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IDEAS OF CITY AND URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS

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Abstract

In the post-industrial time, the process of transformation and growth of the city assumes new names that are very different from those traditionally taken into account by urban history: terms such as *New Towns*, *mega-cities*, *city/region*, *Global City*, *Hyperville*, *StadtLand*, *Technopolis*, *urban archipelago*, *Urban Islands*, *New Urbanism*, *Smart City* and others, testify to how population displacement caused by de-industrialization and the computerization of communication in everyday life are evident phenomena of a urban and social reality that comes to the fore with the strength of rapid change and powerful, widespread economies of scale. Among the phenomena that in the last twenty years of the 20th Century created a genuine revolution in the urban structures of the world's industrial cities, two should be considered crucial: the gradual closure of many productive activities that occupied large parts of urban territory, linked to the abandonment of various obsolete public infrastructures, and the progressive formation of an extended city spreading out along the major lines of communication, also in areas not physically connected to the traditional urban periphery. Also in Italy, the question of re-using land already built on and abandoned constructions provided the opportunity to reintroduce the three themes of urban and architectural research that were typical of previous decades: the morphology of the compact city, the architectural typology as an element of shared civil rules, the conversion and restoration of existing buildings, which includes the historical *querelle* between *ancient and modern*. At long last, the need for projects to include urban and architectural quality has started to become an objective that is publicly acknowledged, one that is sought after through the medium of public and private design contests.

Keywords: de-industrialization, urban reuse, sprawl, design quality, smart city

Streszczenie

W epoce poprzemysłowej procesowi transformacji i rozwoju miasta nadaje się nowe nazwy, jakże inne od określeń tradycyjnie stosowanych w historii urbanistyki, takie jak *nowe miasta*, *mega-miasta*, *miasto-region*, *miasto globalne*, *hyperville*, *StadtLand*, *technopolis*, *archipelag miejski*, *wyspy miejskie*, *nowy urbanizm*, *miasto inteligentne* itp. Dowodzi to, że przemieszczenia ludności spowodowane de-industrializacją oraz komputeryzacją komunikacji życia codziennego stanowią wyraźne zjawiska w realiach miejskich oraz społecznych, które wysuwają się na pierwszy plan wraz z siłą szybkich przemian oraz powszechnym obniżaniem kosztów jednostkowych dzięki zwiększaniu wielkości produkcji. Dwa spośród zjawisk, które w ciągu ostatnich dwudziestu lat XX wieku wywołały prawdziwą rewolucję w urbanistycznych strukturach przemysłowych miast świata uznać należy za najistotniejsze, a mianowicie: stopniowe zamykanie działalności produkcyjnej, która zajmowała znaczną część terytorium miejskiego, związanej z porzuceniem wielu przestarzałych infrastruktur publicznych, oraz etapowe tworzenie miasta rozrastającego się wzdłuż głównych linii komunikacyjnych, także na terenach niezwiązanych fizycznie z tradycyjnymi peryferiami. Również we Włoszech kwestia ponownego wykorzystania uprzednio zabudowanego terenu oraz porzuconych budowli stworzyła możliwość powtórnego wprowadzenia trzech następujących tematów w ramach badań urbanistyczno-architektonicznych, typowych dla minionych dekad: morfologii miasta zwartej, typologii architektonicznej jako elementu powszechnych zasad obywatelskich, adaptacji i restauracji istniejących budynków, w których toczy się historyczny spór pomiędzy *dawnym* a *nowoczesnym*. Potrzeba wysokiej jakości projektów urbanistycznych i architektonicznych zaczęła nareszcie stanowić publicznie uznany cel, do którego dąży się, organizując konkursy o charakterze publicznym oraz prywatnym.

Słowa kluczowe: deindustrializacja, ponowne wykorzystanie terenów miejskich, eksurbanizacja, jakość projektu, miasto inteligentne

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1. Between the 20th and 21st century: trends in city settlements and urban form

The body of the city is mainly made up of residential buildings. The relationship between the city and residence thus plays a crucial part in the relationship between city and architecture. From this premise arises the need to analyse the urban condition in all its complexity so as to be able to recognize and understand what is happening in the relationship between urban form and housing typologies.

The industrial revolution, from the beginning of the 19th century, had triggered the rapid growth of cities around their historical centre, creating a new urban structure that had been non-existent up to that point: the suburbs (in Italian: *periferia*), in which were placed all the projects and activities that, for various reasons, could no longer remain within the walls of the old city or its surrounding villages: industry, workshops, technical facilities, blue-collar new settlements and upmarket neighbourhoods.

