

## INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE-LED URBAN REGENERATION. AN ITALIAN CASE-STUDY

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**Keywords:** historical urban landscape (HUL); urban interpretative tools; urban renewal; adaptive reuse; public space and buildings

### Abstract

**Identity** of places is a dynamic process of one unending construction.

The **investigation** of structural characters of places and their relationships with cultural assets and heritage provides a **layered set of readings** which is in itself the forerun of an urban landscape design action. When based on a critical recognition into the deep structure of urban form, design can be a **powerful tool** to investigate the built landscape in view of its valorization and to enhance the possibility of reading, comprehension and reuse of built heritage settings.

The small city of **Cesano Maderno** is a valuable case study for a design-led approach to historical urban landscape. From its historical structure, set by a late Baroque project that overlaid onto the medieval settlement a two-kilometer landscape axis, we can learn a **design strategy** that is at once a *staccato* and unitary. This strategy has been reinterpreted to direct present demands of transformation and valorization along another **landscape section**, where a tight sequence of historical buildings, gardens, public spaces and churches have been all reused or redesigned for cultural and civic functions, creating a **coherent urban landscape** and giving new quality, functionality and significance to the old city core.

### Paper

**Identity of places as a dynamic process. The quest for a design vision and a strategic thought**

Identity of places is a dynamic process of unending construction and reinvention. At any time, society has the responsibility of combining the need of conservation of its heritage with the need of transformation, to avoid both destruction of cultural identity and the danger of museographic “freezing”.

The “sense of history” and the landscape dimension of urban heritage, expressed in the mutual relationship between tradition and design and between conservation, architecture and urban design, is certainly one distinguishing feature of the Italian architectural culture in which formal issues themselves are understood as a matter of civilization and research.

Facing the problems of reconstruction after World War II and later the progressive destruction of the original characters in historic urban landscapes - as a consequence of economic development -, since the 20th century it has become clear that architects responsibility cannot be referred only to the present and to new buildings: within historical landscapes every project ought be understood as an act of conservation of urban identity; symmetrically, even pure conservation has to be considered as one precise architectural choice in itself.

The relationship between the old and the new is an essential issue concerning architecture.

Refusing a dichotomous approach between architecture and restoration, Ernesto N. Rogers dealt with design within heritage settings (*preesistenze ambientali*) as an overall issue ever since the 50's.

Going beyond the dimension of conservation of single buildings, he extended the limit of the *caso per caso* approach (study case by study case) first theorized by Annoni<sup>1</sup> up to the scale of protection districts

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<sup>1</sup> Annoni Ambrogio. 1946. *Scienza ed arte del restauro architettonico. Idee ed esempi*, Framar, Milano 1946, pp. 19-30.

considered in their logical extension<sup>2</sup>. In urban planning, he stated, «conservation or building are two actions pertaining to the same act of awareness (...): conservation has no meaning if it is not understood as bringing the past up to date and building has no meaning if it is not meant as the continuation of the historical process (...)»<sup>3</sup>.

By taking on the theory of *caso per caso*, Rogers led architectural culture to specify the generic notion of *environment* through the more structural concept of *context*, understood as the historical making of landscape. As a consequence, he stressed the need of going beyond all abstract models and the generic tool of “urban detailed plans” to entrust to design itself the responsibility of critical interpretation of cities as a precondition for the conservation and construction of their parts.

In 1973 Aldo Rossi discussed further the issue of responsibility in contemporary design, this last considered as a necessary and legitimate presence within the works produced by tradition: «I believe we must refuse the concept of environment (...) it is often confused (...) with a vague and sentimental taste in those parts of the city where the urban situation has often become blight (...). How can we create an authentic and circumstantial relationship with the city we are building? It only exists if architecture brings the general characters of the city back to the reasons of design»<sup>4</sup>.

The overall dimension of historic urban landscape (HUL) has been acknowledged by UNESCO's Recommendation (2011) as the suitable scale for framing conservation issues as well, which relates urban heritage settings both to the complex weaving of values and meanings that history, men and nature have left sediment within cities, and to new multifaceted planning issues.

In facing present challenges (urbanization, development, tourism, sustainability) and as a crucial point to maintain urban identity of living cities, the Recommendation has finally acknowledged the need of integrating architecture and design strategies in the landscape approach.

And yet in an integrated approach between disciplines and in enhancing urban quality, the notion of HUL is really effective provided that every city and landscape is considered as an individual identity.

As permanence and mutation are finally interpreted as not necessarily dichotomous, design in turn should be understood as a specific tool for knowledge in which research, strategy and project are deeply intertwined.

