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VOLUME 1

0031_0. INTRODUCTION

Ivan Cabrera i Fausto

0041_BLOCK 1: DEVISING, REPRESENTING AND NARRATING THE CITY

0042_Paper #1.01: The City in the Landscape : Alfred Caldwell's broader perspective on urban design

Kristin Jones, Zaida Garcia-Requejo

0052_Paper #1.02: The face of the city

Nuria Casais, Ferran Grau

0064_Paper #1.03: Co-Drawing: Collaborative Representations of the City

Antje Steinmuller, Christopher Falliers

0076_Paper #1.04: Graphic narratives for reading Indian cities in constant motion

Alisia Tognon, Mariana Felix Paisana

0088_Paper #1.05: The current image of the city of Yerevan (Armenia) through the study of urban spaces

Anna Sanasaryan, María José Viñals

- 0098_Paper #1.06: Toward a Sustainable Urban Development (SUD): A Case Study on Ancient City of Kazerun, Iran
Mohammad Akbari Riyabi, Farzaneh Soflaei
- 0112_Paper #1.07: And with a pinch of nostalgia: Traces of the past in Nicosia's present and future
Christakis Chatzjichristou, Kyriakos Miltiadous
- 0126_Paper #1.08: Many cities in one. Enclaves and microcosms in the general structure of the city: the case of Prague's Ghetto
Domenico Chizzoniti, Yuliia Batkova
- 0136_Paper #1.09: From the grid to the layer: post-industrial city as city in (morphological) transition
Michela Barosio
- 0148_Paper #1.10: Grid geometry and core structure: Space Syntax analysis of small and medium 'grid-like' US Cities
Saif Haq
- 0160_Paper #1.11: The Politics of the Illusion / The Image as a Rejection of Typological Tyranny
Jonathan Scelsa
- 0172_Paper #1.12: The architecture of Chandigarh Capitol
Maite Palomares Figueres, Ivo Vidal Climent, Ciro Vidal Climent
- 0184_Paper #1.13: The new cities of the thirteenth century – a new urban paradigm in the Iberian Peninsula
Filipe Brandão do Carmo
- 0194_Paper #1.14: The performance of gender and ethnic identity in the diaspora mosque
Irem Oz, Alexandra Staub
- 0206_Paper #1.15: Architectural and graphic expression of the Route 66 from Chicago to Los Angeles
Sigrun Prahll
- 0214_Paper #1.16: Seeing beyond cities
Ray Kinoshita Mann
- 0224_Paper #1.17: Corporeal Polis
Paul Holmquist
- 0234_Paper #1.18: The diffuse museum. Toward a new model for interpreting architecture
Queralt Garriga Gimeno
- 0242_Paper #1.19: Urban Meta Museum
Polyxeni Mantzou, Xenofon Bitsikas, Anastasis Floros

0252_Paper #1.20: The skyway as an inhabitable mode of urban representation
Mike Christenson, Erin Kindell

0262_Paper #1.21: FABRIC[ATED]: Fabric Innovation in Architecture + Education
Tolya Syril Stonorov

0274_Paper #1.22: Visual spaces of change: the use of Image for rendering visible dynamics of urban change in contemporary cities
Pedro Leão Neto

0288_Paper #1.23: Drawing water: The making of fluid graphics
Brook Muller, Matt Tierney

0300_Paper #1.24: Energy Visualization in the Architectural Design Process
Giovanna Togo, Marina Maurin

0312_Paper #1.25: Thin architecture: energy, economy and the all-glass archetype
Elizabeth L McCormick, Waleed AlGhamdi

0322_Paper #1.26: VR, photogrammetry and drawing over: envisioning the city of the future
Olivier Chamel, Laurent Lescop

0333_BLOCK 2: LIVING IN URBAN LANDSCAPES

0334_Paper #2.01: Getting a grip on fiction: graphic narratives as study sites for urban design
Carmina Sánchez-del-Valle, V.M. Price

0344_Paper #2.02: Transescalaridad, an instrument for the sustainable territorial development
Celia Izamar Vidal-Elguera, Claudia Bengoa-Alvarez, Cinthya Butron-Revilla

0356_Paper #2.03: Top down planning approaches and urban reality: The case of Delhi, India
Sana Ahrar, Alexandra Staub

0364_Paper #2.04: An inquiry on the architecture of the open cities in the age of planetary urbanization
Esin Komez Daglioglu

