

# MIAW

## 2017

# Milano Farini Rail Yard Just Like Starting Over

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## **MIAW**

The MIAW-Milan International Architecture Workshop is the international intensive programme at the School of Architecture Urban Planning Construction Engineering, that provides an international design forum for schools, teachers and students, but it is also an informal platform to discuss issues and share ambitions that education implies. Its aim is to stimulate cross-over thinking between researches and practitioners in the design field, involving different scales and encouraging an interdisciplinary approach towards design problems. Each class has an international guest professor of high profile whose activity and interests are related to the different study courses and disciplinary areas characterising our School.

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# Gardens without Gardeners

The Milanese rail yards represent today seven major challenges for the future of the city. Distributed along a continuous ring which encircles downtown, it is highly probable that they will be the next areas of intensive development, giving another strong acceleration to the process that, in last twenty years, radically changed large sections of the city, transforming semi-central sites in new mixed use poles. These new settlements introduce, within the continuous of the historical and modern fabric, unusual morphological sets of various descent. We could count, in example, some different morphological schemes: the campus-like layout (Citylife); the modernist plaza with commercial basement and towers (piazza Gae Aulenti); the six-lanes boulevard with office towers (viale della Liberazione); the cultural island (Prada Foundation) in relatively peripheral and decayed residential neighborhood; new types of courtyard residential complexes (corso Como); mega-blocks aligned on the shores of straight avenues (Santa Giulia); scattered huge blocks along a presumed parkway (via Giovanni Spadolini); high rise luxury green residential towers (Bosco Verticale); et cetera. Looking at this rough list of new, old, and recycled urban patterns which are now on use for the remaking of the city, it is not clear how the Milanese public and private actors – businessmen and politicians, planners and architects – intend to manage the future of these appetizing areas, the seven rail yards. A first consultation, operated by the national

railways company, which is the owner of the areas, produced grand views of green architectures and opulent public spaces. These projects, commissioned to a few well known Milanese and international firms, were presented in a public show but they were never really published and offered to a public discussion, making evident that the real projects have yet to be ordered and made, and that they will probably follow quite different paths and goals. In our Miaw program, we faced the incertitude of those preliminary condition, when everything was still possible but nothing was clear, and we decided to simplify at the maximum level our task, to minimize doubts and to indicate an evident common point of view that could be interpreted, by the visiting professors and by their students, in many different ways. We started selecting the largest of these rail yards, the Farini, because it looks as something different and more crucial. First, because of its extra size (about 620.00 square meters), that is the fifty per cent of the total surface amount of the seven yards; second, for its proximity with one of the newest and largest areas of recent urban transformation in Milan, a large Eastern sector which extends from the Feltrinelli Foundation, near the fashion district of corso Como, to the new headquarter of the regional Lombardia government. Another point, which makes Farini special, is the remarkable qualities of the presences that encumber its brownfields, either architectural or natural. In fact, Farini has today the character of a wild garden city, where old elongated masses of endless warehouses, battered and semi-abandoned, live together with impenetrable fields of wild bushes and traces of sunken rails out

of order, everything drenched with the rubbish and rusty atmosphere created by the daily passing by, since decades, of hundreds of trains. Farini, then, offer its post-urban enchantment to our imagination with nonchalance, offering a suggestive scenario that is made more appealing by the evidence that it is ready to disappear, that its inhabitants (because it is inhabited) and environments are more exceptional because they are fragile and temporary, probably fated to a fast extinction. In this meantime, because we are exactly talking of a meantime, this urban oasis acts as a reservoir for many species, both human and botanical, and also it is a perfect theme park for architects, offering a complete collection of beautiful foreshortened views of an analogous city, of delirious archeological remains, ravishing deserted sequences of spaces without nor meaning neither care, just accidental products of the combined effects of pollution, time, and oblivion.

We want to look at Farini as an urban case study, because about this place we can find a lot of interesting information: from the residents' opinions (people living around the yard was consulted, interviewed, but not the homeless living inside the yard) to the photographic overview, and then we thought that it was perfect as a test site for our workshops.

The challenge was to design before the starting of the real transformation, or, in other words, to try to imagine that it is possible to make something right now, with a small budget, just 3 million of Euros. A project, a concept, which can be intended as a pilot, an experimental test useful to inspire the major following developments,



also not knowing who, and which forces, will really drive the big deal. This goal and these conditions, elaborated inside the Miaw scientific committee, were offered to the visiting professors as a common ground, a shared starting point to be developed along their personal interpretations and design strategies. The reader of this book can easily understand that, generally speaking, our brief was taken seriously very little. Architects are ambitious professionals who hardly limit their actions by themselves, rather they are minded to never accept reality as it is, and, in front of a given scenario, they always offer a different and more optimistic, and usually more expensive, option. In front of the wide Farini extension, and looking at the inadequacy of their presumed budget, they opened their imagination towards futuristic visions which, from the more substantial to the more immaterial, tend to engage the entire area in a process of transformation projected well far from the today condition.

The limited budget, more than impeding the vision of the entire area, as it was in our intention, seems had obtained the effect of diverting the proposals from the usual pattern of urbanization, pushing them towards the borders of more fictional and radical strategies. There was just one exception, just one workshop which, not considering at all the brief about the budget and the temporariness of the intervention, stubbornly led to fill the entire area with the traditional elements of urbanization, alternating the usual repertory of blocks, slabs, open and closed courtyards. This workshop, led by Oliver Thill, preferred to give up the research of new forms of urbanism and it choose to design the kind of outcomes that can appear the



more probable, in a pessimistic view, but that are not necessarily the more logical and realistic. The other workshops, on the contrary, exploited critical points of view, in respect of the ongoing practices in urban design, and bravely tried to figure out brand new ideas for that urban fragment. Results are various, often more complexes and reflective than they can appear after a first glance, and introduce in the dynamics of Farini unexpected and stimulating ideas that refer to unknown, and sometimes enigmatic, scenarios. In these projects, elaborated in the compressed and intense lap of ten hectic days, images play a specific game, acting as synthetic condensers able to say and show a lot, becoming the vectors of ideas that are still embryonic, not yet fully displayed. These projects basically are prophecies, vision of unknown futures elaborated with the level of approximation requested by this specific type of fabrication, where some details can be more important and revealing than the complete representation of the whole.

The idyllic views of Mauro Baracco's students, the Monopoly variations of Luis Basabe's, the metaphysical gardens of Liza Fior's, the entrepreneurial landscapes of Tom Holbrook's, the Children's City of Kristoffersen and Brengeland's, the temporary metropolis of Ippolito Pestellini Laparelli's, all take care of this space, getting inspired from its peculiar and humble characters, learning us how to explore, and work, these hidden pleats of the city. The goal, for all of them, stay in the will of inventing spaces of freedom, desire, pleasure, imagination and dream. It is hard today imagine what will happen in Farini rail yard, but our workshops remain as an original

contribution to the question, under multiple aspects, that you can discover reading professors' texts and looking at the students' proposals. Among the many suggestions that can come to reader's mind, there is one that seems to me worth of a specific attention, and it is the capacity of understanding the whole area as a garden, as a space where landscape, environment, architecture and people could find new relations, balances, and lifestyles. In some way, in some different ways, after this projects Farini appears as a beautiful garden without gardeners, a special place waiting for a special architecture.

*Alessandro Rocca*