalized to the shared design of its reuse.

This very articulated proposal, has been judged utopic and rejected by some public participants. So the outcome of the event is the result of a complex and difficult negotiation between the "Movimento di Lotta per la Casa", the occupants, the municipal administrations involved, the Tuscany region, the net of associations on the territory of shelter. This abstract is the synthetic reenactment of Luzzi case and of its inhabitants.

The Luzzi case study¹

The ex-hospital Luzzi represents one of the most emblematic situations handled by the Michelucci Foundation for the research-action and interactive planning involved. For the last thirty years the Foundation has concerned itself with the city of the excluded: urban poverty and social marginalisation, reception centres and problematic housing situations. We work to remove blinkers and seek to breach walls in order to construct relationships favouring the process of self-building. In all this, we are guided by the outlines laid down by Giovanni Michelucci which were most original for an architectural foundation. The social and physical panorama in these years has changed greatly in that residential impoverishment has grown, the housing supply has become weaker, the means of social mediation more uncertain and cloudier and the tools for exclusion stronger.

It is in this framework that the Foundation in collaboration with the Department of town planning of the Faculty of Architecture has presented the project «Frontline Housing: models of housing and social inclusion through self-building and recycling». This project won the Tender for research and innovation in the territorial and environmental fields of the Tuscan Region. Upon the request of the Region (through its Department of Housing, University and research), the Foundation began to concern itself with the ex-hospital Luzzi as a case study of considerable interest.

Always within this framework, we sought to be incisive in the local decision-making process which inclined towards evacuation of the structure and eventual sale. Rather, we proposed a radical change of direction that would turn the Luzzi complex by means of an innovative public residential policy for urban democracy through participatory contributions for an eventual project of shared re-utilisation. The necessary tools were used to set up an adequate plan of reconnaissance given the complexities of the situation under examination and towards the formulation of an intervention scheme likely to be acceptable amongst the social and institutional players during the bargaining process.

The proposal which is highly segmented was deemed by some of the public participants to be too idealistic and was turned down. At this point, events led to complex, difficult and often dramatic negotiations between the “Movimento di Lotta per la Casa” and the squatters on the one hand and local authorities, the Tuscan Regional government and the local network of voluntary associations of reception centres on the other.

This piece is a concise reconstruction of the events at the Luzzi.

The hospital of the homeless

The ex-hospital “Saverio Aloigi Luzi” sits in the municipality of Sesto Fiorentino within an area bounded by the old Via Bolognese, Villa Demidoff, Mount Uccellatoio and the Mugnone stream. Its social and health history is tied up with that of its neighbour, the old sanatorium “Guido Banti”. Together, they formed an integrated hospital complex in the thirties that put Florence in the forefront of the fight against the social disease of its day. This function came to an end in the seventies when modern medicine finally overcame the spread of tuberculosis. After that, Luzzi Hospital served various functions and partial use (retirement home, drug abuse rehabilitation community, day centre for the disabled and mental health centre) in various periods and duration around the site. With the complete shutting down of these functions, the area was destined as a hospitality complex by the municipality of Sesto Fiorentino and approved by the Tuscan Region in 1995 and together with the Banti complex was put up for auction unsuccessfully in 2005. In the midst of conflict and negotiations, in the absence of any rehousing possibilities but with the definite risk of a forcible eviction, the work group from the Michelucci Foundation and the Department of planning joined forces and laid down a proposal for a socially shared salvage of the Luzzi area coherent with its history of health reception and its architectural and environmental characteristics.