0374_Paper #2.05: Green infrastructure as urban planning regulation of public residential neighborhoods
Andrea Iacomoni

0384_Paper #2.06: Artificially unnatural: Nature 2.0
Gayatri Tawari, Alka Tawari

0394_Paper #2.07: Mapping the Passive Natural Surveillance The Bilbao Metropolitan Area
Iñigo Galdeano Pérez

- 0406_Paper #2.08: Reconnecting with nature: identifying new models of urbanisation
Steffen Lehmann
- 0420_Paper #2.09: Considering Ladakhi self-sufficiency under climate change, COVID-19 and beyond
Carey Clouse
- 0430_Paper #2.10: Sense of absence: place keeping of the intangible
Elena Rocchi
- 0442_Paper #2.11: Contact and impact (influence). Timeless events in the contemporary city landscape
Salvatore Rugino
- 0450_Paper #2.12: Architecture beyond permanence: temporariness in 21st century urban architecture
Marco Enia, Flavio Martella
- 0460_Paper #2.13: Public squares, social interactions, and urban sustainability: lessons learned from Middle Eastern Maidans
Shima Molavi Sanzighi, Farzaneh Soflaei
- 0474_Paper #2.14: Urban landscape living lab. Base Camp : Vadozner Huus (BC : VH), Liechtenstein
Clarissa Rhomberg, Anne Brandl, Johannes Herburger, Luis Hilti
- 0486_Paper #2.15: Sevilla 1910, the motion of censure against the architectural style Art Nouveau. Perpetuating and controlling the narrative of the symbolic city in the modern era
Reyes Abad Flores
- 0496_Paper #2.16: Urban landscapes in Berlin shaped through cultural diversity
Sigrun Prah
- 0508_Paper #2.17: Was Le Corbusier a utopian thinker or a realistic visionary? An analysis of two diverging views
Cihan Yusufoglu, Alexandra Staub
- 0518_Paper #2.18: University is city. The infrastructure of education and research as an engine of urban regeneration
Emilio Faroldi, Maria Pilar Vettori
- 0530_Paper #2.19: The Mediterranean Peri-urban Historical *Huertas* (Murcia-Alicante-Valencia-Zaragoza). Transversal research
Juan José Tuset, Rafael Temes, Ana Ruiz-Varona, Fernando García-Martín, Clara García-Mayor, Marcos Ros-Sempere

0542_Paper #2.20: Employing the industrial landscape. Insights on the use of collective spaces of industrialization in Ethiopia
Arnout De Schryvera

0554_Paper #2.21: The "second life" of a building. Hidden flexibility possibilities on appropriation of architectural space
Caio R. Castro, Amílcar Gil Pires, João Mascarenhas Mateus

0566_Paper #2.22: Shopping center and contemporary city: Discussion of appropriation forms
Pedro Bento

0578_Paper #2.23: Intersections with the ground in the contemporary city
Luigi Savio Margagliottai

0590_Paper #2.24: The domestic city: Expansion of the domesticity in the contemporary city
Flavio Martella, Marco Enia

0598_Paper #2.25: The sustainable house: psychology vs technology
Olivia Longo

0606_Poster #2.26: Comfortable parks
Anastasiya Volkova, Madlen Simon

0611_BLOCK 3: THE NEW FACES THE OLD

0612_Paper #3.01: From Dismissal to Development: the Challenge of Architecture
Roberta Ingaramo

0622_Paper #3.02: The hidden designer: rethinking urban rules in city making
Caterina Barioglio, Daniele Campobenedetto, Marianna Nigra, Lucia Baima

0632_Paper #3.03: Designed to change: The future of architecture is Agile
Salah Imam, Brian R. Sinclair

0644_Paper #3.04: Performance: The Fantastical Dichotomies of City-Making.
Shai Yeshayahu, Maria del C. Vera

0654_Paper #3.05: Infrastructure for collectivity: built heritage and service planning in the city
Francesca Daprà

0664_Paper #3.06: Circular economy and recycle of architectural heritage in fragile territories
Marco Bovati, Alisia Tognon

0676_Paper #3.07: Binckhorst: A palimpsest of architectural lives
Angeliki Sioli, Willemijn Wilm Floet, Pierre Jennen

0688_Paper #3.08: Pursuing potential arising from collision: The Islamic city considering Western hegemony
Sabeen bin Zayyad, Brian Robert Sinclair

