Beyond Public Spaces: Shared Spaces in the Contemporary City

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Abstract: The text aims to investigate the relevance of the concept of "public space" and the continuous variations which have changed its meaning. Going beyond the concept of public space, the author can understand the semantic boundaries of this definition: Today, relational spaces and shared spaces are the forms with which people can express the concept of public space. The gradual spread of new forms of communication has transformed the static view of public space in a more dynamic condition, the distinction between square, street, garden has lost its meaning leaving space to fragments and residues. Contemporary public spaces are defined, as the residual places that come from the abandonment of industries. The large mono-functional voids, which originate from industrial dismantlement, should be strategically reconsidered as new shared public spaces, where the integration between different functions leads to reactivate new forms of re-using of built space.

Key words: Time-space, relational spaces, shared public spaces, hybridization, degrees of publicity.

1. Introduction

"The city, in which every individual is identified is a mobile world, without known limits, but at the same time it is not infinite, where the difference is the law of the form and function. The identity of the city is, exactly, the experience of difference [1]."

2. Public Space: A Matter of Meaning

"Obviously, the protagonist of an urban project is public space, the place where the collective reality of the city is produced. The city is essentially its public space, provided that it is a readable space, etc. [2]."

Designing public spaces in contemporary cities also means being able to give a definition to these places and to build the semantic boundaries. If public space is the protagonist of the construction of urban fabric, as stated by Bohigas, then the architectural project must fulfill a more decisive, and at the same time, a more complex role. Faced with the growing trivialization of the concept of public space, often

reduced to the design of flowerbeds and paving, there is a urgent need to question what does it mean today to talk about public space?

In this sense when Aldo Rossi, in his famous text "The architecture of the city", affirms that the city is a huge artifact in continuous growth and transformation, he deals with the concept of public space as a place of profound changes linked to ongoing transformations of urban form. Sola-Morales argues that "all too often, the category of public space is used without taking into account the requirement of real urban quality that the term entails" [3], so public spaces as urban material capable of providing a response to various social, aesthetic and collective needs.

Nowadays, public space is no longer recognizable in itself. The classical distinction between square, street and garden has lost its meaning, leaving fragments, residues and absences of space. The concept of public and even more that of space should be redefined, creating a new semantic order in the articulation of individual constituent elements.

Speaking about space means to highlight the "parallel cultural descent from topoi, sites, locations, areas, surroundings, and finally, spaces, a term that

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denounces an extreme generality, abstractness and conceptual indeterminacy", as Crotti [4] suggests. Gregotti [5], within an entire issue of Casabella dedicated to the design of open spaces argues that: "the new issue is, on one hand, the difficulty of identification between open space and public space, on the other the re-interpretation and renovation of the residual spaces".

The gradual dissolution of public space has its origin in the city defined by the modern movement. Here, public space is severed by infrastructure and crossed by cars, it is the space between skyscrapers that removes the condition of square as a meeting place. If, until now, the city was built on a measured relationship between built-up spaces and their voids, nowadays, the cities planned by modern movement deny this connection to state the isolation of buildings, therefore, an absolute space in the Newtonian sense of the term, motionless and excluding any relations with the outside. The modern movement's denial of the concept of public space as the representation of collective space and a place of dwelling, has led to the abandonment of these places. Furthermore, it has led to a separation between collective identity and forms of space that are capable of representing such an identity. Redefining the shape of public spaces, and consequently, reconstituting their identity may be possible only by interpreting space as a place of relationship.

3. Modification and Permanence beyond Public Spaces: Relational and Shared Spaces

The view of relative space proposes that it be understood as a relationship between objects which exists only because objects exist and relate to each other [6].

If relational space is defined as a place that shows the relationship between built-up and open spaces, people can also say that it is possible to define an additional level of description of contemporary public space, it is also what David Harvey called relational space. In this sense, it is intended to emphasize the intrinsic relations that an object could be able to build with the surroundings.