1 Paragraph 1 is written by Corrado Marcetti; paragraph 2 is written by Sabrina Tosi Cambini



An integrated model of various functions for its re-use is offered to public debate:

- *The house of social dwelling* (reception of refugees, asylum-seekers, strongly troubled families, hosted in a limited number and for limited periods; experimental forms of co-housing for youths and micro-communities; studio or workshop-cum-flat for artists and artisans; other forms of temporary housing).
- *Fair-trade network* (activities related to cultural and artistic experimentation and production; new economies based on ecology and micro-activities tied to the new circuits of fair trade).
- *Open school* (integrated activities in school, university and post-university training;
- summer school, masters programmes, refresher courses, specialised training, internships; in-house seminars with guest quarters, short-term lodgings for foreign and Erasmus programme students; space allocation and equipment for seminars and conferences).
- *The house of care and mutual help* (specialised activities related to services for the individual and the family; decentralised health services particularly in the face of social and personal distress).
- *The workshop for environmental experimentation* (research activities in the field of new technologies in energy-saving; schools and research into green building and planning; workshops for self-building re-development and self-restructuring related to the realisation of the project and the building site as a place for experimentation).
- *Centre for sustainable rural life* (an organic teaching farm, social and therapeutic gardening, agricultural experimental park, the public use of the old park and woods in conjunction with the incorporating ANPIL of Terzolle).

Above all, we proposed that the participatory process be transparently managed in its various phases by a collective subject and receptive to all contributions. This subject must have the full approval of the local authorities and the support of the Tuscan Region. The procedure is the usual: the Regional Authority for Participation examines the proposal and if deemed worthy of regional support, it explores the possibility of organising a participatory process together with the public administrators involved (the Tuscan Region, the municipalities of Sesto and Vaglia and eventually, the municipality of Florence and the Local Health Unit). Once pinpointed through a participatory effort the areas of intervention, the selection of projects to be implemented may be offered for public calls of interest and an external commission set up to evaluate the proposals based on the criteria of innovation, quality, social and environmental priorities (after the model of Iba Emscher Park although, of course, on a much smaller scale).

The segmented and flexible nature of the complex would make it possible to intervene in timely sequence and organise the transformation according to the available funding of the moment.

The structure of the Luzzi building site would take on concrete and realistic features only through an open and transparent participatory process where every stakeholder is included: public administration (Region, Province, Municipalities of Sesto Fiorentino, Vaglia and Florence), the Local Health Unit, representatives of the associations and the third sector, the university and experts, ARCI, Caritas and help organisations, representatives of movements and squatters, the local public in the territory involved.

The itinerary illustrated, however, was not met with enthusiasm during the participatory process by the Tuscan Region which sought an agreement with the mayors. The latter moved to avoid a convocation of an integrated round-table amongst administrators, property owners, associations and scientific support bodies to elaborate a proposal of participation on the basis of the Regional law 69/2007.

This move consequently blocked the possibility of presenting a request of support for the participatory process to the Regional authority.

The situation found itself locked into a corner with the mayor of Sesto Fiorentino demanding a clearing-out. The Michelucci Foundation nevertheless continues working with other organisations in the belief that there should be no forcible eviction and a worsening of the situation in terms of social tension and residential distress should be avoided in the Florentine area. The agreement reached between the Region and associations is a coordinated plan to distribute the squatter families around various Tuscan areas and with

the aid of regional resources to begin the social integration of these families into their new environment. The work of the foundation has been important in all aspects of the support procedure.

There was also a programme of assisted repatriation to Romania for a dozen families. With the economic crisis, the difficulties, especially financial, encountered by these families trying to relocate either back to Romania or in other Tuscan towns are growing. A small group of families still remain in the gatehouse waiting to be further transferred. In the former farmhouse, the association “MutaForma” is still active with sustainable environmental interventions. The buildings strictly concerned with hospital care have been blocked up by the Local Health Unit and continue to decay. In a short time, other groups of homeless immigrants will take over with worsening living conditions and with the continuing economic crisis, with an even bleaker outlook. A new plan to avoid forcible eviction and support alternative ways to integration in the Tuscan territory will need to be reformulated.

Now the complex lies empty and abandoned again and there are no plans for regeneration on the part of those players that so tenaciously boycotted the participatory process to decide the fate of the place as proposed by the Foundation and the Department of town planning. The ex-hospital will again be put on the market with its usual end-use as a hospitality complex but with an even more uncertain outcome given the crisis.

Migrating

In these part of the intervention, we will relate a brief history of the migration of a wide network of “*Rudari*” families, many with family ties and/or community connections. These families come from the county [Judetul] of Costanta and in particular from the municipality of Cuza Voda and from the county of Calarasi, from that city itself as well as from the municipalities of Modelu and Spantov.