In the post-industrial period, the process of transformation and growth of the city assumes new forms and names that are very different from those traditionally taken into account by urban history: terms such as *New Towns*, *mega-cities*, *city/region*, *Global City*, *Hyperville*, *StadtLand*, *Technopolis*, *urban archipelago*, *Urban Islands*, *New Urbanism*, *Smart City* and others, testify to how population displacement caused by de-industrialization and the computerization of communication in everyday life are evident phenomena of a urban and social reality that comes to the fore with the strength of rapid change and powerful, widespread economies of scale.

New perspectives of interpretation of space in architecture have often been found also in the analysis and research of non-architect scholars, who were perhaps better able to make more direct use of new instruments for urban reading, free from set schemes that can sometimes be *de-forming*¹.

Understanding the variables and the effects of these transformations is a necessary step for today's architects, whose training has usually been based on more formal design principles, such as the *plan/project unit* or the *type/morphology* relationship. It is important to understand the extent to which these views now have to be considered clichés, superseded by new values that are more powerful and up-to-date, like the so called *smart-city* concepts and sustainable needs, or whether they can still be valid strong points in research and design work.

- For example, does public space still have a figurative dimension, or is it now perceived only as a service infrastructure?
- Within the framework of the “ideas of city” to which it refers, are the changes taking place to be considered irreversible phenomena to which we have to adapt our way of life?
- Or is this decomposed vision of the city of the future based on theories that relate to something that in reality has already innately changed the relationship between the city and its territory, between urban form and its inhabitants, between the way the city is used and its transformation over time?
- Does it make sense to refer to the idea of urban form that is part of the collective imagination dating back to the 14th century? Or even that of the 20th century?

¹ For example: W. Mitchell, *La città dei bits*, Milan Electa, 1997; C. Maar, F. Rotzer, *Virtual cities*, Edizioni Birkhauser, Basel, 1997; AA.VV. *Paesaggi ibridi*, edited by M. Zardini, Skirà Editore, Milan 1996.

Despite this, and notwithstanding the great global depression that the Western world has sunk into since 2008, we can see that in fact we are still faced with phenomena that largely match traditional methods of modifying urban space: on one hand, plans for the expansion and consolidation of construction in new suburban areas; on the other, goals of progressive functional urban replacement without any special search for innovative solutions.

2. Urban form and architectural design

Within Europe of the 20th century, perhaps only the Netherlands, Austria and Sweden were able to maintain a clear evolutionary continuity in the planning of their residential urban expansion, which is considered one of the cornerstones of the political economy of national and local governments.

The “systems” on which they have based their policy actions, tested over decades of advanced social democracy, are founded on the participation, direct intervention and control of the residential construction market, of buildable areas and of social and subsidized housing through specific public investment companies.

The town-planning models of reference, although different from country to country, clearly reflect the morphological and typological decisions mostly related with the early ‘900 and Modernist origin (*Siedlungen*), in which the quality of public housing, in terms of facilities and size, is on a par with the private building sector and is also expressed in the search for new typological solutions at affordable costs.

The other recent European experiences of urban regeneration have often been dictated by the need for intervention relative to specific events, such as the various international EXPOs, the major projects of the new Barcelona, the reconstruction of West Berlin (IBA) in the 1980s and of East Germany DDR settlements in the 1990s and 2000s, the recovery of large industrial and disused mining areas in the territories of the Ruhr and the plans to restore large areas of Madrid, Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Lyon, Munich and Milan.

In some of these cases, such as Barcelona, Berlin and Paris, investors were invited to participate directly in a series of planning competitions organized by administrators on both public and private areas, based on a Master Plan. The goal, for which architects competed, was to come up with quality design solutions, and several results were achieved on the basis of a general programme coordinated by an architect of great prestige for the city and for local institutions.

Contemporary architecture has also benefited considerably from this approach, which has paved the way for new, young designers, many of whom are now well established, providing them with genuine and prestigious job opportunities.

Typically these experiences have followed, in different ways, the rules of urban morphology, leaving the ancient traces of the city, reaffirming the urban structure as a matrix of good spatial and housing solutions: this attitude has allowed us to achieve important results that, as a deliberate design decision, did not want to move away from what they recognized as the city’s established values, in the same way that they were recognized and lived on a day-to-day basis by its inhabitants.

In many other cases where town planning and the layout were more flexible, the transformation took place merely in terms of functional replacement, according to economic rules taking into account the nature of the land, beginning with executive town-planning tools that are generally indifferent to the quality of the urban and architectural result.