"I choose to call this relational space—space regarded in the manner of Leibniz, as being contained in objects in the sense that an object can be said to exist only insofar as it contains and represents within itself relationships to other objects" [6]. The idea of a relational space implies that, for the first time, the concepts of space and time could not be read separately, but they are elements that define an inseparable relationship, in which the contemporary perception of time changes the forms and uses of open spaces.

Increasingly, the design of public space is related to movement, is referred to the infrastructural systems that connect different places of the urban fabric, both large nodes (station, airports), and imposing structures related to production and trade of goods. It is movement that underlies the notion of time, speed, seriality and reproducibility of contents.

Moreover, the gradual spread of mass media has changed the identity of public spaces, which are understood as computer networks able of breaking the traditional view and turn it into a virtual reality. So, it is possible to identify a gradual independence of virtual reality from physical space and from the structures that determine it.

The contemporary condition, clearly described by Harvey [7] as a situation of "space-time compression", highlights an unstable and continuously evolving condition derived from changes in technology and infrastructural devices. That have completely changed the way with which people produce, people travel, people consume and people think about space, coming to the progressive break of spatial barriers.

It is in this context that people must work through a strategy of reconstruction focused on a new lexicon of contemporary public spaces and where the project becomes the element that can "give identity to places through the restatement of their forms" [8].

4. Shared Public Spaces: A New Lexicon in the Construction of Open Spaces

The good city is one that can give public value to what is private [1].

The condition of fragmentation and disintegration of both urban form and consolidated urban fabric, highlighted above, moves to think about which places can adjust to a reformulation of the concept of public space. The phenomenon of abandon that affects, with increasing velocity, all contemporary European cities and it has highlighted what that people might call the predicament of voids [9].

The size of these mono-functional large voids represents an extraordinary opportunity to experiment new structures of open spaces that define a new kind of relationship between built-up spaces and voids. Therefore, it is necessary to determine a set of strategies to construct a cultural heritage to use and to design open spaces in contemporary cities, no longer seen wastes of industrial production or residual elements, but as the lifeblood of urban fabric.

Public spaces can be seen in an extensive way in respect to the past, it reconfirms the need to go beyond the sometimes abused concept of public space, to open the direction to new urban types such as, shared spaces or relational spaces, as well as diversified typological hybrids. They become spaces of social interaction, able to determine the identity of different urban environments, for example, the system of urban gardens spreading rapidly in cities or, at a different scale, roads, infrastructural and technological nodes that are reformulated as "common places", defined also as "interspaces" [10].

The concept of shared public space is related to transit places such as stations, airports, shopping centers, thus effectively Augé [11] called "non-places", nowadays, to a certain critical distance from this definition people can say that a non-place is, in reality, a transitional space but also a space for social interaction, able to built new forms of urbanity and sharing. Moreover, it is possible to say that, today, the real non-places are the large disused industrial areas, whose footprints, imprinted on the fabric, causes a rift between urban open spaces and built-up spaces, and also a fracture in both physical and visual spatial continuity.

What needs to be defined is the role of public place in the construction of urban form, to design public space means to think about a skeleton that can hold together open spaces, relational spaces and intermodal hubs, transforming them from transit places to places of dwelling.

The urban project must develop a unified approach in the definition of these shared spaces, refusing fragmentation and exclusion. The location of wastes, landfills, industrial abandoned fabric, disused infrastructures are the generating nodes which can be recycled or recovered, focused on the construction of a system of sustainable public spaces for the city and its territory. The industrial structures, which were formed as sequences of introvert enclaves, subject to a neglect and decay processes are currently configured as ruins of the contemporary landscape.

The contemporary industrial landscape of the city was built by progressive additions, whose borders and intervals are characterized by a series of residual voids.

The open spaces between abandoned buildings are the starting points for a process of recovery and reuse of urban fabric and artifacts.