Their characteristic mobility is tied up historically to woodworking which was interrupted with the advent of Communism and their resulting settlement. This however changed in the 90s when the “*Rudari*” again began to move internationally due to their economic precariousness. Work was irregular in agriculture and construction where the pay was no more than €10 a day. The only other alternative was to work as drivers for the tinker Roma in Cuza Voda. Furthermore, without regular work, they were excluded from the national health system so leaving became a concrete possibility. A son may leave for a seasonal job, a mother or daughter to substitute a relative in domestic work, or a father for a longer work period. A single member or a nucleus of the family may leave more or less permanently for the various countries of greater Europe: Italy, Spain, England, Germany, Greece, Turkey... thus creating a transnational family web and giving rise to a “reticular migratio” in which family relationships act both as a vehicle for work opportunities and a safety net for the new arrivals.

The majority of the families present in Italy have been able to build on a movement that has then become rooted but some members are more mobile than others especially the children and older family members.

As we well know, people in a migratory circle do not take on just one voyage but many more or less frequent ones, which allow them to live in the reality of their provenance as well, making it possible for them to juggle social, economic and spatial relationships in two places contemporarily. This form of migration allows the single person or the family group the possibility to renegotiate continually their existence in the countries of their departure and arrival according to their individual possibilities. Contingent situations influence decisions and by opening further doors lay the foundations for a more stable settling in the new country. “Our” families came for a period of time in Italy and then returned to Romania only to come back again. Not entire families but the men first, followed by the women and some children or when their situations improved, everyone together. Some members may stay for a short period or go back and forth often. Others may remain for longer periods, going away only in August or for the Christmas season.

2 Concerning the Rudari, please refer to Bengelstorf 2009, Block 1991 (Ed. or. 1923), Calota 1995, Chelcea 1944, Dorondel 2007, Stahl P.H. 1991, Tosi Cambini e Piasere 2011.



What we are concerned with is their mode of settlement in Florence where it took the form of squatting in some of the buildings of a disused hospital complex just outside the city. Luzzi Hospital, which has been closed for less than eight years, is made up of seven large buildings and ancient woods. Here the history of migration of the “*Rudari*” families intersect with the spatial configuration of the city (the variations in urban functions and composition of town areas), the abandonment and fate of public spaces and the political decisions over public areas and their commodification, as well as crossing into the local history of the struggle for housing rights.

Squatting in the ex-sanitarium Luzzi represents an important passage for many people as it gave them the possibility to achieve a certain residential stability: to have something better than a shack with no running water or electricity in a disused industrial site; to have the possibility of rooms in a building which can be heated and with bathrooms, perhaps not completely functional, but nevertheless, bathrooms; and the means to create a kitchen but most importantly, a place suitable for one’s children. Of course, the premise is based on squatting and without doubt not all the buildings are in good structural shape but people have managed to transform the place into a home. New possibilities have opened up: schooling for the children and job-seeking. Everything is uphill but certainly better than the possibilities available to the “*Rudari*” in Romania. Nevertheless, communications are intense and there is a continuous exchange of information, things and people between the two places and Romania is still considered “*home*”.

Squatting, inhabiting

On 14th May 2006, a few hundred people of diverse provenance but with a majority of Romanian “*Rudari*” began squatting in the former Luzzi hospital. The action was organised by a support movement “*Movimento di Lotta per la Casa*” which sought through this operation to resolve the housing problems of some 80 families who had until this point lived in makeshift shacks in the industrial areas or sleeping rough around the city: “tales of people, attachments and hopes that cross neglected and derelict places which begin to revive with the work and hopes of the new inhabitants” (*Movimento di Lotta per la Casa*, 2006), to quote from one of their manifestos. The families transform these abandoned spaces into the scene of their everyday routine, into their homes: Luzzi House, in fact. Since many work as manual labourers in the building trade, they are well able of transforming the various rooms into homes for themselves and their families.

