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Disused Sites in the Re-composition of the Urban Puzzle

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The main value that is assigned to a piece of a puzzle does not rest in its shape (even if it is perfect and flawless), but in the complementarity with which the shape of the single piece is able to connect to the other elements in order to generate an overall design, i.e. the puzzle. «[...] the element's existence does not precede the existence of the whole [...] for the parts do not determine the pattern, but the pattern determines the parts [...]» (Perec, 1978; preamble).

The validity of an urban renewal plan (the single piece of the puzzle) is confirmed not only by the quality of the intervention itself, but by its ability to relate to other parts of the city and its potential to generate a new urban equilibrium (the design of the puzzle). With reference to the urban context of the post-industrial city, this paper aims to analyze the problem of urban redevelopment in disused sites. Bearing in mind that these areas have represented and continue to represent a strategic element in the development process for the entire city as well as the territory.

Introduction

The theme of disused sites encompasses the central issues of the debate and the research on the contemporary city (Russo, 1998); the aspects and implications that flow into the dynamics of change in the existing urban areas lead to reflections that affect the overall orientation towards which the development of the European city seems to be directed as a whole. By the numerous studies conducted on the subject and the attestations of urban practices (that widen the scope of surveys and case studies) it is revealed that from the since end of the seventies, the abandoned areas (in particularly industrial areas) and the processes of urban transformation have assumed increasing importance in attributing new forms and new features to the city. In the Italian panorama (among others), the process of physical, functional and symbolic conversion of unused production facilities bears witness to two crucial steps that occurred in the last century. Within the socio-historical context, it marked the transition from an era of increasing industrialization to a post-industrial period.

Within the urban context, the major interest placed in redevelopment projects for disused sites represented trend change: a weakening of urban expansion that led the city to occupy increasingly larger portions of free spaces, in favour of urban development aimed at the reclamation of the already urbanized space.

The variety of the different points of analysis and interpretation of the subject, given the implications that were briefly indicated, are difficult to discuss in a short article. The aim is therefore to extrapolate one aspect from a wider reflection. Among the most important elements in the processes and plans of urban renewal, we attempt to highlight - through an open perspective and not a punctual - the integration of disused sites and the project with the other parts of the city. how abandoned areas can be a range of applications in order to achieve the programmatic of goals can be achieve by the use of the abandoned areas , but only if they are treated and considered in their entirety.

Disused sites and land consumption

In the current economic and cultural contingency where it's requires appropriate action to ensure good governance of the territory, one can note a change in the approach related to the issue of urban reutilization and urban development. In the past, the availability of sites in a state of abandon , given their strategic position and the presence of infrastructures, led the city to develop within its own borders. Therefore the process of urban development have been addressed in the urbanized areas at the expense of new under-developed sites; the resulting consequence was a decrease in the urban sprawl. More recently, the diffusion of environmental and ecological awareness has determined a change of approach for the development of the city: since the territory is now considered a limited resource, the city tries to renew itself without using additional portions of territory. With the aim of preserving a precarious environmental and territorial equilibrium, the city, not being able to further expand, invests more resources in the restructuring of urban areas in a state of decay, which, however, preserve a high degree of economic attractiveness and real estate. To summary, while the reduction of land consumption could be initially considered an outcome of practices which stem from the opportunity to utilize disused sites, today it is clearly placed between the main objectives to be achieved through urban renewal projects at the various levels of local and supra-local government. The contrast to the land consumption is become a goal of urban policy, it is not only a outcome.

Today, the issues of environmental sustainability have become very important. In fact, the national and regional governments have put between their goals the fulfilment of sustainable development. As part of the government of the territory, the principles of sustainable development are translated as sustainability of living a place without increasing the amount of land occupied by buildings, with the understanding that the construction of artificial structures and buildings are difficult process to reverse. This principals are expressed in some recent laws at the regional and national level:



- The Regional Law of Lombardy Lr. No. 4/2012 «Norme per la valorizzazione del patrimonio edilizio esistente e altre disposizioni in materia urbanistico-edilizia»¹ (based on the principles of environmental sustainability), together with the PTR (Regional Plan) and the census of disused areas.
- The fundamental law of the Tuscany region Lr. No. 1/ 2005. The law, limiting the urbanization of land if it is not properly justified, implicitly it calls on cities to identify areas of development within their borders. Following this guide lines the regional government issued the Regional Law Lr. No. 214/ 2011«Disposizioni urgenti per la crescita, l'equità e il consolidamento dei conti pubblici»², in which procedures are more simplified for the redevelopment of disused sites owned by local authorities.
- The draft law (Ddl) on promotion of agricultural areas and containment of land consumption presented by the Ministry of Agriculture in July 2012. The Ddl is considered to be limited (as it intervenes only on agricultural land) and does not fully resolve the problem. But it was first interpreted by the real estate market as an invitation to direct future investment towards recovery and reutilization of existing assets also in relation to incentives for building renovation.

Some urban plans are added to the regulatory initiatives, this plans aim to contrast the land consumption. An example is the Structural Plan of Florence in 2010. With the slogan “zero volume”³, the Plan's objective is the physical, environmental, social and economic regeneration:

«Il principio fondante il Piano Strutturale è quello di affidare la trasformazione della città al solo recupero di aree già urbanizzate attraverso interventi di sostituzione edilizia e di ristrutturazione urbanistica tesi a recuperare diffusamente qualità urbana ed ambientale [...]»⁴ (Structural Plan of Florence 2010; Art.1)

Regulatory examples underline the direct relational equation that associates the fight for the land consumption with urban renewal. It can be said, therefore, that urban development has become one of the main references to the reduction of land consumption through better optimization of the use (through reuse) of urbanized areas, especially of buildings and disused or unused sites.

The fragmentation of the “occasional city”

The contemporary city, as a complex layering of actions and tangible assets in perpetual “becoming”, is given a vocation aimed at driving continuous change. This prerogative is essential to meeting the contextual needs and requests of supranational level. The change is implemented through works of urban transformation that impact large areas of the compact city. These actions, resulting in a veritable rewriting of the place, are changes in physical appearance and morphology accompanied by the assignment of a renewed function of both the intended of the building and the usability of open spaces. Individual projects, spatially limited in their geographical location, are interpreted as urban synecdoche: the transformation of significant parts of the city leads to substantial change in the entire urban structure (a part for the whole). The change, therefore, attributable to a given place, becomes important as a change in reference to its relationship to spaces beyond those that are closest to it. In reading the evolution of a place, therefore, it is essential to broaden the horizon of views and to focus the eyes on the relational dynamics that construct the whole and better define the scope of these transformational works in both functional and physical terms, and in terms of the meaning induced.

1 «Rules for the enhancement of existing buildings and other provisions on planning and building». (translation by author).

2 «Urgent measures for growth, equity and fiscal consolidation». (translation by author).

3 In fact, according to the sizing estimate of the plan, it would be more correct to speak, as affirmed by Professor. M. Massa in an interview in 2011 to the Journal of Architecture, of a plan to “reduce use of land”.

4 «The basic principle of the Structure Plan is to entrust the transformation of the city only to recovery of already-urbanized areas through interventions of building replacement and urban restructuring designed to recover widespread urban and environmental quality [...]». (translation by author).

«[...] knowledge of the pattern and of its laws, of the set and of its structure, could not possibly be derived from discrete knowledge of the elements that compose it. [...] The pieces are readable, take on a sense, only when assembled; in isolation, a puzzle piece means nothing – just an impossible question, an opaque challenge». (Perec, 1978; preamble)

According to this perspective, Georges Perec's metaphor of the puzzle is useful if applied to urban analysis when the goal is to simply and effectively explain the complexity of an object, a complexity that lays in relationships and in the complementarity of the parts of the object rather than the individual parts out of context.

From this type of reasoning one cannot escape the analysis of disused sites or sites in a state of decay, which present themselves as empty blocks located within a urban fabric. These areas are the subject of urban renewal projects aimed at activating regeneration processes; the processes are not limited to intervening on the project area; but the project present itself as opportunities to redesign new spatial hierarchies and to delineate future functional equilibrium. However, when following extemporaneous and contingent logics, the new scenarios often tend to lose that integrated and multi-layered vision aimed towards the urban system as a whole; a vision that, in focusing on the composition at an architectural scale or on the relations of spatial contiguities, takes a reflective view at the effects of the project in terms of functional relationships, the demand for infrastructure services, land use, and mobility flows.