0702_Paper #3.09: New VS Old: Understanding Architectural Tensions in the Design of Public Spaces
Giulia Setti

0712_Paper #3.10: (sub)URBAN; Merging Suburban Home Qualities with Urban Housing
Craig S. Griffen

0724_Paper #3.11: Changing the Currency of Manufactured Lakes in the Great Plains
David Karle

0736_Paper #3.12: Scarpa in light of croce: the post-lyrical city
Frank Harrison Weiner

0746_Paper #3.13: What Does A Single Building Tell About A City?
Burcin Basyazici, Birsen Sterler, Safak Cudi Ince

0760_Paper #3.14: The Urban Church: Repurposing a Community Detail
William O'Neil Bourke

0772_Paper #3.15: New old cities. The rebirth of German historical centers
Michele Giovanni Caja

0784_Paper #3.16: Adaptive reuse & regeneration as potential for industrial sites in the metropolitan cities of Pakistan
Naveed Iqbal, Koenraad Van Cleempoel

0796_Paper #3.17: Metamorphoses in Paris: the fate of Samaritaine among preservation and innovation
Antonella Versaci, Alessio Cardaci

0808_Paper #3.18: Building a Modern Asuncion: Contributions of the Hotel Guarani in the Configuration of a New Urban Space
Julio Diarte, Elena Vazquez

0818_Paper #3.19: The architectural Spanish imprint in China. Why an "Alhambra-style" mansion in Shanghai?
Álvaro Leonardo Pérez

0830_Paper #3.20: Transformation of a historical area in Elche through an apparently invisible architecture
Antonio Maciá Mateu, Ana Mora Vitoria

0840_Paper #3.21: Recuperation of the staircase space of Arma Christi San Jerónimo of Cotalba
José Manuel Barrera Puigdollers

0852_Paper #3.22: Workspaces evolution, towards the new coworking spaces
Alicia Llorca Ponce, Franca Cracogna

0863_BLOCK 4: SMART CITIES VS. TECH CITIES

0864_Paper #4.01: Is Dubai a New Paradigm for Smart Cities?
Sabeeb bin Zayyad, Thomas Patrick Keenan

0876_Paper #4.02: Performing and Measuring smartness Giving ground to urban intelligence by an alternative metric
Julien Lafontaine Carboni, Dario Negueruela del Castillo

0888_Paper #4.03: Smart Design for Bicycle Parking Stations. A proposal for the Historical Center of Arequipa, Peru
Gabriela Manchego, Cinthya Butrón Revilla

0898_Paper #4.04: A biomimetic research on how cities can mimic forests to become sustainable and smart
Aliye Raḥşan Karabetça

0908_Paper #4.05: Aggregated data management and business model in designing Positive Energy Districts
Paolo Civiero, Jaume Salom, Jordi Pascual

0918_Paper #4.06: Purposeful Play: Bridging the energy-efficiency gap in Cities
Malini Srivastava

0928_Paper #4.07: Optimal Operation Strategies of Three Different HVAC Systems Installed in a Building
Yeo Beom Yoon, Byeongmo Seo, Suwon Song, Soolyeon Cho

NEW VS OLD: UNDERSTANDING ARCHITECTURAL TENSIONS IN THE DESIGN OF PUBLIC SPACES

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ABSTRACT

The essay aims to reflect on the role of the design of public space in contemporary cities, starting from the emblematic case of Milan, to build a broader debate on the need of public spaces that European cities are increasingly showing and on the role that architectural design must assume in this instable scenario. In Milan, architectural tensions between new and fashion interventions and the background of the traditional city are alive, fertile and sometimes conflicting: it opens-up a space for design. The heart of the powerful urban transformations in Milan are public spaces, or rather their redefinition; observing Milan today means to put at the center of the debate the role of public spaces and a latent, but crucial, conflict between *new* and *old*.

Cities and architectures are changing faster, so the relationship between new and old is taking a central role in the architectural debate; what does it mean to design the new and how this could necessarily integrate with what already exists, in a delicate and precious balance?

In this sense, Milan represents an *open-air laboratory*: it is a city that has strongly changed from its past. However, the change raises important questions about the relationship between new and old.