In any strategy aiming to confront with a specific context, the *suspension of judgement* on the relationship between the old and the new is not a neutral attitude. Tradition and *long duration* meanings in urban culture cannot be evoked by the mere reuse and conservation of buildings and urban fabrics as if they were just *documents* of the past, i.e. isolating *architectural texts* from the present living culture, contexts and contemporary life-needs.

Functional promiscuity, break-in of tradition within contemporary language and grafting onto the historical layering, all of them characterize the true nature of European cities as historical palimpsests, which are always the result of a long-term process of transformation and evolution in use and meaning.

Therefore, the new challenges portrayed by the HUL Recommendation - such as the threats to the essence of historic areas, their loss of functionality, economic pressures and tourism development - require new approaches and tools integrating not just planning but design vision and strategic thought concerning spatial arrangements, heritage, architecture and urban quality as a whole.

### **Between permanence and mutation: looking for new tools**

In a design-led approach to HUL, strategies aim to combine the need of conservation with the demands of legitimate cultural denotation of the present.

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<sup>2</sup> Rogers Ernesto Nathan. 1957. *Il problema di costruire nelle preesistenze ambientali*, in *Esperienza dell'architettura*, Einaudi, Torino 1958, p.311.

<sup>3</sup> footnote by E. N. Rogers in *Il problema di costruire...*, cit.

<sup>4</sup> Rossi Aldo. 1973. Un progetto per la città antica, *Edilizia Popolare*, a. XX, n.111, March-April 1973, pp.7-9.

If design is based on a critical recognition into the deep structure of urban form it can be understood as a powerful tool to interpret historical landscape in view of its sustainable *valorisation* and inclusion in the spatial organisation of a living city.

The tools already included in current planning and management practices, such as thematic surveys and mapping of city's resources along with metric and materials surveys of single buildings, enable depicting the conditions of places and setting the basis for conservation projects of historical values, while sometimes proposing flexible guidelines but more often very rigid plans.

And yet, the acknowledgment of the historical value by itself is unable to include the historical significance of the present and of its own cultural value, critical in creating an overall strategy for HUL.

The meaning of the whole is far beyond the immediate physical aspect: cities are the result of projects related or opposed to each other; lost or never built; in continuity or discontinuity; reflecting or opposing to the society which has produced them. All in all, the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts.

As the poet T.S. Eliot wrote «the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past»<sup>5</sup>.

Along this line of thoughts, design research starts from acknowledging the identifying characters of a place, considered as one historically, physically and culturally defined context. Therefore it is not possible (nor it is desirable) to standardize in models the transformation process of complex systems like cities.

To target such a complex layering in urban settlements and meet sustainable transformations, current planning may adopt more flexible guidelines sheets and be supported by the tool of *interpretative maps* meant to provide an overall design strategy through a layered set of readings, interrelating the structural characters of the context with its cultural asset, topography and heritage (this last considered in its morphology, typology and figurative characters).

This frame of stratigraphic reading weaves a field of relationships between selected but diachronic urban, topographical, infrastructural elements, which is in itself the forerun of an urban landscape design action. This “strategic procedure” is aimed at revealing a deep and inner urban order in which different parts and fragments can be acknowledged while apparent coherences can be instead dismantled; new buildings ensemble or urban units can be foreseen while single architectures and the overall urban landscape are shown in their mutual relationship.

Along this line of investigation, the generic notion of urban landscape finds contextual evidence and operative clarifications that could guide and arrange interventions.

Every reading-key, of course, is a form of interpretation but, since even mere conservation is only one possible choice and not a neutral attitude, that is the only way for the present to take its own responsibility in respecting complexity, giving coherence and transmitting an ongoing urban palimpsest to the future.

*Interpretative maps*, moreover, activate a second synthetic tool combining research, representation and design at the same time, as it is based on a skilful pictorial “dissection” in the body of the city: *landscape sections* are aimed at revealing the deep formal structure of the city in its physical representation, giving evidence or prefiguring space sequences, formal characters and functional values which in turn can help to define a modulated but overall strategy for entire parts of the surrounding urban fabric.

Through the interaction and synthesis of a wide range of knowledge (from architectural and urban renewal to conservation and adaptive reuse and with the help of management), the role of design is meant as a tool to increase the possibility of reading, comprehension and reuse of heritage.

### **The case study: revealing the inner order, defining a strategy within historic layering**

Urban areas, where pressure for change and transformation is greater, are a critical sphere of investigation showing at the same time the conflict and the potential complementarities between heritage protection and design modernization.

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<sup>5</sup> In its parallel with poetry, the theme has a broad cultural discussion in *Tradition and the individual talent* by T.S. Eliot (1920).