However, it is not a recent discovery that project sites which apparently don't show strong characters or evident background always still contain vital energies, from which new opportunities can be created for a relationship between the parties and the entire urban structure. The question is, as always, *how* architecture and civil society can be so strong to let come out positive solutions for the city from these deserted *non-places*.

3. The new urban reality: industrial wastelands and urban sprawl

Among the phenomena that in the last twenty years of the 20th century created a genuine revolution in the urban structures of the world's industrial cities, two should be considered crucial: the first is the gradual closure of many productive activities that occupied large parts of urban territory, linked to the abandonment of various obsolete public infrastructures (gasworks, markets, psychiatric hospitals, slaughterhouses and other public services no longer usable in their traditional form) and the progressive formation of an extended city spreading out along the major lines of communication, also in areas not physically connected to the traditional urban periphery.

In this way, the landscape of the new suburbs took on new connotations, in respect to the contrast between the industrial city's centre and its suburbs, as well as to the usual conception of suburban space created by a century and a half of industrial civilization.

And in this way, the very idea of the historic periphery changed and was enhanced by new possibilities, giving the city opportunities of modification and reconstruction that were unthinkable up to the end of the 1970s, but also introducing new landscapes and new issues to deal with.

With the end of the urban factory as a physical presence in the body of the city, the often traumatic exodus of manufacturing activities produced huge voids, *non-places* located both within the first industrial belt and in areas that are today often located in strategic parts of the city, in areas that for centuries were considered places of work and for working people: alongside railway lines or at points of direct access to city centres, at maritime and river port areas, or as part of industrial clusters that were once outside the city, but today are surrounded by the 20th Century urban expansion.

Paradoxically, in many cases the residential areas that had arisen in a more or less planned manner close to large production facilities, have found themselves having to look for a different meaning in the life of the community that had grown up in that place because of the former availability of work: suddenly, in a short period of time, the factory exhausted its role and literally disappeared, leaving behind only dilapidated structures, to be given over to other uses, together with neighbourhoods of unemployed people. And urban (and human) dignity has not always been returned to the areas (and people) that lost their *raison d'être*.

This is why, during the last 20 years, a debate has begun in more European countries about the possibility of replacing entire 20th Century urban districts in order to “heal”, both physically and socially, what economic policy and the market had abandoned. After the II World War the idea of **demolition** has long been a taboo subject, both for the European architectural culture and for European urban policies, Italian ones in particular, stuck for decades at the generic good idea of conservation of city centres but falling back on a messy and intrusive real estate market, both private and public. Demolition is a chance to be considered quite carefully and strictly controlled, but is a possible tool in a qualified urban renovation.

On the other hand, with the hollowing out of urban industrial areas, a powerful centrifugal force has shifted the territorial and settlement equilibrium of European cities in directions that are totally new and alien to the traditional concept of “urban form”, both in the industrial suburbs and along external linear mobility axes.

In this way there took form, or rather *non-form*, a new type of widespread city, made up of *non-places* born more or less by accident and as a result of subsequent functional links (motorways/airports/supermarkets/shopping centres/car parks/storage facilities/services/residences/landfills/incinerators/etc.), whose economic worth today is expressed as a negative value often evident in the built-up environment, made up of various mundane fragments, that is difficult to interpret if not looking at it in a possible new way.

The models to which modern urban studies and town planning in the ‘60s and ‘70s gave birth do not seem adequate any more to the programming of a reality that quickly mixes new and different settlement trends, continuously modified and superseded by new living and working habits, by temporary hubs of activities, services, infrastructures and overlapping and interconnected public and private transport systems.

With this great readiness to transform, the sense of dematerialization of urban construction (and consequently of its architecture) – certainly more evident in the new *urban sprawl* and alongside high volume road traffic systems – is now becoming crucial also in urban centres and in large areas abandoned by industry and by public institutions.

This is happening for two main reasons: on one hand, architecture has unfortunately accepted its increasing isolation in the production of stand-alone architectural projects, also important ones, but which seem to live only as a reflection of the major changes currently taking place in urban areas, suffering all of the consequences of this separation from the real city life.

On the other hand, on many occasions when former industrial or service sites were to be redesigned, preference was also given, on purely economic grounds, to demolishing without any distinction all buildings that could easily have been reused and which were part of that still liveable *forma urbis* that we know and appreciate; in their place, we had to accept any generic substitution so long as building standards and volumes were respected, usually already set up *ad hoc* to satisfy the property market.