The aim of the dissertation is to underline the possibility of recovering urban fabric marked by a condition of dismantlement through the construction of new public spaces, "thanks to which the negative stereotype of brownfield sites would turn positive in reclaimed areas" [12], reducing the construction of buildings and according to the design of shared spaces in the consolidated fabric of contemporary cities.

Friedman [13] asks: "Do we still need buildings?", stressing the necessity to reduce the construction of new buildings to work on the existing materials through practices of recycling and recovery.

5. To Built up Places of Abandonment: Public Spaces and Forms of Production

"Nowadays, the issue is to give meaning and future through continuous modifications to the city, the territory, the existing materials, which implies a modification of our design method, etc. [14]."

The traditional view of public space has always been tied to the square, as an open and external space, the crisis of meaning of places traditionally established to bring together the community is shown in the transition to more introverted forms of public space. These forms arise from the recovery of abandoned industrial structures, or even before, from the advent of malls which determine a threshold between a condition of open public space to another different condition of an enclosed public space dedicated to commercial or highly specialized functions. In particular, public spaces included in large commercial malls or intermodal hubs, should be thought as a system of new areas in contemporary cities, privately owned but publicly used. The interior spaces become the heartbeat of these complexes, that are, externally, completely indifferent to the context.

The determination of new types of public spaces defines new relationship between interior and exterior, as well as new identity of urban fabric. Recent forms of industrial dismantlement have dotted urban territories with fragments. The recovery of these structures, through a new definition of public space, can determine the relationship between re-functionalized industrial buildings with the urban fabric of the city.

The case study described below is a design experimentation conducted on a disused industrial building in an advanced stage of decay in the city of Bergamo. Preliminary considerations pose a significant question related to the choices of intervention on an architectonical heritage and on the restoration of its spaces. More specifically, is it possible to define principles and strategies able to transform industrial devices into partially public productive containers, and therefore, open to the urban context?

So, how to improve the integration between the new types of public space, described above, and the recovery of a disused industrial building? People can talk about of an architecture of relation, able to decline the theoretical ideas of relational space and interspaces, which are used today to describe the contemporary public space?

The case study addressed is paradigmatic in this sense, the OTE (Officine Trasformatori Elettrici) industry founded in 1924 is located in a strategic position inside the city of Bergamo, close to the railway line that connected the city to the valleys. Only recently, it has been reactivated as a tramway for the carriage of passengers (Figs. 1-2).

In this moment, the industrial building is subject of a strong deterioration and abandonment of the internal structures, and consequently, of the open space outside. The architectural structure of the building consists in a series of shed warehouses with large windows in the upper parts of the perimeter walls.

The variation of the design of the roofs define a kind of typological and morphogenetic selection referred to the forms of the spaces of production, an interesting starting point for a strategic study to be conducted on the industrial artifact (Figs. 3-4).

The design experimentation, as the final objective, is oriented to determine a transcription of design strategies for abandoned industrial buildings, a set of adequate practices that allow the redefinition of post-industrial contexts. The recovery process requires the need to recognize the architectural value to the industrial structures that become "recyclable materials" [15], open to new uses of urban space.