In small towns the phenomena seem to be reproduced in smaller scale but in comprehensive range, thus providing a “design studio” where strategies can be elaborated and tested.

The small city of Cesano Maderno, set within the Lombardy human-made landscape – which was precociously defined by Carlo Cattaneo (1845) as «a huge pile of works, culture and experiences»<sup>6</sup> –, provides a valuable case study for a design-led approach to historical urban landscape, showing a comprehensive and integrated approach for the identification, conservation, renewal and management of heritage considered in its specific urban context, in its dynamic character and within the larger goal of enhancing the identity, quality and citizens’ experience of urban space.

Cesano’s historical urban structure, moreover, derives from an exemplary design strategy that established a *voluntary geography* along an extended urban landscape section, which in this specific case corresponds to an axial arrangement: between XVII-XVIII, in fact, an overall design promoted by the main feudatory Borromeo Arese overlaid a two-kilometre perspective axis onto the medieval settlement, thus imposing a rotation of ninety degrees to the whole previous urban structure built along the river Seveso (fig.1).

Centred on Palazzo Arese Borromeo (XVII-XVIII), this urban landscape axis established at both sides of the building an axial perspective sequence, expanded eastward into the geometric garden as far as the enclosure of the menagerie and westward, through the frontal exedra (called “the theatre”), extended to the village centre which was also redefined on purpose by the rotation of the Church and the construction of a new row of houses and gates.

By a set of coherent architectural objects (palace, loggia, church, pavilions, gates, portals etc.), urban voids (exedra, garden, menagerie) and parts (row of houses) arranged along the urban landscape sequence, the design strategy centred in the dense urban fabric and gradually thinned out to project, finally, towards the countryside.

The elaborated sequence of historical, mythological, religious and allegorical themes portrayed in the different rooms of Palazzo Arese Borromeo, testify the cultural ambitions of the feudatory.

While the railway changed again the urbanization trends at the end of the 1800’s, this strategy that is at once a *staccato* and unitary has been tangibly reinterpreted nowadays to direct present demands of transformation and valorisation along a second urban landscape section as well, which is instead the result of a longer and heterogeneous historic layering (fig.2).

This second shorter urban axis departed from the main *palazzo* according to an orthogonal system, to configure the elongated Piazza Arese defined by the Palazzo Melzi d’Eril and by the smaller but older Palazzo Arese di Seveso (XVII-XIX), built by the cadet branch of the Arese feudatory family and connected to the Church attributed to the architect Carlo Buzzzi (1642) which closed the perspective (fig.3). Nevertheless this short axis was symbolically pointed toward a medieval church<sup>7</sup> out in the countryside, just passed the once autonomous village of Binzago, which had also been renewed by the main feudatory.

Binzago was connected to Cesano just by a lateral countryside road in those days and kept its autonomy till 1869 but its strong social identity is lasting up to nowadays.

It was not till the first decades of XX century that this second axis became real, when the elongated Arese’s square was connected first to a public school, built halfway from the two villages, and then stretched as far as the very core of Binzago (fig.2).

Just along the intersection between the main late-Baroque axis centred on Palazzo Borromeo Arese and the deep enclosed space of Piazza Arese, the tool of *landscape sections* shows a tight sequence of listed historical buildings and churches, gardens and open spaces, which could provide a coherent urban landscape composition if reused, redesigned for new public and civic functions (figg.2-3).

The municipality understood that a design-led approach to heritage could lead not just to the conservation of a sum of buildings but to identify in this very intersection a vital city core for the contemporary Cesano.

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<sup>6</sup> Cattaneo Carlo. 1845. *Industria e morale* now in *Scritti economici*, Le Monnier, Firenze 1956

<sup>7</sup> Santuario di Santa Maria della Frasca, originally dating XIII century.

As the *landscape section* showed, this specific sequence could function both as a vertebral structure for the historic city fabric and as a *staccato* axis for extending urban quality as far as the old village of Binzago, including the schools complex built in between (fig.3).

Public spaces, semi-public introverted courtyard, green spaces, all of them played a great role in weaving physical relationships between different architectures, making the ideal landscape section visible and introducing a narrative urban sequence.

Along this line of thoughts the municipal administration, who had purchased since 1987 the two *palazzi* and the main old Church, intertwined their restoration and adaptive reuse for public and collective functions (university, town hall, museum, library, congress multi functional space) with the contemporary remodelling of their open spaces and gardens in a unitary framework of renewal and public use of the whole historic core (figg.3-6).

After many years of neglect and once restored, Palazzo Arese Borromeo housed San Raffaele University Philosophy School and some exhibition spaces; the Italian garden and its pavilions have been restored according to Carlo VI cadastre (1722) and so have the *nymphaeum*, the *exedra theatre* and the old Church of Santo Stefano Vecchio which is now reused as a multi-purpose space<sup>8</sup>.