The essay proposes a reflection on architectural tensions that new interventions of Porta Nuova, City Life and Feltrinelli Foundation have generated in the city. The architectural design has redefined entire portions of the city, modifying strongly its identity; if, on one hand, the new has given back to Milan architectures and public spaces, on the other the integration between new and old appears to be an open issue.

KEYWORDS

Architectural tensions; public spaces; Milan; identity.

INTRODUCTION

The making of cities – today like yesterday – passes through the design of its public space, of a collective and shared (play)ground that becomes the background of architectures and phenomena. Cities and architectures are changing faster, so the relationship between *new* and *old* is taking a central role in the architectural debate; what does it mean to design the new and how this could necessarily integrate with what already exists, in a delicate and precious balance?

Especially in contemporary context, the integration with the existing represents a complex and delicate design issue, because it highlights tensions that the juxtaposition between new buildings with the traditional city forms produces. A latent tension, which in some cases, could bring out difficult balances, necessary, however, to transform and to improve contemporary cities.

The essay reflects on the relationship between new and old by observing its effects on a city, like Milan, which has been radically transformed in the last ten years, highlighting a fervent capacity of modification, no longer related to the great urban design plans developed during the 1980s (Bianchetti 2016). It is a radical revolution that has revealed several significant issues that will be the subject of this text; starting from the role of public space in new projects to urban and architectural tensions related to its use and property to arrive to

understand how, and if, the new interventions have changed the perception of the traditional city and its identity.

In this sense, Milan represents an *open-air laboratory*: it is a city that has strongly changed from its past. However, the change raises important questions about the relationship between new and old.

The essay proposes a critical debate on *architectural tensions* that new interventions of Porta Nuova, City Life and Feltrinelli Foundation have generated in the city. The case study will be explored through a critical comparison of architectural elements applied in each project, highlighting similarities and differences, observing the shape of buildings and open spaces. A methodology that aims to describe both the contrast, often not solved, within the context, and to underline the different design choices made. The architectural design has redefined entire portions of the city, modifying strongly its identity; if, on one hand, the new has given back to Milan architectures and public spaces, on the other the integration between new and old appears to be an open issue (Colomina 1994; Gaventa 2006).

1. BETWEEN NEW AND OLD: A CRITICAL PREMISE

Architectural design has always reflected on the relationship with the existing, both with the aim of safeguarding memories and traces of the past, both to understand what could be removed or demolished downstream of processes of contraction or abandonment.

In this sense, the Italian context is paradigmatic: a stratified architectural and urban tradition has clashed with sudden events, economic crises and, also, the most recent climate changes that have highlighted the precariousness of an urban system that seemed unalterable. On the contrary, the city is, and remains, a laboratory of “urban facts” as Aldo Rossi claimed (Rossi 1981); it is the engine of continuous and deep transformations, in which the effects

will be given in a longer time and not within few months. These changes are often slow, complex and difficult for urban contexts because changing parts of cities necessarily means to modify inherited and long-lasting balances.

In this perspective, the powerful transformation that has affected Milan brings out contradictions, conflicts and tensions in redesigning portions of the city; the new advances in the iconic buildings that dot Milan, in the definition of different architectural languages imported by international firms. Recent projects completed in Milan tell of a complex, and unresolved, relationship with the past, or rather with the tradition. Projects that are showing latent tensions between the actors involved in the design of the contemporary public space and its uses.

The pilot projects, carried out in Milan in the recent years, have given rise to powerful transformation processes. Private entities invest capital and resources to build a new image of themselves: they are large banks, prestigious qualified companies that have found possible opportunities to rebirth in the empty and abandoned areas of Milan.

In this sense, the essay aims to reflect on the role of the design of public space in contemporary cities, starting from the emblematic case of Milan, to build a broader debate on the need of public spaces that European cities are increasingly showing and on the role that architectural design must assume in this instable scenario.

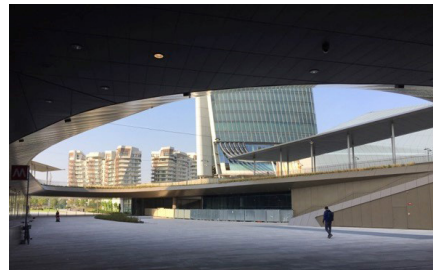


Figure 1. The project of City Life (Milan) and its system of public spaces. (Giulia Setti 2017)

In Milan, architectural tensions between *new* and *fashion* interventions and the background of the traditional city are alive, fertile and sometimes conflicting: it opens-up a space for design. The heart of the powerful urban transformations in Milan are public spaces, or rather their redefinition; observing Milan today means to put at the center of the debate the role of public spaces and a latent, but crucial, conflict between new and old. A conflict that has distant roots: in the *critical reconstruction* of Berlin, after the Second World War, carried out, among others, by Josef Paul Kleihues emerges the need to re-establish a link with existing architectural shapes, establishing precise languages and parameters. A complex story that questioned again the relationship between history and project, between new and old indeed.

