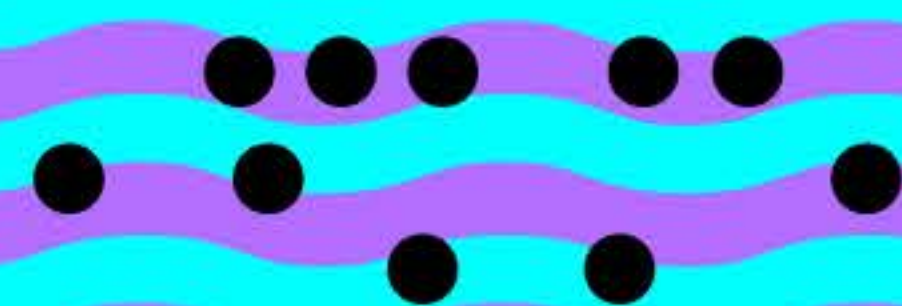


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Pad © ISSN 1972-7887

Numero 13, Dicembre 2016

Publisher

LetteraVentidue Edizioni S.r.l.

Corso Umberto I, 106

96100 Siracusa - Italy

+39.0931.090950

info@letteraventidue.com

www.letteraventidue.com

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THEORIES AND PRACTICES

Social oriented design for disused buildings. The case study of *MR*

by Marco Borsotti and Sonia Pistidda

METADESCRIPTION

The Magazzini Raccordati of Central Station in Milan. Experimenting methodological/operational platforms to define social innovation strategies to reactivate disused buildings.

KEYWORDS

reuse, interior, social innovation, place identity, Milan

ABSTRACT

The MR (Magazzini Raccordati) complex of Milan Central station represents one of the most impressive landmarks in Milan: it is extended for over one kilometre along two sides facing the street, rhythmmed by more than one hundred of storages. Such system, left in a persisting state of abandonment, has a negative influence over the contextual urban fabric. An intense design studio activity has been carried on at Politecnico di Milano over the presented case study, taking it as an opportunity to develop a methodology to approach design for built heritage with innovative architectural and socio-economic models through participated processes and social aggregation mix.

1. Introduction

The research investigates the possibility to develop a theoretical basis that, by joining teaching and multidisciplinary research experiences, could define methodological and operative platform. It aims to define new applicative architectural models, able to regenerate abandoned buildings set in urban and extra-urban areas, together with alternative socio-economic models for the reactivation of services supply through participated processes and social aggregation mix.

This is the assumption set at the basis of the theoretical-design-systemic approach adopted by the authors as coordinators of the *Interior Design and Preservation of existing built Studio* and the Graduation Studio *RMR/ Redesign Magazzini Raccordati*, part of the Master of Science in Architecture of Politecnico di Milano, (School of Architecture, Urban Planning, Construction Engineering, former School of Civil Architecture).

A theoretical framework: designing for the existing built

The huge unused heritage in our city represents nowadays a *potential* resource: specific reactivation strategies can act as a trigger for new relational systems.

The model of *design for built heritage* is a tool able to revitalize and make newly available an urban built complex, by respecting its origins and the potentialities offered through its renewed placement in the daily-use circuit, through the creation of innovative use-models.

Within a systemic design, the abovementioned strategical points set in the territorial reality have to be interpreted in the issues related to their present role in social and urban dynamics. Thus, from this analysis, resources and potentialities

useful to trigger regeneration processes have to be extracted (Trocchianesi, 2014).

A design idea as *possibility* that rises from the shaping identity deriving from the past, recognizing places and appropriating them again in order to develop innovative interpretations codes and to communicate them. This kind of project vision wants to reveal the elements of the urban context to transform them in topic for the design.

In this way the design can represent the link between the project culture and the practice of intervention, trying to develop scenarios through on field research.

Some of the teaching activities were carried out *on site* also, leading students in very closely contact with the tangible realities and different stakeholders.

Working with complexity: a multidisciplinary approach

The urban context is the result of a complex stratification process where the different ways of living have left permanent signs on the territory: every sign points to a multitude of meanings (Thackara, 2005).

Starting from the assumption that the city is at the same time *past*, *present* and *future*, it follows that the project for the existing city is contained in the city itself. Permanence and change, preservation and transformation are components related and essential. According to this reading, the first approach to the complexity is the recognition of tracks of the transformation processes. This interpretation allows us to transform the recognition process in a respectful project of the natural vocation of the city (Morin, 2007).

Once recognized the marks, the second step consists of the establishment of a *care process* of the diversified aspects contained in the city. This also involves the promotion of a *cul-*

ture of care, that directly involves the users in the preservation process (Emery, 2008).

Specifically, multidisciplinary and participated design experiences have been developed, aimed to re-admit one of the most relevant architectural elements of Milan –from the historical and territorial point of view – in the urban vital cycle: the embankment railway complex of the Central station, of which the *MR*, set along Ferrante Aporti and Sammartini streets, are the characterizing element (Finazzer Flory, 2005).

The *Magazzini* form a system of over 100 storage areas spread along over a kilometre on each side of the massive embankment. Organized in two rectangular-plan typologies, vaulted and with a unique entrance facing the streets, the storerooms have approximately 300 square meters in area each, and are since decades almost totally abandoned (Angeleri, & Columba, 1985).

That being so, the entire complex is facing a progressive deterioration, which condition has consequences over its contextual area (few months ago was completed a superficial cleaning of facades).