A recovery aimed at buildings presenting a typological and functional obsolescence through the integration of new functions and types of production. Hence, the need to convert these structures to a light production focused on a flexible scientific research: business incubators, laboratories and retail spaces. The possibility to open the industrial fences to the city
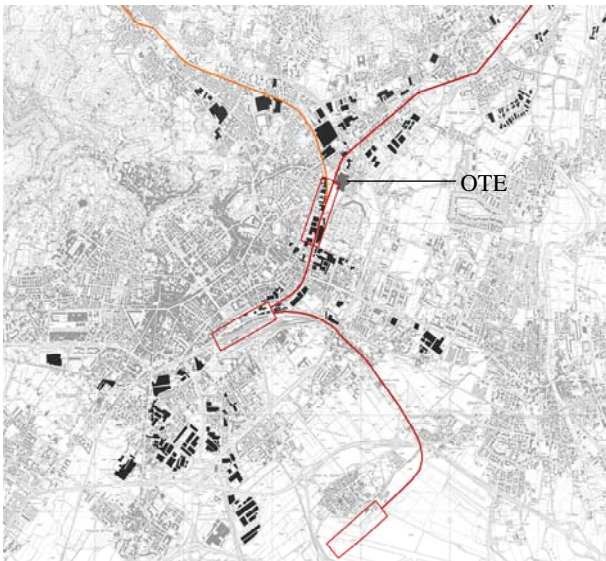
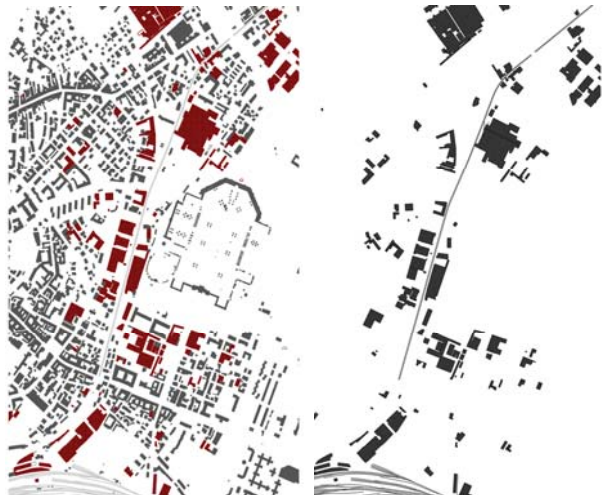Fig. 1 Map of the industrial system in Bergamo.

Fig. 2 Urban fabric and industrial fabric in Bergamo.

Fig. 3 Case study: industry OTE, external view, Bergamo.

Fig. 4 Internal view, Bergamo.

aims to reflect on the change in the concept of public spaces in the contemporary city. The reconversion of industrial artifacts into structures able to define urban containers changes the concept of the factory as an area of private production, to a progressive integration of private space, public space and semi-public space.

The proposed strategies do not concern only spatial operations, related to the interventions on the archaeological structure of the artifact, but also for operations focused on new uses of the spaces of production (Fig. 5). The aim is to increase flexible production spaces in a logical progressive integration between forms of production and urban fabric.

Therefore, a modification of the relationship between cities and productive structures takes place, favoring conditions of high integration between industry and housing. This situation involves a necessary flexible aggregation of the new production spaces that must be able to accommodate different uses.

However, it is possible to determine two points of view: a first look related to the relationship between artifact and context, it might be said, a territorial view, that investigates the relationship between a part, that is the architectural object, and the whole to which it belongs. A second point of view is closely related to the architectural character of the individual building
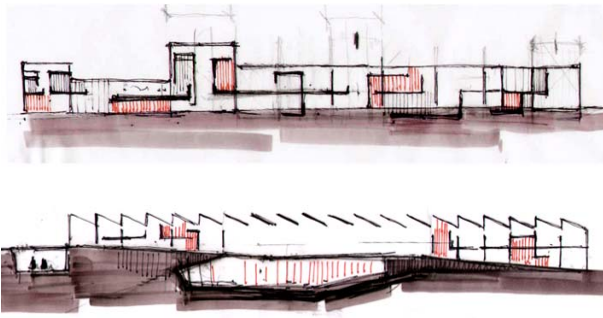
Fig. 5   OTE, design strategies: infill, stratification.

Fig. 6   OTE, masterplan, general strategy of action.

and to the relations that this element has with the open space surrounding it.

The recovery of the architectural structure, leading to new cycles of life for the building, provides for specific operations such as implanting, layering, extensions of the surfaces, emptying and including. So, operations aimed at restoration and enhancement of existing traces of tissues and on the overlaying of new languages to the signs that these artifacts show.

Through a series of interpretative analyses, design strategies for action on the artifact have been identified, engendered to facilitate the crossing through the industrial structure. Thanks to a series of selected demolitions, it can be possible to determine a new system of public paths between production areas, characterized by different degrees of publicity (Figs. 6-7).

