**THE ATLANTIC WALL LINEAR MUSEUM PROJECT**

Conversation between Gennaro Postiglione and Francesco Lenzini

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## Premise

The Atlantik Wall, understood as a fortified Atlantic coastal infrastructure system erected by the Nazis during World War Two is effectively one-of-a-kind in size and complexity terms. It is a monumental work which Hitler intended to safeguard the section of Atlantic coast stretching from the Pyrenees to North Cape from the much feared Allied landings. This immense defensive line was to have been composed of around 15,000 buildings (of which only around 12,000 were effectively built) set out strategically along the nearly 6000 km of European Atlantic coast (with the exception of Spain and Portugal) both of which were effectively neutral during the war, penetrating several kilometers inland on average. It involved more than thirteen million cubic meters of concrete organized according to a scattered and discontinuous logic. It was a huge and constantly evolving building site which required very detailed planning entrusted to Organization Todt on one hand and, on the other, millions of men, some of whom were from occupied countries condemned to hard labor and interned in special concentration camps.

**FL**

Despite the mind boggling figures, the notable scale of the surviving work and the dramatic scope of the building process - with its own dark history - I believe that the AW has been largely ignored or, at least, its potential to tell us much about the events which generated it under-estimated. Proof of this is the overall state of abandonment of the majority of its extant buildings: a sort of convenient neglect consigned to the progressive decay of an uncomfortable legacy too onerous or time consuming to demolish, as a result of the building technique and structure used. In this sense the desire to recover and enhance the AW's archaeological patrimony, via a multiplicity of research and design experiences which have seen it both promoter and center-stage player, can be seen as a powerful contrary trend - a necessary attempt to bring back this history into our own day.

**GP**

The reconnaissance work done on the restoration and re-use work, and also on the AW's state of abandonment, highlights the fact that the multiplicity of traces and great many buildings

scattered along Europe's Atlantic coast are still in many ways a burdensome presence. It might, however, be said that until recent times, except for some conservation work on certain buildings for military purposes, on one hand, and, on the other, certain, especially historically important sites having been made into museums, no great attention to renovating or re-using these buildings has been made. This latter, however, has changed over the years. Over the last fifteen years, a range of work has spontaneously been done to restore the bunkers to their original size and, to a very limited extent, to make them into museums designed to protect and preserve certain buildings of special collective value for local communities (Caruth 1995). It is only in recent years that a new trend has emerged, on one hand, the result of the military downscaling which has followed the breakdown of the Soviet Union and, on the other, a growing awareness that the last testimony to these events will soon disappear and with it the many stories linked to these war years. With these clear objectives, the restoration and re-use of many AW buildings is slowly picking up speed, converting buildings into museums or implementing more flexible functional programs with the general intention of healing and working through the wounds linked to them. And it is precisely in these cases that the most interesting design contexts have emerged in which debates over and tensions between memories of a still living history and the objectives of the new programs trigger and inspire diverse intervention methods. These strategies make design work on such painful legacies of particular interest not solely for research into conservation and restoration of existing buildings but also in architectural terms *tout court*. This is the context encompassing my research and The Atlantic Wall Linear Museum project designed to set in motion a process of physical and immaterial reappropriation of the artefacts it is made up of. As you quite rightly note, the bulk of the AW's buildings are now ruins, in the absence of specific policies, on one hand, and wide ranging projects on the other. In the absence of a process of shared rethinking of this difficult legacy, each nation has implemented its own strategies ranging from restoring specific sites and buildings, such as in Norway or France, to completely sweeping these painful memories away via demolition, as has been done in Germany. The goal decided on - and one which has currently not been brought to fruition - was to set a re-appropriation process in motion capable of saving the AW from this fate, first and foremost by nurturing a new awareness of the presence of this legacy by bringing in new institutional and social forces. Certainly, the difficulties involved in working over such a vast geographical area and one which is fragmented in both political and management terms have conditioned our approach and meant that its only practical outcomes have been academic work. Despite this, the various initiatives undertaken have widened the field of interest and generated material which is of great preparatory value to research. The same experiences undertaken in the educational context have demonstrated the subject's potential however difficult and unsuited to any sort of unmediated action. This awareness raising process set the foundations for a new perspective on the AW, a full-blown shared trans-national scale memory which is potentially a tool for inclusive rather than conflictual dynamics. From this perspective, the AW could well become a tangible legacy for a Europe with shared wounds but also an ability to reconsider its dramatic past together.