While it is fair to say that cities can no longer be studied in the same way that they were in Europe up to the 1980s, we may need to ask ourselves whether, in some cases, these analyses, even if based on the interpretation of the new metropolitan condition, do not at times tend to stretch reality (as in the case of certain special types of new “nomadic” type of citizen) as did, in various ways, many abstractions of avant-garde modern urban planners and of ideological utopias applied to cities and architecture throughout the 20th century.

In any case, we still need to consider that the widespread phenomena of de-structuring of the urban landscape described by scholars of the contemporary city are not necessarily visible everywhere: a large part of medium-sized cities and small towns, especially in Europe, are not experiencing so directly this condition of “acceleration” of urban rhythms, or perhaps they are living “two different temporal and spatial dimensions at the same time: metropolitan integration and localism. The same person can live within a system of relationships that extends in some cases to the global city and, at the same time, to a friendly society in which neighbourliness, acquaintanceship and solidarity prevail; within the ever faster speed of the first system of relationships and the slow speed of the second one; using the most sophisticated means of communication that characterize the first and the simpler, traditional techniques of the second; with the imagination and innovation of the former and the inertia and habits of the latter”².

4. Urban mutations versus housing typology

“Fast speed” and “slow speed” systems, on parallel tracks that intersect only when necessary. And in spite of everything, with regard to residence, the concept expressed in the etymology of the Latin word *habitare* (meaning *dwelling*, but also *being*) still applies for the majority of the population at a “slow speed”, similar to the deep sense that comes from a derivative of *habitus*, understood as a way of being, usual disposition, attitude and insistence on something vague and precise at the same time, which is home life, wherever it be found, in the city of certainty or in that of scattered fragments. Which explains the reasons for the permanence and slowness of the typology (and of the inhabitants) to accept new solutions and variables, despite everything changing much faster around them.

In this way, “type” and “etymon” have the same basis, solid and fertile at the same time, able to create many different variations, nuances, refinements of meaning, but nonetheless able to evolve its own deep meaning towards new possibilities and new morphological identities, with no regrets, because consequential and based on a root which is that of urban life and its developmental changes.

It is clear that the residential function has played an important role from the point of view of the construction and modification of urban *non-space*: cumbersome but necessary, but often expression of pure speculative attitudes of land property, housing have continued to be built mostly using traditional methods and forms, usually borrowed from a bad kind of “modern recovery” repertoire, for which the standard derogatory expression of “residential connective” is often correct, as if to express the sense of mere occupation of areas interposed between urban facts considered structurally more important.

If anything, the problem (again) arises from “how” to work without adopting attitudes that end up by not giving concrete qualitative results to urban life and design work, revealing themselves to be sterile (as in a certain uncritical, aestheticising and egoistic acceptance of expansion without urban rules, as it is sometimes theorized by some important contemporary architects) when faced with the real need for transformation of the built-up environment and of those who actually have to live in the city and in these settlements.

² B. Secchi, *La città*, Casabella no. 601, May 1993.

For example, in Italy, still in the 90s and up to the present day, “residential zoning” has continued to be implemented through zonal or recovery housing development plans (by public or private initiative) in accordance with the generic guidelines of local executive town plans. This approach did not have a decisive impact in terms of controlling and coordinating the development of the territory, though urban planning rules were asking standards of facilities and public functions, because property developers did not have to follow precise instructions of a morphological and architectural nature, only having to comply with generic standards as regards size and to pay taxes on the generic urbanization of the buildable areas, instead of having to submit to evaluations and decisions as regards architecture quality and improvement of urban facilities for the residents.

As far as urban housing is concerned, the absence of any real debate on “evolutionary” planning for the housing and the transformation of parts of the city aimed at new housing (such as what had happened in the past, for better or for worse, within the CIAMs) often tended to result in even good projects remaining isolated episodes, individual experiments, without becoming a reference point for more widespread use.

In fact, the Italian Faculties of Architecture have continued to produce research and projects regarding the new city, but a lack of communication between the academic world and the economic/political reality has failed to encourage the transfer of urban planning and design methods and experiments from theory into practice.

5. Italian architecture experiences for urban renewal

The city is one of the greatest inventions of humanity and architecture is its instrument to communicate different periods of continuity and discontinuity, of revolution and involution of this great ancient experience. It is still very obvious that European cities in the last 20 years have seen the growth and consolidation of situations of highly dynamic urban transformation, in which high priority was given to the question of converting abandoned urban areas and redeveloping public and private buildings that were no longer of use.

From the early years of the 21st century, also in Italy, the question of re-using land that had already been built on and constructions that had been abandoned provided a real opportunity to reintroduce the three themes of urban and architectural research that were typical of previous decades: the morphology of the compact city, the architectural typology as an element of shared civil rules, the conversion and restoration of existing buildings, which includes the historical *querelle* between *ancient and modern*.