In this sense, the recovery practices allow to think a new cycle of life for the disused industrial buildings, where resources can be re-used within the contemporary "porous metropolis" [16]. The private-public-semi public path is articulated through a sequences of shared places such as, spaces for the public sale of goods or spaces for meeting and gathering, alternating with structures for industrial production such as research laboratories, business incubators, greenhouses and laboratories.

In addition, it is possible to define design strategies in which both "public space, generously sized, to take charge of the discontinuity of buildings, allowing the
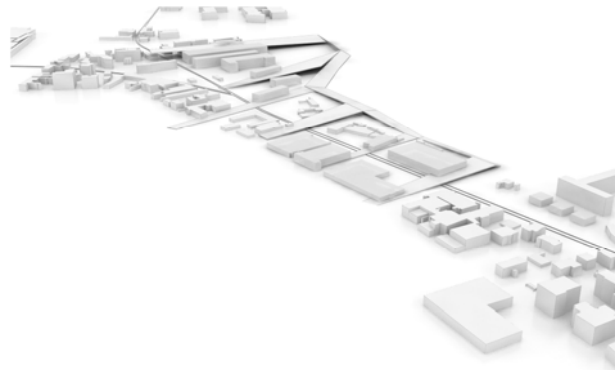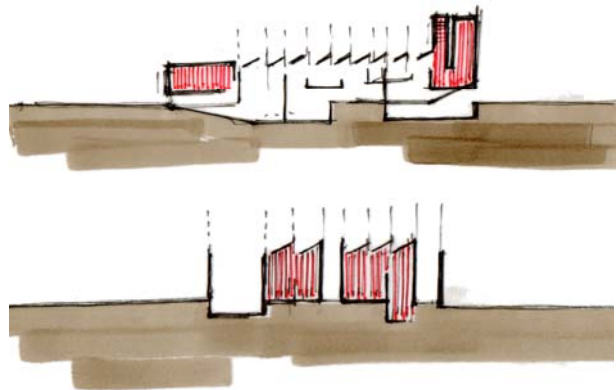

Fig. 7   OTE, recovery strategies: additions, subtractions.

program's diversity and the coexistence between industry and housing" [17]. An ambitious goal that puts the open and public space, as the protagonist of the processes of recovery of dismantled industrial artifacts, the open spaces become a structuring element in the articulation of the built-up environment.

Recovery strategy implemented in 1991 by Yves Lion for the arrangement of Plaine of Saint Denis, a territory of 600 hectares on the outskirts of Paris, an immense industrial extension waiting of reconversion. Yves Lion proposes to divide the available surface into two equal parts: half assigned as public space and half as constructed spaces, imposing a regular grid that organizes the surface. The proposal, controversially, refuses to enforce the grid in the definition of buildings but suggests that it should be precisely the public space to solve the discontinuity of languages (Fig. 8).

In conclusion, returning to the context of the OTE

factory in Bergamo, the creation of a series of transverse passages allows overcoming the tramway, favoring the connection between the two fronts of the system and allowing enjoying continuously different landscapes.

Parallel, to this process, a new identity for the production structure could be determined, which from a place of abandonment becomes a real urban device.

In this sense, the measure and the rhythm of the architectural elements, which define the structure, become central elements to consider in order to study the building. The partial demolition, that create an internal and external condition, respect and follow the trace of the sheds, building a sequence of spaces that may be, in effect, seen as urban squares.

What was before internal to the building becomes a public open or partly covered space, place of dwelling, contrasting the rigid compartmentalized, traditional structure of the industrial spaces. Therefore, it is possible to think that the issue of public space is the key to re-qualify, conferring a clear identity to the open spaces of urban sprawl? And also, "public space is precisely what allows architecture to find meaning?" [17].