The essay will describe some major projects completed, or under construction, including the area of Porta Nuova and Piazza Gae Aulenti, Feltrinelli Foundation and the complex intervention of City Life, but not only, we will try to reflect on what it is still in process, in particular in the area of Porta Nuova and City Life which have become *contemporary laboratory* for the city. It will be a journey to (re)discover the contemporary soul of Milan, but above all, it will be a story about the rediscovery of a new role for public space in these new interventions and the architectural image they have produced in the city.

If the role of architecture is radically changing, it is also changing the nature of public space in these contexts; no longer just an expression of a past monumentality, crystallized in the fixity of the plaza, but a (public) space discussed, stratified and complex in its definition. A public space that is uncertain and necessary for the construction and image of this *new Milan*.

The essay questions these urban transformations and tries to read them critically by investigating the different *architectural tensions* that the new projects have activated in the city. A city, Milan, with

a strong industrial past, which has been able to rise after numerous economic crises, the last one started in 2008. These projects tell about how architecture represented an incentive and a tool of action, albeit partial, to recover portions of cities previously in a state of decay. In particular, each project has been described through its history, its design genesis and architectural peculiarities, identifying the essential key aspects, such as the design of the ground floor, the definition of systems of open spaces and of a new urban and architectural verticality. The inquiry works through a detailed investigation of drawings, architectures and images that have been generated by these interventions; it is a story seen through the eyes and the critical gaze of an architect, who tries to grasp the latent design issues raised by contemporary projects in Milan.

2. THE TIME OF CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC SPACES

The design of public space has always crossed the development of cities and, in particular, the (public) void remains and it is shaped by the buildings' design that surrounds it. In the recent interventions, previously mentioned in Milan, the design of the contemporary public space is the result of daring but clear formal and architectural choices.

Buildings that we observe walking through Porta Nuova or City Life (Fig. 1) are iconic artifacts, powerful landmarks, which once again mark the city shape; the design of its public spaces could only be influenced by these choices but strongly highlights the necessity of public open spaces that citizens have showed. Interventions and projects described here mark an important moment for the city, also in relation to the world economic crisis that began in 2008 and, in fact, not yet concluded. It is thus a series of impressive urban and architectural transformations

that began before the advent of the crisis, therefore they had to redefine their ambitions and actual construction times.

The story, developed in this essay, also tries to understand the contradictions between the use and ownership of contemporary public spaces, result of complex negotiation and, in fact, financed by private investors. Observing Milan today means to discuss on *architectural and urban tensions* that led to a radical transformation of Milan.

3. PORTA NUOVA PROJECT: REDESIGN AN URBAN VOID

The image that emerges from this journey in a Milan that has changed, and is still changing, is that of a city tormented between past and future; a future that raises questions around the life of new projects, as well as on the architectural quality of spaces that has been determined. Piazza Gae Aulenti is an expression of this, walking in the large central void defined by Unicredit skyscraper and by a series of fragmented and disrupted *architectural objects* one captures an unexpected life (Molinari, Catella 2015).

The square, and the public space, appears as a residual component, surrounded by a dense border of massive buildings: it quickly assumed a key role in the public life of citizens. Raised up by the arterial roads that innervate the background of Porta Garibaldi railway station, it is a protected *enclave* and, therefore, perceived as a safe place by citizens.

Public and private strongly face each other: the square, built thanks to the funding of banks and private actors who have thus been able to move their offices in the heart of Milan, has become the stage of *public life*: it lives at different times and seasons,

it is quickly crossed by those who go to workplaces, lived by young people, children and elderly people who could enjoy the *slow time* of contemporary life.