By both adaptive reuse and new design, the smaller Palazzo Arese di Seveso (then Jacini) has become a mix-use building, part of the town hall complex and seat of an important institution (ISAL) with a research library and small museum (2003, figg.5-10)<sup>9</sup>.

While the monumental and painted rooms of the palazzo Arese Borromeo suggested pure conservation and basic systems works, in the neglected palazzo Arese di Seveso the need of responding to the modern functional requirements without distorting the spatial features of the historical building – being partly already compromised by a previous incomplete refurbishment – opened the dialogue between the old and the new. The primary massive quality of furniture, its essential modelling of details and its *metrical* arrangement has established a relationship with the building made of rhythms and patterns, instead of stylistic camouflage between two distinct identities which should not be merged (fig.7). The transition from the monumental scale of the inner spaces to the small scale of modern functional equipments is established through the line of the strip *boiserie*, understood as an autonomous layer on which all functional equipments can be hanged (seats, desks, lamps, office fittings).

Subsequently, the elongated Arese square along with its courtyards and the surrounding urban spaces have all been redesigned (2003-07) according to functional promiscuity, break-in of contemporary language within heritage setting and grafting of new elements onto the historical layering (one aerial footbridge, new urban spaces lay out with greenery and urban furniture), thus understanding the true nature of architecture and urban landscape as a compositional palimpsest and a long-term process of transformation and evolution in use and meaning (figg.5-6, 8-10)<sup>10</sup>. The design arrangement and its different material textures are meant as tools to increase the possibility of reading, comprehension and reuse of this heterogeneous palimpsest.

Design in turn, by reintroducing quality and new activities into urban fabrics, opens again the cycle of historical transformations in buildings, spaces and landscape as a whole, including legitimately the dimension of the present, to be considered historically as well.

As the result of a restricted competition project (2014), the forthcoming extension of this strategy as far as the modern schools complex and from there to the old core of Binzago, will enhance the character of “Civic Centre” of this landscape section and add new significance to a lively public space and urban landscape

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<sup>8</sup> Carried out by the Municipality staff.

<sup>9</sup> Designed and carried out by the author and another professional.

<sup>10</sup> Piazza Arese renewal project was carried out by the Municipal staff; the surroundings by another professional; the outer courtyards and the new aerial bridge were designed by the author.

(figg.3,10)<sup>11</sup>. Identity, tradition and perception of the two rival local communities will be involved in the design aimed at interpreting the theme of this landscape section. The street, by its arrangement and display of urban furniture, will be understood as a community room promoting a shared creative experience in urban space. The urban space in-between the different school buildings is designed to strengthen the connection to the city centre and to enable educational activities also beyond the school boundaries, particularly through the proposed open-air-classroom within the park.

Moreover, the proposal of building the municipal council hall between the town hall and the school complex is understood as the completion of the historical landscape section with a new overhead *salone d'onore*, interpreting nowadays this theme which characterizes the typology of both *palazzi*.

Presently, the municipal administration is also facing the development and urban regeneration of the SNIA area, a former large industrial site and village overlooking the Regional Groane Park and characterised by heritage belonging to the 20's. Connected to the railway transportation by the Groane Station, it has been considered a strategic area in the master plan but still belongs to private ownership (fig.2).

Yet, the size of this development area can be compared to the historical centre while its heritage could play once again the role of the civic core in the regeneration project. Establishing appropriate partnerships and local management frameworks for the project for both conservation and development seems to be a critical aspect. In fact, many proposals and designs promoted by the private ownership have been turned down by the administration during the last 20 years, owing to their inadequacy in understanding the place and meeting the urban vision and quality attended.

To meet such a new challenge the administration has decided to support once again a design approach to HUL, identifying dense urban landscape sections as a mean to steer a strategy for a heritage-led sustainable urban growth while retaining and enhancing the values linked to the collective memory of the former industrial village<sup>12</sup>.

The comprehension of the historical arrangement provides once again the structure for an integrated design of the old and the new, having its focus in new cultural and public facilities grafted onto the site and its heritage to create the community core for the new housing complex.

Formal research, understood as composing with forms, masses and rhythms a new arrangement of the old and the new in relation to the uniqueness of this historical context and to its latent compositional order and themes, as well as experimenting architectural *grafting* onto heritage buildings, is the other crucial issue of such a challenge. A clear matter of design knowledge in its relationship with reality.

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<sup>11</sup> The first prize was awarded to the author and another professional.

<sup>12</sup> The author is the coordinator of Politecnico di Milano of the design consultancy for the Municipality, ongoing.