In an effort to combat the increasingly low level of professionalism subservient to building speculation, the aim of those research and planning projects – expressed since the mid-’60s by a generation of architects and scholars who worked and taught in universities and polytechnics – was to demonstrate that the idea of the **compact city** recognizable in its shape (and in its complexity) was an important resource to be preserved and supported, thanks to the redesign and qualitative improvement of its parts involved in an ongoing process of transformation³.

³ The generation of Robert Venturi, Aldo Rossi, J. Paul Kleihues, O. Matthias Ungers, Hans Hollein, Rob Krier, Giorgio Grassi, John Heiduck, Colin Rowe, Peter Eisenmann, and more recently Rem

Even if urban sprawl and the consumption of land have not been interrupted, shifting towards small and medium-sized towns and along infrastructural axes of mobility, the real development of large and medium-sized areas has helped to transform in a positive way the first and second tier outskirts of our cities, in both physical and social terms, aesthetic and economic, over time occupying areas where abandonment and degradation were about to get the upper hand.

At the same time, faced with the weighty phenomena of progressive de-industrialization, regional town-planning legislation has had to adapt to new needs and find more flexible and faster regulatory tools than the ones used traditionally for the control and approval of recovery plans.

Traditional methodological tools of analytical, interpretive and planning development of urban research have also drawn upon the new disciplines of communication, urban marketing, innovative and environmental technologies, providing a new, positive and updated field of development for the transformation of built-up areas.

6. The need for quality in the rehabilitation of city landscape

At long last, the need for projects to include urban and architectural quality has started to become an objective that is publicly acknowledged, one that is sought after through the medium of public and private design contests; and the concept of quality has entered into the system of cultural and economic rules and policies of government administration and of businesses in the real estate and construction industry, to an extent that never happened before.

Italian urban regeneration has produced a new quality in public and private interventions, also thanks to new regional rules that have enabled the city to regain areas of public use, urban green spaces and neighbourhood services between the planning of private urban transformations, achieving ambitious levels of value that the traditional urban periphery never had in the past. We present hereby just a few examples of Italian urban redevelopment projects, which show a strong effort of our architects in facing rehabilitation of our abandoned industrial urban sites.

In this evolutionary process, value has finally been given to the business of recovery and restoration of industrial or public buildings no longer in use, avoiding the demolition of structures that, despite their simplicity, were part of the fabric of the city.

And this has often been the case regardless of their specific historical or monumental importance: restoration has not only remained more conservative, but has started to include and accept methodologies and techniques in which contemporary architecture can coexist with the “monumentality” of history, in an intelligent relationship of mutual respect and integration.

So abandoned buildings, both large and small, are being transformed from a sterile and romantic condition of *industrial archaeology* into structures ready for a new life and a future involving a new purpose, from historical memory to a new working citizenship,

Koolhaas and many others architects re-built the idea of architecture discipline together with the concept of social and creative value of the urban experience.

in which historical and urban identity strengthens the character of the interventions and raises the quality of planning and design.

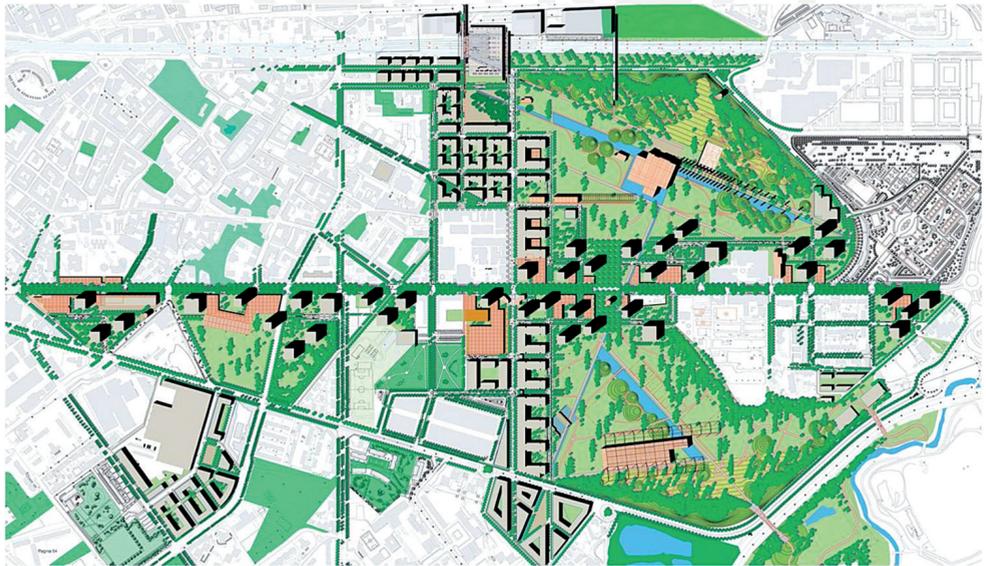
The reuse of built-up areas and their visible redevelopment, has become a public phenomenon that has aroused the attention of media and citizens on the topic of cities transformation and architecture issues, after decades of silence and disinterest. In a country with a high population density such as Italy, the question of the new urban landscape has helped to change the relationship between citizens and buildings, between people and architecture of the city as a collective matter and not just as a private or exclusive one.