The transformation of Porta Nuova area, close to Porta Garibaldi railway station, began in 2005¹, it represented one of the major urban projects carried out in Milan in the last twenty years², compensating a large void, full of meanings, that it could not find a completed definition. Porta Nuova intervention denounces, on one hand, the need to intervene and, therefore, the desire of re-appropriation of abandoned places by citizens, at the same time it marks a complicated balance between glossy architectural objects, brought into this context, and the sensitivity of the place, as well as the relationship with its historical roots.

At the end of the works, the plaza has been able to accommodate different possible uses, becoming a social place, protected by the city and defined by new urban edges. No longer the nineteenth-century monumentality of Piazza Duomo, but a lively contrast of architectural styles and languages resulting from a non-unitary planning. Piazza Gae Aulenti's public spaces have been able to regenerate it, becoming a meeting place for young people and children who have transformed the anonymous square into a vital place. Therefore, piazza Gae Aulenti brings together various forces; it determines connections and unites self-referential and autonomous objects unwilling to open up, but on the contrary inclined to individuality. The tension is generated by the evident contrast between the productive and iconic ambition of Porta Nuova project and the need for public spaces, and it is also fueled by the various informal uses that citizens make of the square (Fig. 2).

¹ The redevelopment of Porta Nuova area has involved several architects both to realize the masterplan (Pelli Clarke Architects, Kohn Pederson Foz Associated, Stefano Boeri Architetti), and to design the buildings, including Cino Zucchi Architetti, Antonio Citterio and Partners, Piuarch, Michele de Lucchi e Mario Cucinella: <http://www.porta-nuova.com/>.

² The construction sites of Porta Nuova Project were the largest in Europe in 2012-2013, see also: http://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2012/02/01/news/foresta_di_giorno_deserto_di_notte_ecco_il_rischio_della_milano_verticale-29109861/. The urban tradition of Milan is marked by major urban interventions, referring to the Vittorio Gregotti's project for Bicocca created during 1980s which has characterized an urban season that has now ended.

The new urban intervention has become a public material, populated in different ways; you could sit, dance, and enjoy the protection offered by an artificial ground, people felt inside a new part of Milan. Different actors inhabit the plaza: next to traditional urban users, there are also those who cross the square to go to work or to reach the railway station.



Figure 2. The pseudo-public space of piazza Gae Aulenti, Milan. (Ivan Ashkinadze 2017)

The development on different levels of Piazza Gae Aulenti and its sprawling and minute connections with the surrounding spaces show how different speeds and uses co-inhabit; the plaza hosts those who stop for a short time, those who use it for a longer time and, at the same time, welcome the dynamism of work, of the rapid and necessary movements. It is a place of discussion between the requests that made it possible, but at the same time, it is a harmonious claim for what could be considered public in the city; the tension does not show itself in a clear or disruptive conflict, but determines a dynamic balance between different actors involved. Piazza Gae Aulenti, and its immediate surroundings, could be defined as a *pseudo-*

public space, in which we have the perception of a public place, however regulated by private instances. Taking photographs in Piazza Gae Aulenti with a tripod is, for example, prohibited³: a common action in the squares such as stopping to take some images, it is not practicable in a place that shows itself as public but which, in fact, is not. Therefore, it is a *pseudo-public* space because it is a space that declares itself as public, in which the use of it is conditioned by private property, which nevertheless allows an impeccable care⁴ (Kayden J. S. 2000; Cicalò E. 2009).

While there is the fear that forces to check, even more so when it is a central place for economic and productive activities; however, there is at the same time the necessity to show the sharing and sociability that also arises from informal practices. The special observatory of Piazza Gae Aulenti is a mirror of tensions and conflicts of our time, where being monitored is possible, more than ever necessary, after the intensification of terrorist acts in large public spaces⁵: control imposes a restriction of freedoms. If we observe the life of Piazza Gae Aulenti, we will be able to notice how it is an effective *urban and architectural condenser*, able to hold social classes and different uses together, adapting its spaces to an informal life.

4. PORTA VOLTA AND FELTRINELLI FOUNDATION: THE REDISCOVER OF AN URBAN VOID

The project for Porta Volta was born from the investment of Feltrinelli Group, which decided to entrust the construction of a building, intended to host its Foundation, to the architects Herzog&de Meuron. Completed in 2016, the building located along the axis

³ During a workshop conducted with some students of Politecnico di Milano in June 2017, a student was invited to disassemble his tripod by a security guard, who invited him to ask for a permit to be able to take pictures of the plaza and its activities during the day.

