

# Conference: Architecture of Alterity

University of Edinburgh

## Self-organised Architecture in the Superhistorical City

Track3: Unveiling the Political: Process, Identity and Alterity

Clara Archibugi, Master Degree in Philosophy at La Sapienza University of Rome  
Clemens Nocker, PhD Fellow in Architecture at La Sapienza University of Rome  
Sapienza Università di Roma, Via A. Gramsci 53, 00197, Rome, Italy  
clemens.nocker@gmail.com, +39 3279817986  
clara.archibugi@gmail.com, +39 3338773360

### Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to redefine the interaction between historical architecture and contemporary space production, a process that is linked to the construction of cultural identity. Seeing that identity is something which is always (re)defined by otherness, in a dialectical process, how is this translated in the construction of place identity?

For more than three decades, the built heritage in European cities has been a focus of attention in the discourse of architecture, urban design and planning. The European Union is launching historical city centres. In the last decade built heritage and the UNESCO heritage status had become a big promoter in the economy of city tourism. However, these processes do not guarantee a cultural identity for the citizens and their daily life. In many “superhistorical” European cityscapes we can see the tendency towards an over-musealisation of historical urban spaces. This phenomenon creates an enlarging discrepancy between the local citizens and their relation to their city. It seems that paradoxically, the more a city governance tries to preserve its cultural identity the most the contemporary production of space gets lost – and consequentially its identity.

The prototype of this process is the city of Rome, with its historical weight that blocs an innovative city development. In other words, this effort to preserve identity is blocking the affection of alterity, meaning the otherness, something that constitutes and renews cultural production - which is essential to (re)shape local identity.

In Rome the main contemporary cultural production is held by autonomous institutions – often illegal – which are characterized by bottom-up processes, as concerns their birth and political decisions and meaning. This mechanism allows to absorb alterity in the

constitution of urban governance. The cultural and political situation in Rome was leading into the creation of many self-organised and mainly illegal culture centres. Some of their main characteristics are accessibility, inclusivity and multifunctionality for the citizens and their interests. Furthermore, they have developed interesting decision-making processes. Many of these new kind of spaces are self-organized autonomous occupations within their urban districts. The function and programme of each of these so called “New Generation Occupation” is based on an open hybrid space for many different users in form of lectures, concerts, working spaces, sports facilities, parties and many others. It's within the crossing of these different activities – inscribed in a direct democracy process – that eventually (counter)culture is produced. The phenomenon of these new occupations poses the question of what is culture and if they could represent a new paradigm of a re-activation of cultural production held by the citizens. On one hand, culture is something who can't be provoked intentionally but which can only be reached by working on its good conditions; on the other hand, what would be a cultural policy that aims to create these conditions? In other words: what would be a cultural policy that protects the counter-culture without losing the autonomous of its identity? Moreover, how does this process affects – or even defends - an authentic democracy?

## **Introduction**

To illustrate the theory that in human mind memories, experiences and traumas are never destroyed but rather preserved, Sigmund Freud used the metaphor of the city of Rome. In his late *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, when treating the process of conservation in the psyche, he takes as an example the Eternal City: by examining his development, in Rome's architectural history every historical age does not cover the previous one, but rather they lay side by side, sometimes overlapping, often in a chaotic way:

Let us choose the history of the Eternal City as an example. Historians tell us that the oldest Rome of all was the *Roma quadrata*, a fenced settlement on the Palatine. Then followed the phase of the Septimontium, when the colonies on the different hills united together; then the town which was bounded by the Servian wall; and later still, after all the transformations in the periods of the republic and the early Caesars, the city which the Emperor Aurelian enclosed by his walls. We will not follow the changes the city went

through any further, but will ask ourselves what traces of these early stages in its history a visitor to Rome may still find today, if he goes equipped with the most complete historical and topographical knowledge.

One of the main interests in Freud's theoretical production has been with no doubt the discovery of a subconscious layer - other than a grasper, more cognizable and aware one held by consciousness – which is strongly linked to the subject's past. As happens in human mind, Rome is a city where past and present is physical in the urban formation. If one moves through the impressive cityscape can find a collage between historical building, different forms built on or next to each other. The city is representing its history and artefacts in a very fascinating way between the modern metropolis and its inhabitants. Any hypothetical visitor, continues Freud,

[...] will see the wall of Aurelian almost unchanged. He can find sections of the Servian rampart at certain points where it has been excavated and brought to light. If he knows enough - more than present-day archaeology - he may perhaps trace out in the structure of the town the whole course of this wall and the outline of *Roma quadrata*. Of the buildings which once occupied this ancient ground-plan he will find nothing, or but meagre fragments, for they exist no longer. With the best information about Rome of the republican era, the utmost he could achieve would be to indicate the sites where the temples and public buildings of that period stood. These places are now occupied by ruins, but the ruins are not those of the early buildings themselves but of restorations of them in later times after fires and demolitions. It is hardly necessary to mention that all these remains of ancient Rome are found woven into the fabric of a great metropolis which has arisen in the last few centuries since the Renaissance. There is assuredly much that is ancient still buried in the soil or under the modern buildings of the town. This is the way in which we find antiquities surviving in historic cities like Rome.<sup>1</sup>