Despite the complete lack of national policy identity, the past 20 years in Italy have seen considerable growth in new integrated design and planning skills and in professionalism which, at different levels and dimensions, are operating on the Italian urban structure with transformations in which the perennial theme of the relationship with pre-existing architecture and urban environment translates into a wide range of choices and opportunities, but whose common goal is architectural quality and professional dignity.

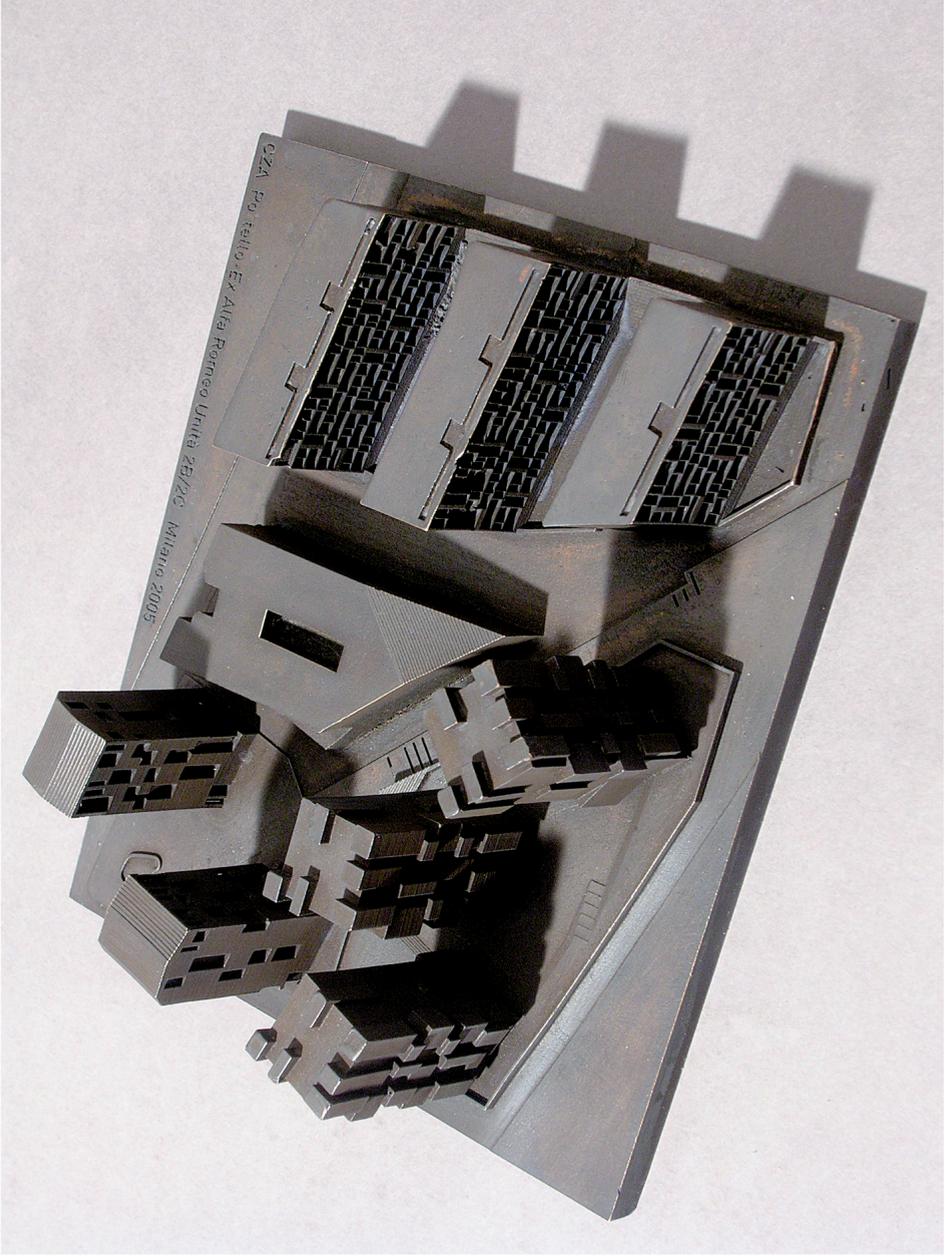
And even though the difficult economical situation of this period, a whole generation of architects and town planners is inspired by this premise of disciplinary complementarity and methodological synergy to deal with times and conditions that are new and extremely difficult, and that no longer allow errors of evaluation or waste of public and private resources.