**FL**

Alongside spontaneous or planned re-use action, project work of a predominantly artistic type

designed to prompt the development of new awareness has also been recorded over the years on wartime buildings and not just the AW. This role was also at the center of the considerations put forward by the Seventh Berlin Art Biennial in 2012 which was entitled, for this very reason, Forget Fear. After the end of World War Two, in fact, at a juncture dominated by a collective need to forget, artists were alone in taking on the theme of broken memory and trauma in a systematic and provocative way via three main action approaches. Some artists, such as Christian Boltanski, Naomo Tereza Salmon and Fabio Mauri, to cite just a few, worked on the concept of memory as loss. Others worked on the theme of denial of monuments as the sole possible type of action, given the dated rhetoric of objects which are no longer capable of generating any meaning whatsoever. James Young has defined such work 'counter-monuments', a sort of monument to the contrary underlining the need to find an active, participatory involvement for each single individual in commemorative events and all those whose goal is to preserve collective memories (Young 1992). Over recent years, lastly, the ruins themselves have attracted the attention of certain artists as occurred, for example, in Magdalena Jetelova (1994-95) and Ejdrup Hansen's performances (1995) in specific work on certain AW bunkers design to sweep away the air of grief which suffused them. The wealth of cases which can be mapped shows that this difficult legacy has been a privileged field of artistic experimentation and the only way to take on the themes and contents it represents, sidestepping and sometimes neutralizing the negative weight which generally blocks any concrete renovation work (Bassanelli, 2013).

Conversely, your enquiry trajectory is at a crossroads in a territory in which disciplines such as cultural studies and archaeology of conflict and difficult heritage overlap and breathe life into multiple cross-fertilizations. The objectives of this cross-disciplinary field of research include the construction of an operational field which you define archaeological conflict landscape. These are characterized by an ability to act simultaneously on a range of scales and reconnect up isolated traces to a much broader and more generalized network. And the experience of each individual episode and local events with the common threads of the grand sweep of history. Your writings and your design experiences clearly communicate a need for shared action on the AW by means of a diffused museum network which is alone capable of restoring meaning and overall readability to this patrimony made of places and buildings but also of histories and memories. The approach you have used to take on this theme seems to me powerfully representative of a new trend underway on war legacies which attempts to go beyond classic museum forms to open up places and artefacts linked to painful memories to new meaning horizons. This is, in some way, an attempt at reconciliation, to de-isolate this uncomfortable legacy and restore it to an everyday perceptional and use dimension. Somewhere between a desire to remove the painful memories and a fear of losing fundamental traces in personal identity, museum projects are thus potentially mediation terrain, a 'third space' (Bhabha 1994) in which grief can in some way be worked through. The tools which recent museums are adopting to achieve this result are, I believe, playing a crucial role, a tendency to re-functionalize the jigsaw pieces of this patrimony and thus subtract it from a merely memorial dimension. The value of different shared practices transcends the still necessary aspects of artefact conservation and knowledge of historic events to offer these places new semantic fields. At the same time the re-functionalization trajectory is constantly

exposed to the risk of banal overwriting: the risk of cancelling out significant historical traces remains, especially in those cases in which sometimes significant parts of this patrimony are isolated in the absence of a wide ranging strategic plan.