Speaking of mind, this simultaneous presence of past and present is articulated in an even stronger way, insomuch as for Freud in the life of mind the preservation of past represents the rule, more than an exception. The metaphor, however, is imperfect: the topological mechanism that Freud search to trace in mind – the distinction between conscious and subconscious – cannot fully be represented in a physical way by the historical stratification of a city, neither on the archaeological method. This work would

---

<sup>1</sup> S. Freud, *Civilization and its discontents*, New York : W.W. Norton, 1962, p. 22.

be to recall, starting from some traces, what the Viennese founder of psychoanalysis called repression; given this, archaeology seems for Freud a good analogy, which he often used to explain the psychoanalytic methodology.<sup>2</sup>

It is not by chance that Freud, in this approximation, chose Rome, because speaking of cities it is the most exemplary for this theory. As well as in the formation of mind – and so of the individual – it is in the overlapping of old and new, in their interferences, ambiguities and incorporations that the identity of a city is built: on the interconnection of historical architecture and contemporary cultural production, in the way they relate as much as in their tensions.

Reversing Freud's metaphor, it's worth asking what is nowadays happening to the mind of Rome: it seems that the discrepancy between old and new is widening, as if they were by now two hermetically sealed compartments, that don't communicate anymore, as in a dissociative disorder (to keep the metaphor): on one side, the musealized city, that strives for being a huge open air museum, perfectly preserved and ready to be consumed by tourists – which seem to be almost the only beneficiary of the historical centre; on the other side, a contemporary culture production which is totally asleep. Two of the most recent cultural projects, MACRO and MAXXI, have no funding and are gradually emptying. Contemporary architecture does not seem to embrace citizens and their needs – least of all for those who desperately struggle to become citizens – and the historical one seems destined to be consumed by someone else. As a city, Rome seems very far from being a “common space”; it is rather a fragmented space, chaotic and loud in the historical centre and quiet and still in the peripheries. Can we ascribe the cause of this situation only to a cumbersome past, which obstacles a contemporary culture adequate to one of Europe's capitals? In what relation should be old and new and what

---

<sup>2</sup> In his philosophical reading of Freud, *De l'interprétation - Essai sur Freud*, Paul Ricoeur states that psychoanalysis shows up in the form of reflection as an archaeology of the subject. Already in his *Delusion and Dream in Jensen's Gradiva*, where Freud applies his psychoanalytic research deriving from *The Interpretation of Dreams* by analysing the novel of Wilhelm Jensen. The story is about a young archaeologist, Norbert Hanold, who – starting from a dream - comes to realize his repressed love for a childhood friend through a long and complex process, mainly by associating her with an idealized woman in the form of a bas-relief that he happens to see, the *Gradiva*; this association and another dream will bring him to Pompei, which he believed being the birth place of the *Gradiva*, where he will find his real and forgotten friend. This novel was an excellent way, for Freud, to show the analogical link between the archaeological process and psychoanalyses.

political culture is to be done? A deeper look will reveal that this is a way to enquire about what is public space and its relation with architecture and culture.

### The breakdown: Teatro Valle Occupato



(figure 1: the theatre in 2012)

14th of June, 2011. Morning. In the already boiling city centre, a certain number of citizens crosses the threshold of *Teatro Valle*, the most ancient theatre in use in Rome, build in 1727 and located in not more than four minutes walking from Pantheon. While a crowd of tourists is there shooting photos and enjoying the city, this other group breaks into a public theatre which had closed a couple of months before, destined to privatization or, more likely, to a definite closure due to austerity cuts<sup>3</sup>. Who are they?

---

<sup>3</sup> In 2011 the management of the Theatre was transferred from the *Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali* to the municipality. "Teatro Valle was occupied in 2011 on the day after the victory of the Italian water referendum when 27 million Italians voted against the privatisation of water utilities. At that time, a new left-wing coalition – including grassroots political and civil society organisations and a splinter group from Partito Democratico (the main left-wing party) – came

They are artist, politicians, students, cultural workers, journalists, citizens, curious: they define themselves “workers of the show” (“*lavoratori dello spettacolo*”) and declare to be “occupying a theatre as workers occupy the factories”<sup>4</sup>; their intention is to regain possession on the cultural production process and practice auto-governance. Moreover, they declare a new juridical category: the joint management of the commons, not private nor public. For three years “the occupants took care of the ancient theatre, collected funds for small restorations and produced shows of an exceptional interest, performances, assemblies, educative programs to which the population had access through a donation method based on each one's possibilities”<sup>5</sup>. With the help of a group of famous lawyers and theorists<sup>6</sup>, they first discussed and then realized a *Foundation* that counts 5600 citizens, in order to have a juridical recognition, the “first institution of the commons through communitary political action”<sup>7</sup>. For this purpose they elaborated a Statute which is open and modifiable by any interested, according to their horizontal management principles, making it accessible from their web site (changes can then be discussed in open assemblies). Their experience was studied worldwide and was the object of numerous publications; they received so far 4 prizes (among which the prestigious “Princess Margritt Award” assigned by the *European Cultural Foundation*).