⁴ Milan, like London and New York, faces and discusses the issue of pseudo public spaces (POSP: Privately Owned Public Space), places at the center of tensions, precisely, between ownership, uses and management

<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/sep/26/its-really-shocking-uk-cities-refusing-to-reveal-extent-of-pseudo-public-space>

⁵ Referring to the recent terrorist attacks in Barcelona (2017), Nice and Berlin (2016), which questioned the use, sharing and security of public spaces.

of via Pasubio, in correspondence with the former tollhouse of Porta Volta, represents an interesting real estate transaction carried out in Milan; the building of a private nature assumes a complex public role, in relation to its location in the consolidated city fabric. The large void that surrounds the Feltrinelli Foundation on the side of Via Pasubio was born as a public space, a place of aggregation and sharing; the proximity to both Corso Como axis and the development of Chinatown in via Paolo Sarpi gives centrality to this intervention which becomes an urban device able to aggregate people and activities.



Figure 3. Feltrinelli Foundation (Milan): a forgotten and to be completed public space. (Giulia Setti 2017)

If Piazza Gae Aulenti lives on mix between public and private activities, the Feltrinelli Foundation denounces a latent, and less resolved, tension between informal uses and urban practices; the building, design by Herzog&de Meuron, concentrates offices and private activities inside, while only a limited portion opens to the city with the presence of a library and a café, thus the surrounding space does not seem to have the strength to constitute itself as public space. It is an uncertain and transitional space between the monolithic and monumental

interior of the Foundation and the austerity of the external ground floor: here tensions between actors and uses appear much more radical and less balanced.

Public space is determined beyond design negations; it finds the strength to become a lived-in urban space, not just a residual void. If it is true that we are witnessing to a *revival of public space*, to recapture and enhance the idea of sharing, a reflection should be opened on the characteristics that define these spaces. Piazza Gae Aulenti perhaps supported the growing need of squares and meeting places that rise around the Porta Nuova transformation and the lack of protected places to meet. At the same time, Feltrinelli Foundation denies the public space, leaving it on the borders, but witnessing a growing interest that leads to think of a future enhancement of what today appears to be an empty, albeit frequented, surface (Fig. 3).

The uncertainties that the public space project, close to Feltrinelli Foundation, opens up concern the role and power of the architecture itself, designed as an *urban catalyst*, able of fulfilling all these needs. The pure and measured beauty, monumental and massive at the same time, of the building designed by Herzog&de Meuron strikes and fascinates to the point to forget what does not happen around. Or the surrounding silence emphasizes the rigor of the project; the design of public space, around the Feltrinelli Foundation, appears too silent, too hidden and covered by the strength of the architectural intervention. However, it is the life surrounding the architecture that seems able, in certain circumstances, to cover this lack.

5. CITY LIFE: THE ICONIC ARCHITECTURE

As mentioned before, the economic crisis, which began in 2008, has eradicated and changed values and uses of public space, as well as diverting attention to the redesign of void; a void, however, which is the terrain of continuous struggles and claims, tensions and appropriations.

Based on this discussion, the description of the transformation and recovery of the former trade fair, now called City Life, take place. The City Life project strengthens some of the key questions raised before: an operation managed by private actors (Generali Assicurazioni, Allianz in particular) was born with the idea of giving back to the city an important portion of its urban fabric, densifying and concentrating the built up interventions into three skyscrapers, *The Straight One*, *The Twisted One* and *The Curved One*, as the expression of as many designer firms: Arata Isozaki, Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind (Fig. 4).

An ambitious project that shows the integration of spaces for offices, tertiary and residential activities with a generous open space for public uses; the architectural objects should

City Life is (and perhaps will remain) a void in the city, a space not practiced because it is thought in an *extra urban scale*, according to the logic of homologation of many European cities. The tensions between public and private sectors will probably explode, giving to the city a space that will never be public, in the traditional sense of the term, but it could define a new paradigm of contemporary public surfaces. City Life denounces a tension between the unique forms and uses of the historical city compared to the homologation promoted and produced by the global market, where to grow seems to be a synonymous of good architecture.