**GP**

Research and design experiences on the AW fit like important pieces into a larger mosaic whose purpose is the re-appropriation of places and buildings with a dramatic past. This is a complex trajectory to which a range of disciplines and skills have contributed precisely in an attempt to overcome the classic memorialization stereotype. The very sense of the museum consists, I believe, in its ability to construct meanings in a relationship building process between people, places and histories which takes a very different form from traditional museums in which objects are exhibited and venerated, effectively generating a relational discontinuity. The fundamental idea behind a diffused museum is building bridges between people, artefacts, places and histories, thus acting as a tool for re-appropriation and a sense of vicinity. From this point of view, enhancing these buildings, the finds and traces of this patrimony is less a matter of exhibiting them than of their ability to materially and symbolically find a place in people's lives once again. The museum project thus acquires a cathartic value you referred to in respect of burdensome memories which these objects witnessed and still bear witness to. According new meaning to the AW bunkers, like other war related artefacts, is certainly a matter of in some way profaning their wartime identity. In this respect I would like to recall the words of Giorgio Agamben: "If consecrate (sacralize) was the word which designated things leaving the sphere of human law, profanating, by contrast, meant restoring them to free human use. Disactivating an old use, rendering it inoperative potentially generates a new use. Recovering a sense of the means, separating it from its original purpose (Agamben, 2005). This shift in meaning does not automatically imply physical transformation: in the renovation planned for the Saint Nazaire submarine base in France which I developed at the Politecnico di Milano, for example, an important role in the building's re-semanticization was played by the addition of a daily market. This fitted into the existing framework without substantial building modification by means of work with strong social connotations marked out by meetings and exchanges between people throughout. It is a powerfully symbolic act of colonization. In this context it seems more appropriate to speak of re-meaning rather than re-functionalizing as the value of new practices triggered by the project can be a key element in their reappropriation. Although I must confess that in my AW related educational experiences the most interesting proposals have often been those in which the bunkers were 'simply' restored to their original landscape observation function without full blown transformation in use. Gigantic cameras focusing on the horizon, perennially awaiting the event they were built for as was effectively shown in The Longest Day (1962, directed by Ken Annakin, Andrew Marton, Bernhard Wicki).

The international Carso 2014+ competition sponsored by Gorizia province in 2014 for the establishment of a World War One open air museum on the Gorizia Carso used the same approach but in a more innovative way. The Burgi studio which won implemented an overall re-appropriation strategy for this painful history suffused landscape making use of typically military architectural elements. New trenches were carved out in the area to build new

trajectories in karstic language exploration and thus certain caves were renovated to host an underground museum on the Isonzo battles. Overall the use theme for this powerfully characteristic landscape was made the load bearing element for all the museum and exhibition work, triggering a dialogue between use structures and historical narrative. The work done at the Valentine submarine base at Bremen is a very different story. From May 2011, in fact, this base built by the Nazis between 1938 and 1945 - which made considerable use of forced labor - was made into Denkort Bunker Valentin (the Valentin Bunker Memorial Site) to commemorate the victims of the seven concentration camps present in the Bremen-Farge region. The main goal of the work was to reinforce the memorial theme, generating one of the largest transformations in use of a legacy from World War Two destined to become one of the most recent monuments devoted to remembering the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis. It was a necessary project but perhaps also a methodologically anachronistic one which seems to have responded more to an impossible attempt to pay historical debts than to looking to the future in a different way. For this reason the museum apparently belongs to a different period of post World War Two history in its curatorial contribution and the character of the work done (Marszolek 2008).