The result will be a civil and better architecture and city for everyone, for a more informed, civilized, far-sighted and participatory citizenship. It's at the end an optimistic point of view, quite necessary in a time in which the *inessential* continue to be permanently celebrated day-to-day. But since the overcome of the global financial crisis, the time of reflection has come, with the great economic depression and stagflation which cancelled as a *zunami* many of the most relevant symbols of the financial liberism and speculative attitudes⁴. And perhaps it is also the positive reaction of a contemporary architecture that, working towards sustainable design and smart city concepts, is more dignified and civil in its constant and pragmatic day-to-day work than that declaimed all too frequently by the vain and arrogant images proposed by a world-wide media architectural *star system*, backed by many investors and politicians, indifferent to any kind of cultural and urban identity, which for us are anyway and still the core of every present and future good architecture.

⁴ We live the contradictive condition of a social-economic system in which the people who until 5 years ago were fun of the pure liberistic market, considered the Mast of every progressive development, is now asking to the Civil Society, as a democratic and equalitarian system, to save them from bankrupt after years of speculative and greedy use of financial instruments based on the liberistic market itself.

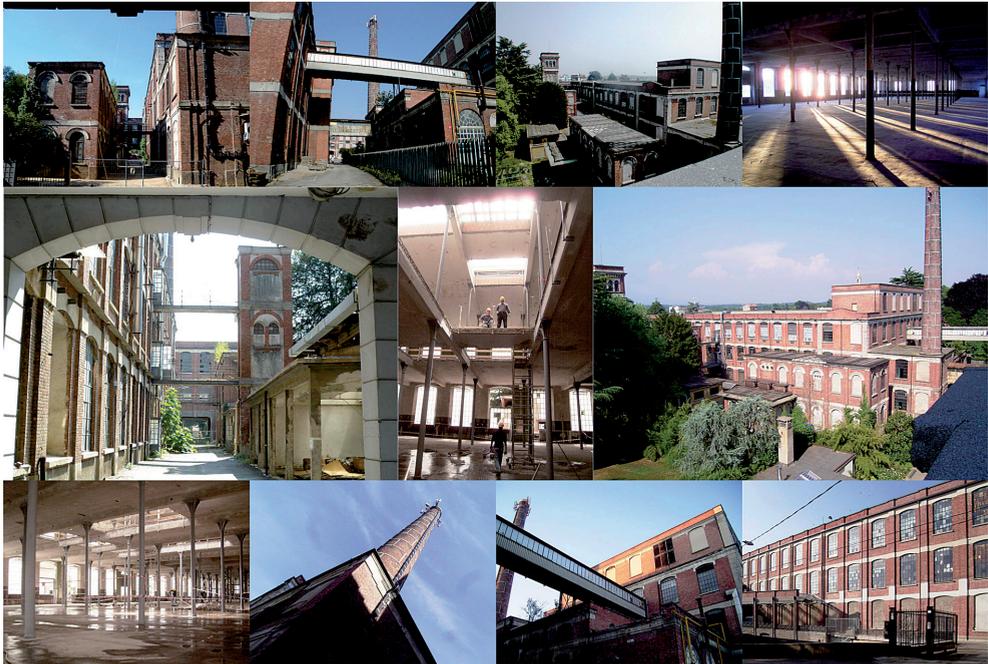


III. 1. Redevelopment of the former steel Falk factories, Sesto San Giovanni (Milan), RPB_Renzo Piano Building Workshop

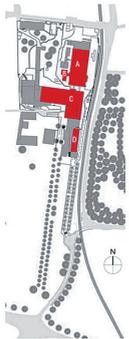


Ill. 2. Redevelopment of the former Alfa Romeo factory, Milan Portello, Cino Zucchi, CZA Zucchi Associati

a)