The inevitable repercussion that the transformation operations create is due to a consequential dynamism inherent in the process of change. The problem is not so trivial as to affirm that "change creates change". But rather to attempt to acquire a structured awareness of the relational mechanisms of reverberation that lead to a change of balance in the development of the city. The real challenge is to be able to guide and govern the outcomes of this development "part by part", directing the projects, from as early as the conceptualization phase, to the main planning objectives of public interest (to know, to understand, to guide and to intervene).

In fact, the real risk, in reference to the processes of transformation of disused sites, is that which is explained by Francesco Indovina. which gives the city a kind of occasional nature. Such criticism is readable in the processes that have characterized the modernization of most Italian cities.

«La città diventa una polarità forte di occasioni economiche-edilizie, essa stessa prodotta di occasioni. Nessun disegno complessivo regge più se la determinante decisiva è l'occasione. Possiamo parlare di città occasionale nel doppio significato di terreno di occasioni e di città che si sviluppa in modo occasionale»⁵ (Indovina, 1993; p.24)

The opportunities of unused urban complexes is configured as a area of interest that involves several sectors and multiple instances. Physical and functional reorganization opportunity of the city induces prospects for economic and social improvement, but this improvement is contrasted by specific interests of an exclusively financial nature. In light of the economic situation of repeated difficulties for local authorities (which play both a technical and political role in promoting of collective requests) the social aspects assume a minor weight in comparison to the financial appeal. The operations of urban restructuring commonly tend to oppose the public interest to that of the private sector. The first is a bearer of prerogatives and collective benefits such as urban, social and environmental regeneration in the given urban context; while the second is the bearer of initiatives that are aimed at the economic promotion of the investment strictly from a real estate standpoint. In reality, the difficulty in finding finances for public works leads these public authorities to accept project proposals, because private initiative is the only means available to intervene in the urban areas: the public reduces the urbanization cost to the private, which realizes also the works of public inte-

5 «The city becomes a strong polarity of economic-construction opportunities, in itself a product of opportunities. No overall design can hold its own if the guiding element is the occasion. We can talk about occasional city with the double meaning: meaning: land of opportunities and city that evolves on an occasional basis». (translation by author).



rest. Thus, also for public bodies, the execution of a project is carried out with the purpose (not so veiled) of optimize economically the operation; the project becomes the instrument in order to gain immediately spendable funds for both the construction of public services and for current expenditures. The elements of the planning process, then, are reversed, for which the means become the end. In the framework described, the vision of the whole is weakened a recurring. The design of the city resulting from the dialectical relationship and the structural integration of parts, is supplanted by a casual development, which makes the city a multifaceted set of individual projects without a plot and a common direction.

It should be noted that both the assessment of economic feasibility and the cooperation between public and private are not elements under discussion. In some cases, the convergence of purpose between market needs and public initiative has led to put in practice cooperative models of efficient and effective proven; but, in general terms, the good practices of cooperative and negotiated planning didn't show a formula to resolve the situation of occasional and disconnected city:

«L'intenzione di saldare mercato e politica [...] ha reso sempre più chiaro il futuro possibile della trasformazione della città, dove molti attori sono soggetti potenzialmente capaci di promuovere e realizzare interventi; ma ha evidenziato anche che la debolezza delle procedure d'inquadramento degli interventi rischia di ridurre un disegno unitario ad una serie di modificazioni frammentarie». ⁶ (Russo, 1998 p. 33)