**FL**

Diffused museums understood as 'museums outside museums' escape the confines of traditional forms to find their way, *in corpore vili,* into the places events happened in, determining new relationships and exchanges between past artefacts, the area and the communities living in it. In the case of the AW, the presence of bunkers and military buildings constitutes a modern archaeological patrimony of an extraordinary scale which melds into the Atlantic coastal landscape in a relationship which we would now call symbiotic despite its violent and overbearing genesis. It is a landscape of great expressive and cognitive potential so dominated by the presence of these military buildings as to make it almost impossible to separate historical and documentary value echoing painful memories from aesthetic-landscape value. And this especially after lengthy abandonment generated a slow reappropriation process by nature of spaces which were carved out of the latter, generating further inter-relationships. I believe that this expressive dimension is fundamentally important to a linear museum vision capable of enhancing this cultural landscape and making the relationship between man, environment and the experience it is repository of somehow more accessible and comprehensible also by means of different interpretations and new forms of use. From a proactive interpretation perspective, the formal and material eloquence of these artefacts is an element of great significance which in some ways transcends their undeniable testimony value to restore them to the status of modern monoliths or, to use Paul Virilio's words, "miniature, religion free temples" (Virilio 1975). Scattered across the coastal landscape, sometimes now partially swallowed up by the very terrain they violently occupied, the AW's bunkers now appear *objets trouvé* and themselves significant polarities of the whole system.

**GP**

The relationship between the AW's bunkers and the landscape they are set in is a controversial one in some ways verging on the paradoxical. Whilst extremely carefully placed

to ensure total control, forming a system of isolated points in continual communication, the bunkers are structures which I would generally define a-topical. Their location has no relationship with the terrain except that which is strictly functional to its wartime purpose of control and defense. With a design and size standardized by a pre-established program of building purpose and building type (collected in the famous Regelbau) and laid out across the land to serve military tactical purposes, these buildings generate no inter-dependent relationship with the landscape but simply overwrite it. Their indifference to the *topos* into which they were carefully incorporated in some way denotes the affirmation of a typological superiority over a topology which in turn reveals an archetype dimension. This abstraction dimension profoundly characterizes the bunkers and is reflected in their compact, mono material, stereometric form which reveals their aesthetic value, opening up their architectural fields. Concrete - symbol of industrial modernity - shows its figurative value in its crudeness, becoming pure matter. I believe that this essentially aesthetic dimension is the key to their re-meaning process in that modern perspective of symbiosis with the landscape which you yourself referred to. The places in which the AW bunkers are located have a spectacular quality: reasoning in landscape terms today is a potential way of integrating them and making them center stage players in a thoroughgoing exhibition process in which the direct experience of the artefacts is once again part of an extended and complex territorial system. In having been called onto to watch over a specific section of territory the bunkers became a privileged vantage point from which to observe them with new eyes by means of that same horizontal vision of the world which cinema chose as privileged outlook for its narrations. As optical cameras with which to capture the surrounding landscape, these buildings can find new meaning horizons.

**FL**

Work done on a patrimony as suffused with its dramatic past as the AW's, as is generally the case with wartime testimony, requires taking on a series of selected cultural processes applied *a posteriori* which supply a conventionally accepted version of historical facts. In many circumstances, elaborating tragedies *ex post* generates distorted or at least altered collective memories of reality. Narrating events linked to such challenging patrimonies takes precedence over the events themselves, producing a story apart. The rhetoric of the opposing parties constantly seeks to take possession of places and objects, channeling meaning into their own version of the facts. The dramatization of the story and its alteration through narrative commonplaces, as is frequently proposed in film and TV, moves us away from that dry factual clarity which opens up, on the other hand, to a different and more profound knowledge acquisition process. Museum projects are affected by these channeled readings and are thus exposed to the risk of perpetrating an in some way distorted history, however based on facts which did happen. And not only because the places and objects concerned have undergone a selective process which consecrates them as *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1994) or condemns them as *lieux d'oubli* (Carr, Jasinski 2013) but as a result of the very same museum strategy which promoted them. The way in which these artefacts are exhibited and the practices with which they are accessed powerfully influences collective perceptions of the events they testify to. In this respect simply remember how a certain bunker exhibition rhetoric which is based on their wartime potential by means of reconstructions and

simulations and omits the drama linked to them contributes to a deviated perception of these structures nurturing the imagination of those approaching them in a fanatical and nostalgic spirit. For these latter the bunkers are first and foremost reliquaries: a whole of performance data linked to their military genesis like the caliber of the arms they held, the number of bullets they could fire in a given unit of time, the territorial radius they could monitor, etc. For this reason I believe that the responsibility of designers is primarily to find a way of telling facts and histories without ideological filters and without opening the way to instrumentalization. Doing so correctly requires a great sensitivity and accurate support from the historical documents in our possession without us allowing ourselves to be hijacked by the interests of specific audiences.