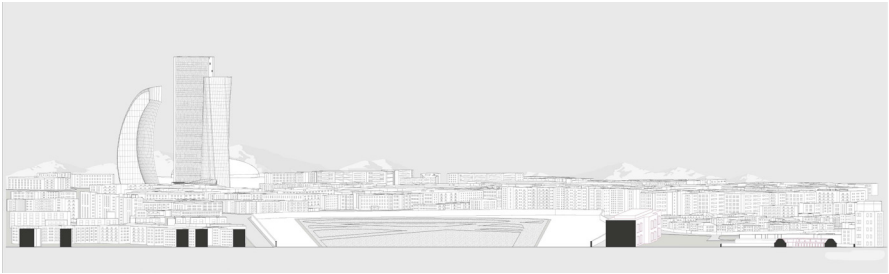


Figure 4. City Life project, the design of a new verticality (Mara Fraticelli 2019)

have been kept together by public space and by a partially covered square. The project has undergone numerous delays and slowdowns due to the economic and real estate crisis, as well as to uncertain fate of the three towers, launched in 2004, started in 2007, it has not yet been completed, the last tower by Daniel Libeskind is now under construction. In this context, the disconnection between the iconic and self-referential force of the three skyscrapers and the uncertainty of the open space is evident; the open space is not unable to unify the ground floor because it is not thought as an attractor or as a dense urban space

6. ARCHITECTURAL TENSIONS: THE FUTURE OF CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC SPACES

To read and to observe tensions between private property and *public use* of space leads to reflect on the meaning of the term public space today, as well as on the processes and methods with which it is possible to think and design contemporary spaces (de Solà-Morales 2009)

The cases shown, and the example of Milan, indicate the will and the need to regain possession of sharing places; it is possible to see these phenomena starting from the rediscovery generated by the interventions of

Porta Nuova and Porta Volta. At the same time, it implies a redefinition of the concept of *public* associated with the term *space*.

Architectural and urban tensions challenge traditional definitions and place us facing *hybrid places*: conceived as public spaces, lived as such, but financed, built and regulated by private entities. Milan, as well as London and other European cities, presents similar cases, characterized by the presence of *pseudo-public spaces*; spaces poised between public wills and private instances, where tensions emerge in the use and appropriation of these places.

It is a tension that denounces a transition and a misunderstanding of uses and properties; generating spaces designed to compensate private real estate investments, the only ones able to have the necessary capital for these interventions. What will be the *duration* of these places and how they will age, is a question to which it is not possible to give answers now; however, a rapid aging of public pseudo-spaces could be imagined.

Places that could pass, like a current fashion language, therefore, undergo and quickly show the signs of the past. A fast time, the one of productivity and economy, that of the power of banks that made its life possible, a time that could escape and change. How much *public space* costs could be another topic able to show the implications of what has been described before. Within a changing scenario, such as the one of Milan, architectural and urban design must find strength and tools to become part of the building process of new parts of the city. Attention is increasingly focused on buildings, icon of modernity, therefore fragmented episodes that intensify the tensions between public and private. The project of public space needs integration and enhancement within the ongoing interventions. The recovery of large portions of city could not be separated from a calibrated and measured relationship between built-up space and open area.

Tension arises where this balance is lacking and where conflicting forces face each other

in the use and appropriation of space. The cases described in this short journey in Milan tell about an evolving public space, result of mediation between private instances and public needs, where, however, an idea of how to design open spaces seems to be missed.

In the case of Porta Nuova, the new plaza invites because it is protected by the built edge and it is elevated above the roads, therefore able to consolidate and strengthen the idea of a new public space. In the case of Porta Volta, architecture is the catalyst of the entire intervention, leaving the role of emphasizing its power to the void.

The space surrounding the Feltrinelli Foundation has not yet had enough time to settle down and become part of everyday life and, perhaps, only time will help this integration. The context of City Life, on the other hand, leaves many doubts about the possible life of public space, financed by the Insurance Companies that will move here; it is a *space out of scale*, not public, still bare and unable to strengthen relations between different elements of the design.

Tensions observed in these places allow a redefinition of the concept of public space, a place of representation of the city's economic power (of banks, insurance companies, etc.), a showcase of recent transformations and a place to show urban and architectural contemporaneity.

The projects presented here described an articulated debate on the relationship between *new* and *old*, in a continuous process of design experimentation: new buildings are juxtaposed to the existing one redefining a new architectural language for Milan. In these years, Milan has represented a laboratory of constant mutation that shows forms and ways with which the architectural design and the design of public space could be defined. It is an open debate, still evolving, which however describes important changes in the construction, definition and use of contemporary public spaces.

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