The abandonment of *MR*, once location of commercial activities, returns in the perception of the massive railway embankment as urban limit, an unsurmountable barrier set as caesura of the urban areas facing its two sides. Furthermore, the *MR* represent a daily proof of a paradoxical situation: the storages are the demonstration of an exceptional surface availability already built, but unused. Thus, they are a neglected resource to the community.

MR are property of Ferrovie dello Stato, who gave the rights of use to Grandi Stazioni SPA. They represent an exceptional opportunity to experiment alternative methods of governance, where the interaction between public and pri-

vate stakeholders based on wide and *bottom up* practices could lead to the development of proactive models of reuse of existing buildings, sustainable on the economic and social sides.

Thus, such approach could develop a design path that would have a significant involving impact in the territory, enhancing *place identity*, as an alternative to the plans prospected until nowadays by the ownership. The tenure has recently presented a program of interventions focussed on a general masterplan, which bolt divides the area in six destination of use (*food & market, media & service, entertainment & clubs, fitness & sport, retail & fashion, art & design, culture & education*), giving the management and investments to private capitals. That being so, the presented project seems not to have vocational correlations to the historical situation of the area.

The examination of case studies abroad has allowed to build a basis of experiences, in order to define a really sustainable proposal. We are referring to project such as *London Bridge Station* in London (Team London Bridge, 2017-2018); the *High Line* in New York (James Corner Field Operations, Diller Scofidio + Renfro, 2002-2011) (David, & Hammond, 2016) the *Viaduct in Zurich* (EM2NO, Architekten AG, 2004-2010); the *Viaduc des Arts* in Paris (Jacques Vergely, Philippe Mathieux, 1988-1995); the *Stadtbahnbogen* in Berlin (Jean-Michel Wilmotte, 2014-2016); the *Stadtbahnbogen Viennat* in Vienna (Silja Tillner, 1997-2000); *Keikyu Railway* in Yokohama (Contemporaries, Studio 2A, Workstation, Koizumi Atelier and Nishikura Architectural Design Office, 2010-2011) (De Poli, & Incerti, 2014).

2. Action/research approach

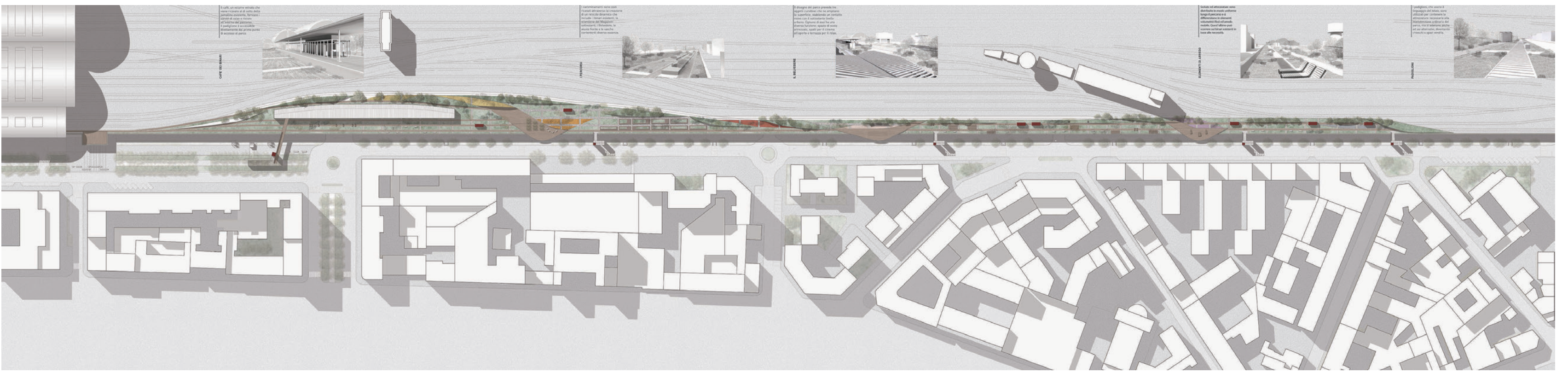
The research conducted at Politecnico di Milano was developed by establishing a multidisciplinary integrated network (apart from the disciplines of Interior Design and Conservation, contributes from Urban Design, Museology and Exhibition Design, Structures, Plant Design and Energy Recovery, etc.) open to the contribution of operators external from the academic world and involving the local social realities, association and administrations set over the territory (supported by sociologists, psychologists, educators, public administrators etc.).

The activity was organized since the beginning having the objective to develop in a coordinated and simultaneous way hypothesis of intervention aimed to the resolution of three primary design aspects:

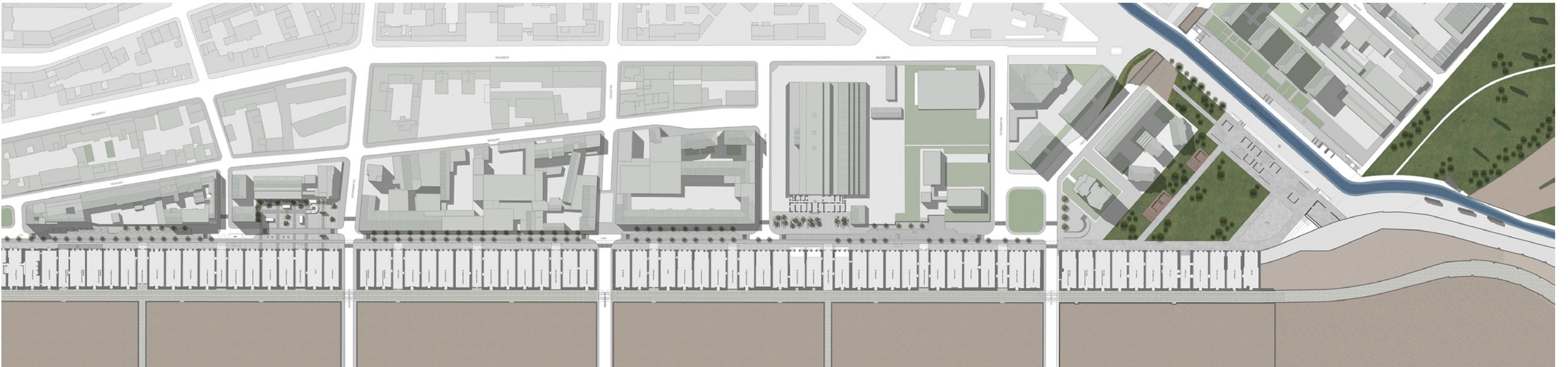
- The configuration of social and architectural models for the use of existing spaces: established through the constitution of a functional mix able to develop collaboration synergies between local different stakeholders, in order to create new activities in a framework of social and economic sustainability;
- Architectural requalification: developed starting from the examination of the decay state, the structure of guidelines for restoration that can be applied also in terms of self-financing, together with the design of ex-novo elements for the strengthening of existing heritage and creation of new services;
- The integration of technology of use of *smart energy*, able to generate the growth of an *energy awareness* system (Manzini, 2015).

From the diverse projects developed by groups of students, three of them have become Master thesis. The final objective of these experiences was the configuration of ways to reactivate existing spaces, aiming to identify as beneficiaries the numerous socially weak users present in the area. In fact, it is an urban area in which welfare-related associations are already existent to support immigrants, elderly people. Another target includes economically less protected people (youth productive activities with little access to income and disadvantaged classes supported by associations) together with the residents for which foresee collective functions based on *social innovation* and *green economy*.

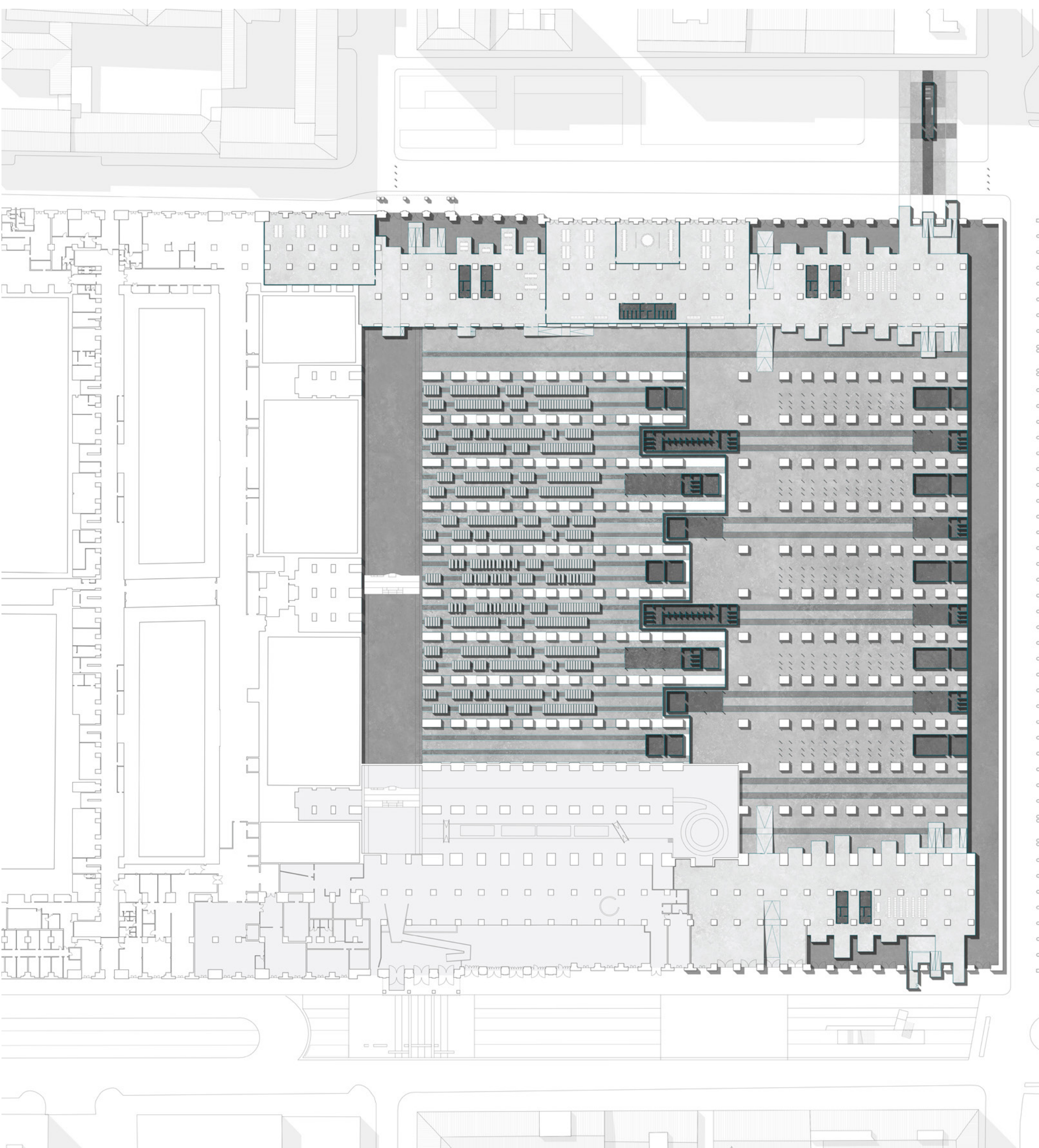
The finalizing of economic ways of self-financing is the founding element of these projects, able to sustain itself without relevant intervention of public funds and capable to trigger widespread phenomena in the area, which can strengthen its role in the urban environment (Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan, 2010).