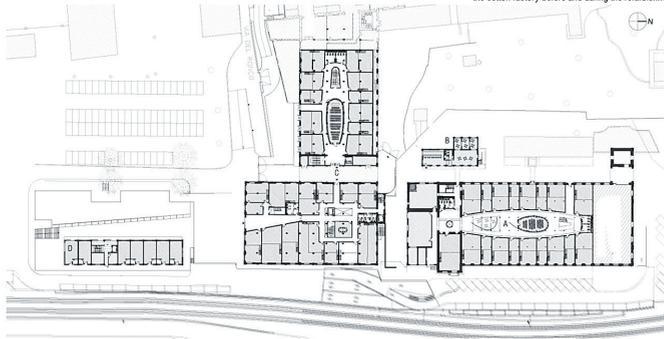
the cotton factory before and during the refurbishment



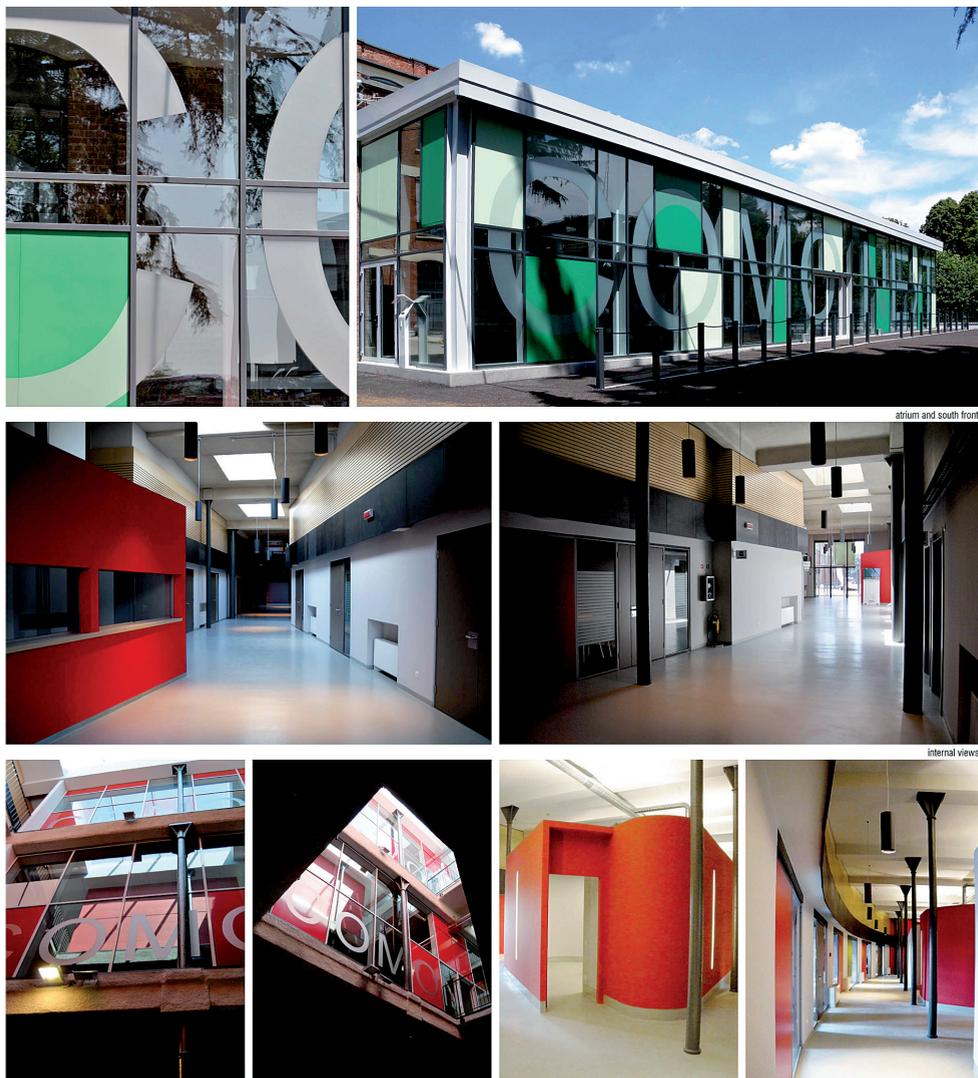
- A - edificio norte
- B - novo refetorio
- C - edificio sul
- D - incubadora das empresas

Ex Somaini Fabbrica de Algodão
 Novo Parque Científico Tecnológico
 Lomazzo, Como, 2006 - 2010
 Ado Franchini, ADM Architettura

masterplan and general ground level of the technology park



b)



III. 3a), b) Redevelopment of the former Cotton Factory Somaini, Lomazzo-Como, Ado Franchini, ADM Architettura