The institutional and local reactions to this squatting has been immediate hostility and little inclined to acknowledge this desire by the immigrants to create a space for themselves in the city which is not an urban discard but an acceptable newly inhabited area. In the newspapers, in public statements, the squatters are depicted as unwanted and undesirable being part of the criminal circuit with an aura of illegality, distant from us (which us?) in language and culture etc.

The intertwining between property speculation, the local and national politics of zero tolerance and the construction of a reality of the immigrants as dangerous and a source of social problems and wasteful expenditure, together with the increasing difficulties facing many families, both Italian and foreign, has created a climate of tension. Even the local grass-roots associations are adverse to the squatters and few people respond to their appeal for support. The municipality of Florence is strongly opposed and has refused to grant residence to the inhabitants which implies no school busing among many things.

The squatter families in turn attempt to create their own “territory”, by establishing a rapport with the ‘old’ inhabitants and with the school and health services. With the former in particular they would like to build a relationship of active exchange, seeking their place within a “common story”.

In 2006, neither the health authorities nor the various municipalities involved (Luzzi hospital sits within the boundaries of three towns – Florence, Vaglia and Sesto Fiorentino) have initiated any provisions for the families except for the Prefecture which is the body for law and order in the territory. This is an indication of the institutional attitudes which consider the Luzzi squatting not as a social question (housing, cultural etc.) but as a security problem above all.

We will now touch on – if briefly – “la” Luzzi during the squatting years.

I have used “*la*” Luzzi as the “*Rudari*” would (in Romanian, cities and towns or any settlement big or small are referred to in the feminine) and not “*il*” Luzzi in the Florentine manner. This change of the grammatical article symbolises the change of perspective. For the people living there, it is not a former sanitarium but a part of the city where they happen to live. Given that the majority of the squatters come from the same area of Romania and given that they are connected through kinship or community, it is an authentic village within the city capable of reacting to the needs of its population. This statement deliberately recalls what Colette Pétonnet wrote after the appearance of the shantytown in the Porte d’Aix quarter of Marseilles and through which its most profound significance appears: careful observation of street life shows a rhythmic subdivision, «the old quarter reacts in the same manner as the shantytown to the necessities of human settlement»(2002:3919).

Through an ethnographical approach Pétonnet was able to go beyond the given, beyond the common thinking of public opinion and of the social sciences. By entering the intimate and hidden contents of these realities, she demonstrated its regulatory function in a spontaneous habitat and at the same time, its capacity to follow through the arrival and complex passage from one part of the world (the one of departure) of the migrant to the other (of arrival). She writes:

«The shantytown (...) ensures security and the adaptation of the newcomers. Just as certain quarters have their specific functions (commercial, receptive, entertainment etc.), so the shantytown has its particular role which is to facilitate the transient passage between two worlds» (2002:80).

“*La*” Luzzi has also had these functions of protection and support. Its inhabitants have had to face the change in social and cultural contexts which may be quite similar or very different from the place of provenance. The ties of solidarity within families and the relative ease of reception into a new place have given many families the possibility to attempt different strategies in the move between Romania and Italy, to gradually confront the new realities of immigration trying out various opportunities of life between Romania and Italy, and to attempt a new life plan here without forsaking everything over there. Self-management has allowed them the means of action but this has been reduced by external impositions on their identity where they are falsely seen as committed to illegalities, squalour, muddle and uncivic behaviour. The safety net within *la* Luzzi has kept alive some of the fundamental characteristics of family networks: economic unity, living together and solidarity.

What has transformed “*il*” Luzzi into “*la*” Luzzi? For one thing, the structure is surrounded by a park overlooking Florence; however, it would be mistaken to talk of a structure as it actually consists of several buildings in a relatively good state of preservation as the hospital was closed quite recently. The electrical supply system functions well although there are some problems with the water mains. Nevertheless, the peculiarities of the squatting is to be found in the organisation and modes of management of the different areas and of communal life. By March 2007, the squatters numbered over 350 (of which 80 were children) divided into 71 families. The “*Rudari*” were the main group but there were also 30 Etritreans and Ethiopians who lived side by side in the same building as well as a dozen Italians, a similar number of Somalians, a Tunisian family, some 20-odd young Moroccans and a handful of Senegalese. A weekly meeting was held which was always well-attended to discuss life in “*la*” Luzzi, institutional contacts and updates on the situation in the light of a looming forcible eviction. In the winter of 2006/2007 a playroom for the children was set up and on Wednesdays and Fridays, a cinema club was held which were all organised within the community.