Federica Ruggi, Elena Rizzico, thesis *La città nascosta: paesaggi inaspettati lungo il km Aporti* (The hidden city: unexpected landscapes along the km Aporti). Project masterplan.



Leonardo Battistini, Fabrizio Uzzi, thesis *Il km Sammartini. Progetto di riqualificazione e riuso dei Magazzini Raccordati di Milano* (The Sammartini km. Regeneration and reuse project of Magazzini Raccordati in Milan). Project masterplan.



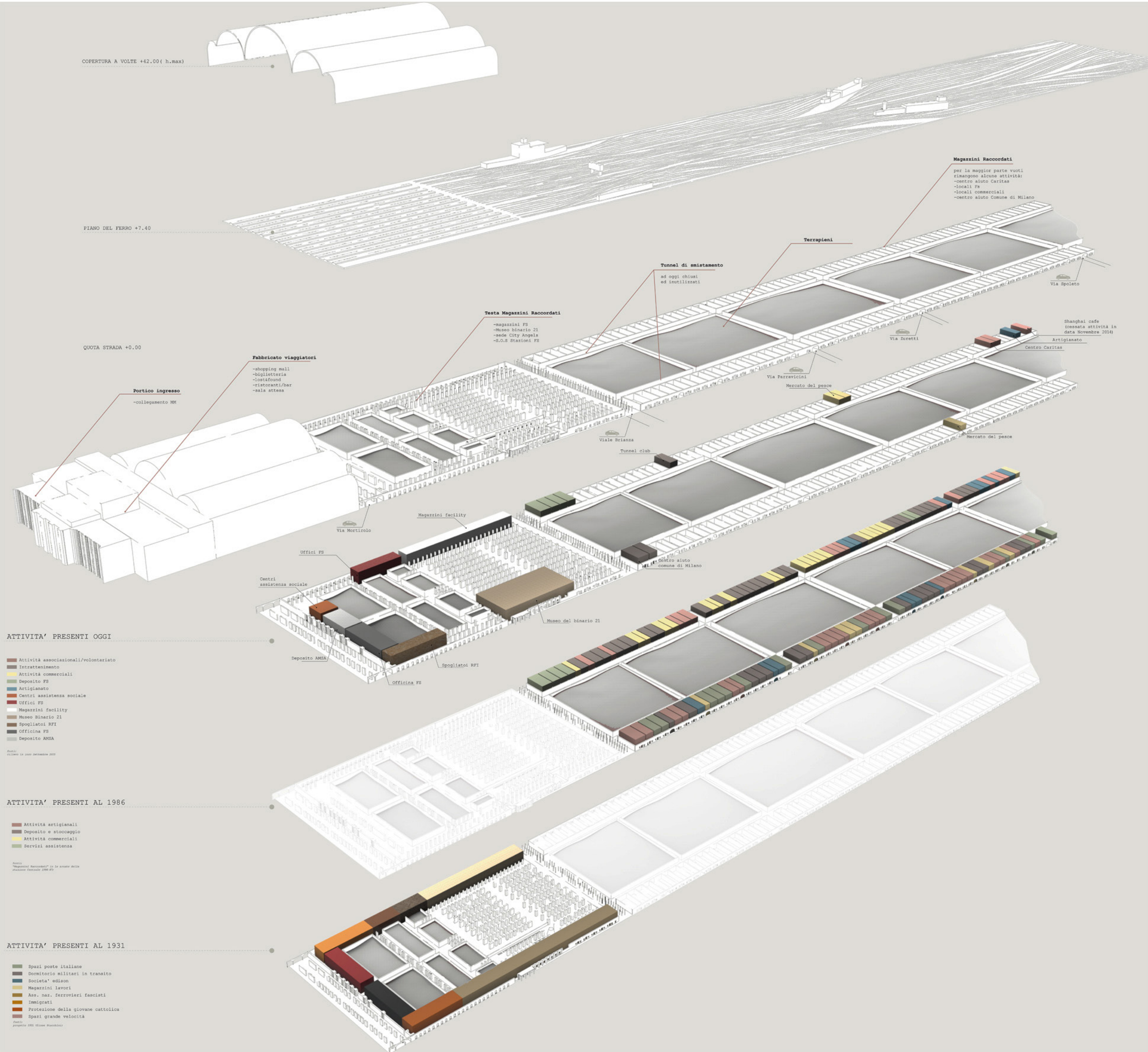
Alessandra Cancian, Tania Ruzzoli, thesis *La Stazione dei Dimenticati. Archiviare, Accogliere, Ospitare. Dall'emergenza alla quotidianità* (The Station of Forgotten. To archive, to receive, to host. From emergency to everyday life). Project masterplan.