6. Shared Public Spaces: Translating Strategies, Dwelling Places

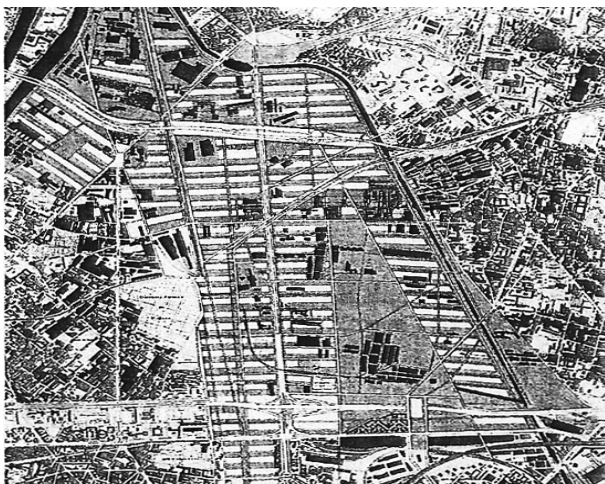"The civil and architectonical richness but also the

Fig. 8   Yves Lion, the masterplan for Plaine of Saint Denis, Paris, 1991.

urban and morphological identity of a city is in its public spaces, related to all the places where daily life takes place, it is represented and remembered. And, perhaps, these are spaces that are, even more, neither public nor private, but both things at once. Public spaces are absorbed by particular uses or private spaces taking collective function" [1].

Today, the divided categories of public and private spaces have gradually dissolved, not being able to precisely define the boundary that separates one condition from the other. The hybridization of public and private character of contemporary sites is one of the possible strategies that can transform these intermediate, and often uncertain places, in nodes of collective life.

The shared places are expressions of the characters of the collectivity that lives in it, the contemporary city must open itself to new semantic construction related to the term public space. This concept is too vague and uncertain to determine the complex layering of uses and characters that shape urban form.

To reestablish public space means, on one hand, to transform open spaces into representative places for the community, in capacitors of symbolic meanings and values, on the other, to work "according to a logic of metamorphosis of the open space" [18], with minimum actions, inserts and stratifications that are able to work on preexisting buildings. The abandoned open spaces, the real places of contemporary experimentation, are considered suspended and incomplete spaces, in particular they become a background against which to arrange individual architectures.
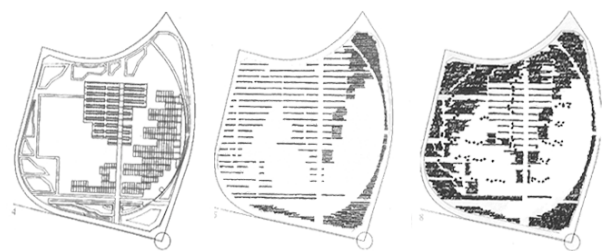
Fig. 9   Michel Desvigne and Christine Dalnoky, redefinition of open spaces of the Thomson's industry in Guyancourt.

The design of open spaces is organized through a strategy for inserts, acting in the spaces between things that becomes the link between constructed spaces and spaces of relationship: foundational element of an idea of connective tissue on which these spaces are based.

In this sense, the project by Desvigne and Dalnoky for the redefinition of outdoor spaces of the Thomson's industry in Guyancourt shows a meticulous attention to the redesign of the layout of open space that continues, ideally, the plot of the industrial structure (Fig. 9). The grid pattern, which draws the external space, allows both to order the structure of the parking lots, both to insert a system of channels used for collection of water to be used to irrigate the vegetation.

Transforming the residual spaces related to the industrial areas in shared public space, open to the city, belongs to the morphological and typological strategy of hybridization described before. It is the industrial fabric itself to define a system of voids, related to the recent disposals, on which the public space project must be able to define questions and provide answers to these problems.

Building the disposal means to change the point of view on the concept of open space, no longer merely urban design element, but the connective tissue can be able to reunify the wounds of contemporary urban structure. Connective tissue, intended as a link between existing buildings, architectural heritage and new buildings, define voids in the urban fabric as a moment of construction of public space (increasingly shared) in the contemporary city.

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