In the context of this scenario, the current economic crisis seems to further reinforce extemporary dynamics of urban transformation. It also seems to undermine the operative action of technical structures responsible for the management of urban planning instruments⁷ which represent the principal means to guide the development of the city in a unified and homogeneous view. Similarly, the crisis has also led to a rethinking of the course taken by private actors which aren't longer willing to invest for urban without sure guarantees of entrepreneurial profit margin as in the past, especially for large projects understood in terms of both quantity and volume and in terms of financial investment. By way of illustration it is interesting to reflect on the case of the City Life in Milan, one of the urban transformation works in place which is among the most important and debated at the Italian national level (for the amount of investments allocated and the urban and architectural project, it is the object of both appreciation and criticism). For the project of this area, which previously housed the fairgrounds of the city and will now become an area which is mainly residential, the consortium of investors presented the request to the municipality to get back EUR 12 million related to urbanization costs already paid for the downsizing of the project⁸. The housing and construction market has been declining from the past five years (given the stagnant population growth); the public finance has few resources to spend on urban projects. The effects of the crisis have implications for both the public and the private sectors, who are forced to rethink new models of development. So, paradoxically, the current phase of uncertainty gives the city an opportunity of a new change, in which the public can acquire a greater decision-making power to face the urban in a unitary vision. Among the hypotheses most fascinating, there is to conceive the city as an object in continuous and cyclical mutation focused on the concept of recycling of the city: «Non si tratta solo, come recitava uno slogan di alcuni anni fa, di costruire la città sulla città esistente, ma di una posizione di riuso radicale che può essere definita in estrema sintesi :

6 «The intention to fuse market and policy [...] has made the possible future transformation of the city increasingly clear, where many actors may be able to promote and implement interventions, but it has also highlighted that the weakness of framing procedures of the interventions risks reducing a single design into a series of piecemeal changes». (translation by author).

7 The difficulty for local authorities in raising funds to draw up plans (using external expertise) and the role that the government of the territory and planners can play in times of economic distress are central themes of conferences, seminars and debates; often the titles of public conferences use a standard and similar formula: the specific theme of conference and the following wording: "... in times of crisis".

8 The news is reported in a short blurb in the newspaper "Il Sole 24 Ore" dated September 10, 2012 and entitled "The urban safe is empty. Less works, fees to return".

100% recycle»⁹ (Viganò, 2011; p.112). That is why we are already moving some urban policies that frame the action on disused sites within a single view on a regional scale.

In perspective: disused sites as a potential application field of urban policies

If the role assumed by the abandoned areas on a regional scale appears to be more clearly defined, less clear-cut is the setup and management of these areas, with a view of the whole city as events whose sum can define and guide urban development. If the inclination to consider disused sites as an overall unit is clear in pursuing the goal of reducing the consumption of land, less obvious is the awareness of treating these areas as a field implementation of urban policies. In this sense, it may be effective to revisit some of the proposals of the past, among them the master plan of the industrial areas of Florence, written in 1996, in draft form, by Leonardo Benevolo. The guide was designed to provide appropriate support to the main areas of urban transformation: a document of coordination, integrated to the planning regulations of the PRG (Town Plan), with the aim of delineating homogeneous processes of relocation of production activity and conversion of disused sites.

The awareness of treating disused sites not as isolated, occasional realities but as individual pieces of a common design may prefigure new perspectives for intervention in the cities founded on the practice of reuse and recycling:

«La pratica del riciclo degli spazi e dei tessuti urbani è necessariamente contestuale e adattiva. [...] Ogni luogo e ogni caso prevedono un progetto diverso. Si potrebbe parlare di diverse tattiche [...] che rispondono a una sola, strategia di intervento. The practice of recycling of spaces and urban fabrics is necessarily contextual and adaptive. [...] Every place and every case involves a different project. We could talk about different tactics [...] that respond to a single intervention strategy.»¹⁰ (Ricci, 2011; p. 73)

Therefore, the projects in these areas may constitute the backbone for the future development of the city and for the achievement of the main urban policy objectives, understood as a «insieme delle attività pubbliche che riguardano le trasformazioni (fisiche) del territorio, operate da soggetti sia pubblici che privati in un ottica di coordinamento, in un contesto di pianificazione locale».¹¹ (Crosta, 1990; p. 254)

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9 «It is not only, as reciting a slogan of some years ago, to build the city on the existing city, but a position of radical re-use which can be defined in a nutshell: 100% recycle». (translation by author).

10«The practice of recycling of spaces and urban fabrics is necessarily contextual and adaptive. [...] Every place and every case involves a different project. We could talk about different tactics [...] that respond to a single intervention strategy». (translation by author).

11«set of public activities that relate to the transformations of the area, operated by both public and private in a perspective of co-ordination, in the context of local planning». (translation by author).