3. State of the art and problem analysis

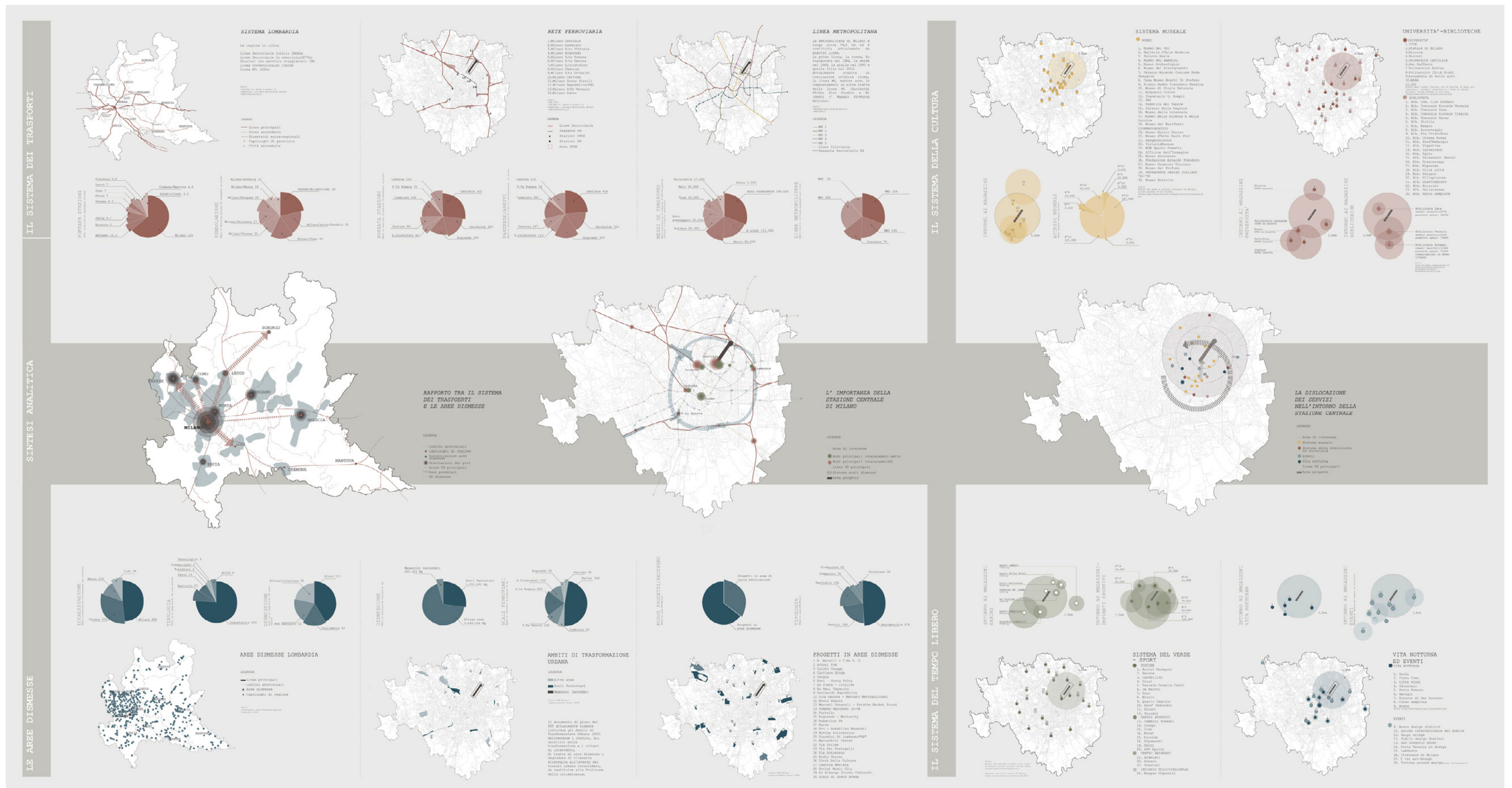
The urban area set at north east of Milan – established around the railway embankment – is since decades in an advanced decay situation. This condition is mainly caused by the progressive abandonment of *MR*: commercial and storage places set along the two fronts of the embankment.

Whereas the head of Central Station has been redesigned few years ago, changing its destination of use in a vast shopping centre, there were no recovery actions for the very commercial axis: the *Magazzini*, originally characterized by a high presence of artisanal and commercial activities.

Nowadays the embankment is not more the reference point of its contextual urban fabric. Currently, the perception is that this architectural element is a limit, which *out of scale* dimensions generate unintelligibility. Being an architectural heritage not producing incomes but having a negative impact over the economic and social aspects of the contextual area, its presence is in open contrast with the high potentialities, proved by important case studies abroad that have solved positively similar issues (De Poli, & Incerti, 2014).



Graduation Studio RMR/
Redesign Magazzini Raccordati:
preliminary analysis layout, state
of the art of the architectural
system of the railway
embankment of Central Station.
Coordinators of the studio: Marco
Borsotti, Sonia Pistidda (Master
of Science in Architecture of
Politecnico di Milano).



Graduation Studio *RMR/ Redesign Magazzini Raccordati*: preliminary analysis layout, railway urban transport system, system of brownfield area, qualitative and quantitative data synthesis. Coordinators of the studio: Marco Borsotti, Sonia Pistidda (Master of Science in Architecture of Politecnico di Milano).