The Italians were usually the representatives in contacts with local authorities. One Italian woman in particular was a pillar of support in helping the families send their children to school and in obtaining health services. Families were extremely creative themselves as well. The buildings began to take on the appearance of blocks of flats with a great deal of variety, each according to the family’s needs: some of the homes even had bathrooms, minor restructuring and repairwork were carried out and every flat had surnames on the door and a number to form an address. A roster was drawn up to keep the common indoor areas clean and



Saturdays were set aside for tidying up outdoor and green areas. On the road running through the grounds were signs signalling the presence of children (in a slightly reworked Italian: “*attenzione bambini*”). While just before entering the grounds and chalked on the asphalt in Romanian was an exhortation to take care of the place and to keep it clean (“*pastrati curatenia*”). And the place was truly neat and tidy which brings Colette Pétonnet to mind! In good weather in the evenings, one passed by mums and dads out with their children; smoke rising from open grills (with the firewood coming from the surrounding woods); young girls laughing and joking appearing from entrance ways, dressed like all the girls of Florence, made-up with care and hair in place. And the music rising to accompany the returning workers (who usually arrived after 21.30 with the bus from Florence). In the beginning of July 2007, an outdoor café was set up comprising of a gazebo with a refrigerator, a stereo set and lights. The Tunisian woman made bread and sold it to other families. The Italian woman previously referred to sought to publicise this multicultural community by organising outdoor functions, bazaars and other fund-raisers such as the recycling of clothes “*made in Luzzi?*”. And then there was the church (which was kept locked and out-of-bounds to the children). In all the roughly one and a half years of squatting, there was only one episode of tension.

This experience bears witness to possible solutions for a city willing to transform itself, to allow space for negotiation and “spontaneous” experiments where the subjectification lines may escape but not definitively from the dimension of power and knowledge to create new itineraries.

As mentioned before, it was the squatters themselves together with the “*Movimento*” who got in touch with the local authorities and associations. The solicitations from the squatting was not only, as in other cases, the possibility to have an experience of repossession – which presents itself as a complex problem given the conditions and characteristics of the property – as much as an opportunity for the squatters to acquire access to decent housing not necessarily in that particular property. A further request was also made against the eventual privatisation of the area (park and buildings), transforming the place into a hotel complex or private structure, but rather to develop its potentialities as a socially useful structure with its surrounding areas for the city.

In July 2007, while eviction was in the air, the Tuscan Region in an understanding with the Prefecture, initiated a round-table to discuss means of avoiding a forced intervention involving hundreds of people which would also leave unresolved their housing hardship.

The solution hammered out was that the “*Movimento di Lotta per la Casa*” would oversee the gradual reduction in squatting numbers and that the Department of social welfare of the Region would take responsibility for the housing of some 70 people while the Department of housing would set up an inter-institutional round-table including social associations to pinpoint a possible “public and social” employment of the Luzzi area. It is not the place here to enter into the complexities of a long and strenuous process, of years of negotiations, relocations, threat of eviction, house searches and comebacks...³

Epilogue: from an experimental opportunity to an urban vacuum

From when our contribution was first presented at the conference to this present paper, a long time has passed. A time in which the squatting episode has meant a halt to the social timetable, in a stalemate lasting nearly two years and the setting up of yet another round-table, but this time in the Prefecture for the complete closure of the complex. This finally took place in the beginning of December 2012. From being an opportunity for a notable social and cultural experiment, “il” Luzzi has returned once more into its urban vacuum waiting to be sold. The only positive note is that there was no forcible eviction and all the squatters (with varying solutions according to their living situation) managed to come out with a solution to their housing problems either rooming (for singles) or in dwellings (for families).

3 Please refer to C. Marcetti, G. Paba, A.L. Pecoriello, N. Solimano (a cura di), 2011.

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