**GP**

The potential for working correctly on the AW legacy is unlikely, in my opinion, to take place via an indispensable condition of academic detachment. The past must be regarded in a neutral spirit and be prepared to take on board surprises. Because it is not a history which has been fully written. Danish historian Henrik Skov Kristensen, director of the Frøslevlejrens Museum, has recently worked from a conflict resolution perspective in the civil population at Padborg (DK), a small town on the German-Danish border, obtaining highly significant results. In a conference held in the auditorium of Westerbork Camp Memorial Centre (NL) in 2013 with the program title *One Camp – Two Narratives: Froeslev 1944-1945, Faarhus 1945-1949, Negotiating the Past?*, this scholar illustrated the way in which, after the end of World War Two, a sort of civil conflict erupted between the peoples of this specific front which was the outcome of the stories of survivors and oral transmission of events reported by indirect witnesses which almost immediately generated highly discordant narratives between pro-German and pro-independence people. By means of a meticulous reconstruction of the facts, documented in an accurate and precise chronological sequence, in ten years of work certain false legends have begun to be swept away, restoring the truth of fact to certain historical events, attributing each faction with their own responsibility, attenuating local tensions and conflicts considerably thus generating a full blown reconciliation between parties. The narratives tend frequently to be extreme, either black or white, but research on the AW has once again given me an insight into the fact that within these complex contexts there are large gray areas which escape this distinction however contextualized within an unequivocal general history. Recognizing the complexity of a history and its facts takes none of their truthfulness away from them and neither does it cancel out, eliminate or rewrite history. It is, however, certainly necessary to recognize that this perspective has become practicable for us thanks to the chronological distance which now separates us from these dramatic episodes. Earlier generations were too weighed down by their tragic experiences to be capable of elaborating a clear retrospective reconstruction of the facts. Getting closer to and touching history, denying that process of deification which dramatic events are frequently subject to, is a way of bringing them closer to home and, ultimately, cohabiting with them even when they are as loaded with uncomfortable legacies as these are. It is, however, important to avert any risk that utilitarian, or worse, instrumental, interests come to the fore in relation to this patrimony as has occurred on several occasions, with these being channeled into the exaltation of the ideology which produced them. One of the intentions underlying designing a

diffused AW museum was precisely to subtract the bunkers from instrumental use by those fanatics whose by no means negligible presence generates ambiguities and makes it an extremely delicate matter to gain a closer look at a patrimony already so heavily conditioned by its tragic past. There are still a great many people who are attracted by the Third Reich's heroic rhetoric who see the inviolate bunkers and their physical bulk - despite the many available demonstrations of their unsuitability and fragility - as the embodiment of these values.

**FL**

A linear AW museum is to be seen from the perspective of a reconciliation between places, events and people through observation, consideration and use of a patrimony linked to painful memories frequently covered over without having been elaborated. Returning to the direct experience of *nudo luogo* (bare place) (Pirazzoli 2010), on one hand a diffused museum shows us the testamentary scope of the dramatic events which left their mark on it and, on the other, it is an attempt to supply a meeting ground between geographically and culturally separate people in which they can make new relationships. Reconsidering this painful legacy does not, however, imply denying the Nazi atrocities they were a direct expression of as much as attempting to learn a further lesson for a Europe which is constantly in search of shared experiences which are more tangible than Brussels's bureaucratic mechanisms. The scars constituted by fortified lines can, via a new reading, constitute a new tool in the formation of new supra-national identities, conscious and commemorative of the failure of aggressive, obtuse ultra-nationalism and ultimately of war as a tool for resolution of international controversies.

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