4. General and specific objectives of the action/research

Objective of the research was to investigate sustainable solutions for the reconversion of *MR* and their relocation in the dynamics of the area, in order to define alternative strategies for the use of the spaces nowadays set in abandonment.

The aforementioned result could be obtained through the proposal of strategic and innovative systems for the governance of coordinated commercial, productive, social and cultural activities.

The critical parameters observed, from which the design processes have started, are listed synthetically as follows:

- Architectural decay of the building structure;
- Economic depression, caused by the abandonment of the spaces;

- Social problems derived by the union of the aforementioned issues, which arise in lack of services and safety, perceived and real both;
- The diffused intolerance regarding the persistent stillness, determined by the lack of concrete intervention plans by the ownership.

The team work has sided its theoretical-design activities to a constant attention and participation towards the numerous initiatives related to sensitization campaigns aimed to the recovery of *MR*, leaded by citizens from the area. Such consideration was needed in order to develop possible participatory design paths for the individuation of implementing models of reuse.

User led design methodologies have been used, in which the role of the designer is to work as *facilitator* of synergy processes between users and producers. Such methods were used in particular for the development of *open innovation* systems oriented to collaboration, sharing and multiplicity of the participants, together with the proposal of applicative models based on mixed public-private interventions.

Starting from the cognitive analysis of the urban area around *MR*, direct contacts with all the stakeholders began (e.g. local public administration, local associations, community activism). With the progression of these meetings the role of the designers has been identified as the mediators between *city users* – framed in different typologies – and their opinions/suggestions over an actualized and concrete use of *MR*.

In particular, were organized:

- Open days dedicated to the citizens, in presence of designers/students, during events organized by local associations;

- Data gathering sessions through interviews and specific questionnaires submitted to significant examples of citizens;
- Limited seminars with the participation of citizens' representatives, public administrators and experts in various sectors;
- *Think thank* facing experts in different sectors, finalized to systematization and implementation of data gathered and to test the work in progress (architectural design and socio-economical models).

The purpose of this articulated platform is the implementation of a collective appropriation process of the abandoned spaces, defining a system open to the local community.

5. Development of action/research

The first step was the investigation of a *Desk and Field Research* for the mapping of national / international reference case studies, of the local conditions (architectural, social and economic characters of the urban context) and of architectural decay level.

In particular, the organization of collective work sessions allowed to acquire and implement useful information to outline the history of *MR*, their positioning in the social evolution of the area, as well as the current ethnic, social, productive and cultural nature, also achieved with interviews and targeted questionnaires.

The collected results formed the basis to develop *social oriented* patterns of use, identifying possible types of future users, able to ensure the activation of mutual synergistic partnerships, open to the social and productive stratifications of the urban system (Manzini, 2015).

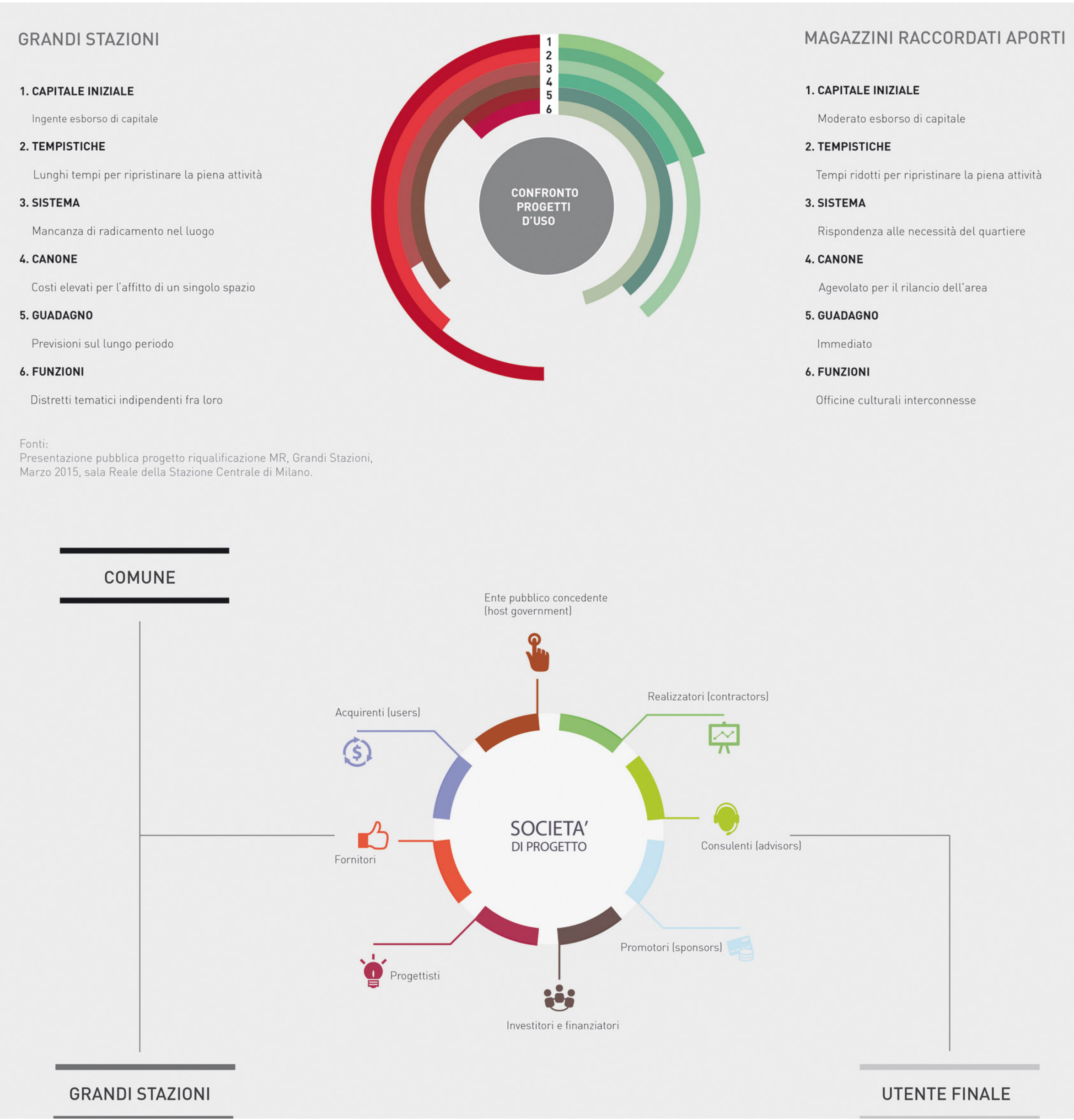
These activities were accompanied by opportunities of participatory planning, designed as free *ideas accelerators*, with multidisciplinary seminars in the academic, associative and local world and opportunities of discussion with the public administrators of the area.

In this way students / designers have had the chance to get in touch with the active dimension of the neighborhood in different ways (participation in awareness-raising and social aggregation events, work in progress presentation, discussions). This allowed us to collect a wealth of testimonies and suggestions immediately reworked in *policy* of self-determination of the territory (accessibility, resources) as direct actions for the re-appropriation and re-use of MR.

The last step of the work focused on the development of project proposals according to real economic models, as virtuous prototypes for using collective and private resources through participated processes with high sustainability. This means that the action on existing built develops in a contemporary and synergistic way, also through architectural interventions *ex novo* and socio-economic models for revitalization and maintenance of the whole system (Burns, Cottam, Vanstone, & Winhall, 2006).



Federica Ruggi, Elena Rizzico, thesis *La città nascosta: paesaggi inaspettati lungo il km Aporti* (The hidden city: unexpected landscapes along the km Aporti). Synthesis analysis, area activities, social-cultural activities, project concepts.



6. Outcomes of the action/research

The design values

The project focuses on three interventions involving the head of Central Station below the floor of arrival and departure of the trains and the two sides of the railway embankment, on the Ferrante Aporti and Sammartini streets.

The three projects, despite the different formal results related to the various approaches of the designers, represent a coordinated intervention system, demonstrating the flexibility of a systematic approach with the aim to define common methodological tools.

The design has focused not only on the historical and social aspects of the actual urban fabric but also on the architectural material of the buildings, carried out through a geometrical survey of the existing structures with mapping of materials and decay conditions and instructions for their conservation.

This kind of approach provides a first level of action consisting in the *recognition* of the territorial system resources, by highlighting constraints and opportunities (open spaces, natural resources, cultural elements, space use etc.).

A second level of action searches the necessary balance between conservation and transformation, inquiring about the natural tension of these two ways, apparently antithetical, to relate to the existing built. These elements, if properly stimulated, are able to generate a renewed harmony of the overall system, especially with the inclusion of *ex novo* elements as mediator.

A last level of action starts a process of intervention on the materials, acting as a strictly *relational* operation because it represents the first test and implementation of the innovative models of use (cultural, social, economic) finding here a concrete compound.

Social-economic model

The interventions over *MR* have foreseen the definition of a mixed economic-social operative model based on the hypothesis of the creation of an intermediary association. This association would have administrative and management functions between the property and final users (lessors / users of each space): contracts, coordination, control and development (Murray, Caulier Grice, & Mulgan, 2010).

Besides the association, the ownership is in charge for the maintenance of the complex in its urban point of view. Furthermore, agencies of territorial governance have the responsibility of primary infrastructure works on the context, which include the integration of technologies for the use of *smart energies*, as foreseen by project.

The use of *MR* expects low-fare rents for determined periods. Furthermore, the contracts will have a *programmed-exit agreement* that would assure a continuous availability of the spaces and a change in *occupational energies*. Such system would allow economic weak classes (e.g. young professional, artisanal and commercial activities; activities with scarce access to bank credit or without an immediate profit) to have the availability of adequate spaces to start and consolidate entrepreneurial activity. All the aforementioned actions are set in a framework of users configured and programmed over the basis of the territorial analysis.

The economic model expects that all the tenants would be committed, by signing a contract, to the *restitution* in terms of working hours, of the market value not collected. The users will make available to the community their cultural and operative know-how, through artisanal and professional activities, learning programs, cultural spreading etc.

The aforesaid actions could take place in the singular space

and in shared areas or *stations* both, which represent the backbone of the available spaces. These spaces would be available to host activities self-produced by the local community, so as to ones from the nearby territory (residents meeting, photographic set, events, etc.).

In this strongly self-sustained system, maintenance and refurbishment interventions of interiors are charged over the tenants: such activities must be carried out following the guidelines resulting from the diagnostic, material and decay project of the building.

The new functional and architectural layout

In the head of Central Station (corresponding to the above floor of the trains), the parts facing the street are drastically reduced, in relation to the change of architectural shape: here in fact there are not the serial types of stores.

The entire depth of the building, occupied by MR for a limited portion, is completely free and it is defined by an enormous hypostyle hall, characterized by a dense grid of structural pillars that support the rail level.

Recent history has turned this railway depot in a kind of *city of forgotten*, not official but tolerated, with a large population of homeless and indigents, today reinforced by continuous migratory flows that involve our country. This particular condition suggested the development of a double use system.

The inner part of the building, (without the possibility of adequate facilities for the exchange of air and light) is converted into a mechanized archive with the aim to centralize and rationalize the numerous stores actually scattered throughout the city belonging to different public bodies (including Politecnico di Milano). Municipality of Milan will be

in charge of the management of the archive, receiving a rental income for the service.

The large remaining space becomes a first *Immigrant Reception Center*, able to adapt itself in relation to incoming migration flows, often very diversified and with moments of peak.

Flexible spaces for temporary stay, food service, hygiene, cultural and prayer activities are designed thanks to the arrangement of living space equipment. The system is formed by prefab box-shaped volumes, decomposable and combinable that can be configured differently according to a wide abacus of equipment, with specific supplies such as machinery system, sanitary facilities, kitchens, dressing room.

In moderate flow period, the space can be reconfigured as a great covered *square of cultures*, destined to events related to the multiethnic realities hosted in the urban area, in order to develop, disseminate and comprehend their cultural and traditional identity.

The management of the space is entrusted to the creation in network of different welfare and multi-cultural non-profit associations, already active in the territory, recognized as sensitive references, able to ensure the appropriate relationship policies.

Modular furnishing systems were designed also for *MR*. These ensure flexibility in use and low management costs, with modular independent systems, combinable and transportable. It comes to the concept of *box in a box* derived from the model of container or as structural grid that can be equipped according to the principles of the three-dimensional snap-fit frame. All equipment can be manufactured in self-construction by the same users.

The project along Sammartini street includes a small museum, the MUMAR, with the task of describe the story of *MR*,

to testify the historical and cultural value in the development of the city, having the aim to become a cultural system of territorial reference (Karp & Lavine, 1995).

The same project extends to the intersection of the railway with the nearby Naviglio della Martesana (Martesana Canal), redesigning a part of the area and waterfront to host a square with infrastructure for an open air municipal market and for recreational and sports activities.

Along Ferrante Aporti street, a linear park is designed on the railway embankment in the rail portion facing the street. This part is currently intended for maintenance activities and the project wants to define a green area to be returned to the surrounding urban fabric, very lacking from this point of view.

The park reconnects two different levels (the city and the railway) strongly divided until today. It is organized into thematic and botanical areas, equipped with facilities for leisure and entertainment, such as urban gardens, solarium, open air cinema, bar.

Some parabolic platforms cantilever beyond the limit of the front of *MR* underline the park, becoming an additional urban landmark, reinforced by pedestrian and mechanized lift elements that mark the road below in harmony with the serial nature of *MR* (Borsotti & Sartori, 2009).

7. Conclusions

Each intervention could be configured as a tool able to promote interest and social participation, by involving the main final users of this places: the inhabitants.

The proposed projects, verified by the citizens, present hy-



Pastoral community Giovanni Paolo II – Ambrosiano Refectory, Community hall, Greco square, Milan, 25 October 2015. *RMR OPEN LAB - Redesign Magazzini Raccordati*. An experience of participatory planning: an open graduation Studio/ work in progress exhibition: design tests for MR. Presentation of material and decay survey.

pothesis that activate development perspectives in the entire area through an innovative *place branding*. Thus, this action structures two kilometres of entrepreneurial activities related to cultural workshops and social aggregation spaces, in accordance with the welfare vocation already present in the area. The activities might be as follows: workshops, professional studios, artisanal and cultural ateliers, multimedia and cinematographic activities, art workshops, sport facilities, commercial activities, restaurants, markets, co-working areas, museums, rotating basis exhibition spaces aimed to the promotion of products, bike-sharing, associations spaces.

The total synergy between new economic, social and architectural scenarios in the projects actualizes the chance to obtain intense consequences in terms of renewed urban identity, by minimizing relative costs.

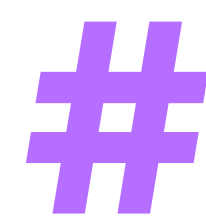
Acknowledgment

The text refers to the following thesis, Supervisor Marco Borsotti, Co-Supervisor Sonia Pistidda, Master of Science in Architectural Design, Politecnico di Milano, School of Architecture, Urban Planning, Construction Engineering, former School of Civil Architecture.

- Federica Ruggi, Elena Rizzico, *La città nascosta: paesaggi inaspettati lungo il km Aporti* (The hidden city: unexpected landscapes along the km Aporti).
- Alessandra Cancian, Tania Ruzzoli, *La Stazione dei Dimenticati. Archiviare, Accogliere, Ospitare. Dall'emergenza alla quotidianità* (The Station of Forgotten. To archive, to receive, to host. From emergency to everyday life).
- Leonardo Battistini, Fabrizio Uzzi, *Il km Sammartini. Progetto di riqualificazione e riuso dei Magazzini Raccordati di Milano*, (The Sammartini km. Regeneration and reuse project of Magazzini Raccordati in Milan).
- Although the paper is a result of the joint work of all the authors. Marco Borsotti is in particular author of paragraphs 3, 5, 6 and Sonia Pistidda is author of paragraphs 1,2,4

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