When, the 31st of July 2014, in the middle of the process of legalization the theatre was closed for “urgent renovation works” (that had no evidence and were so far not even

---

together around the Movement for Water Common Good led by MP Stefano Rodotà, Ugo Mattei and other prominent lawyers. The movement opposed the programme of privatisation and labour deregulation of the Berlusconi government and proposed a radical reorganisation of the state based on decentralised forms governance and progressive welfare policies, including a European basic income and minimum wage. In 2010, Berlusconi's Minister for the Economy Giulio Tremonti closed down the Ente Teatrale Italiano (ETI – the national agency in charge of the management of some public theatres and cultural institutions). This *de facto* sparked the privatisation of the whole Italian theatre sector.” M. Mollona, *An unprecedented experiment in political economy and participatory democracy: The Teatro Valle experience and its legacies*, [www.culturalfoundation.eu/library/tvo-massimiliano-mollona](http://www.culturalfoundation.eu/library/tvo-massimiliano-mollona)

<sup>4</sup> U. Mattei et al., *Teatro Valle Occupato. La rivolta culturale dei beni comuni*, p. 10, DeriveApprodi, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> P. Zardo, *Un appello per salvare il Teatro Valle*, Internazionale, 11 July 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Among which Stefano Rodotà, Ugo Mattei, Paolo Maddalena, Salvatore Settis, Maria Rosaria Marella.

<sup>7</sup> U. Mattei, *Teatro Valle Occupato. La rivolta culturale dei beni comuni*, p. 16, DeriveApprodi, 2012.

started) and remained close for six months with no plan about its future, many artist and intellectuals showed their support and made a public motion: among them, Slavoj Žižek, David Harvey, Étienne Balibar, Michael Hardt, Peter Weibel, Sasa Dobricic and Tomaso Montanari.<sup>8</sup> The future and the use of the theatre remains uncertain.<sup>9</sup>

What the experience of Teatro Valle showed is exemplary of a problematic relation, particularly evident in Rome, between built heritage and contemporary culture production.

### **Built Heritage and the concept of the historical city**

The typical European city form is built on fragments: the historical core, the suburban residential areas, the office district, the shopping mall and the industrial zone. The inner centre is the only part that can be considered as a multifunctional space. This city core is defined as a successful mix between residential, office and retail space. Its streets, the historical architecture, the squares, small retail facilities and cafés are creating a special urban atmosphere, which is leading into a powerful force for identity.

In the last 30 years, many European cities recreated pedestrian areas in their city centres. Being a “flaneur” became “postmodern” and the historical architecture with its squares and narrow streets opened for a fluctuating city life. The Danish architect Jan Gehl analysed in his book *Life between Buildings* that the historical cityscapes with its historical buildings, churches, monuments and public squares are creating the most attractive aesthetic for pedestrians. This attractiveness can be seen in many commercial activities public events and city tourism. This means that the ornament which Adolf Loos hated so much at the beginning of the 20th century became the identification for a successful post-modern European city.

For more than three decades, the built heritage in European cities has been a focus of attention in the discourse of architecture, urban design and planning. The European Union is launching special programs for supporting and financing preservation, renewal and revitalization of historical city centres. In the last decade built heritage and the

---

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.dinamopress.it/news/appello-in-sostegno-del-valle-occupato>

<sup>9</sup> The activity stopped the 11 august 2014: the occupants decided to leave the Theatre peacefully, after the proposal from the *Teatro di Roma* (an association part of the municipality) to cooperate with the *Fondazione Teatro Valle Bene Comune* in what should have been, as declared the president of *Teatro di Roma*, Marino Sinibaldi, a participated form of theatre. Currently, the theatre's activity has stopped since already one year.

UNESCO heritage status had become a big promoter in the economy of urban tourism and the importance of place identity.

Rem Koolhaas wrote in his essay *Preservation is Overtaking Us* about the history and extension of preservation laws. He describes the rapid extension of listed built heritage from a singular object towards a coherent cityscape. One the first preserved building was the *Notre Dame Cathedral* in Paris preserved as a singular object in 1844 and extended with a protected area around in 1913. In 1973 the whole Soho district in New York got preserved and designated as a historic city landmark. From the 60s on we can see an extreme extension of preserved built environment. According to Koolhaas, this fact creates a kind of over-preservation and cities became open air museums for their residents and visitors.

The original root of this over-preservation process is, with no doubt, an important task, a responsibility that every citizen should subscribe: the care and preservation of its past. In order to protect and guide the outstanding historical and natural sites was founded UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), born in 1945. The step to create a programme for cultural and national heritage protection was taken during the 17th UNESCO general conference held in Paris in 1972<sup>10</sup>. The agreement of the convention was the fact that there is a need to protect the cultural and natural heritage from destruction in relation to social and economical conditions.

Although the historical sites has always been of public interest – for tourism as much as for the local people – the concept of the “historic city” is more recent:

The invention of the historic city collapsed the memories of different historic periods into a generic notion of “the past.” This process relied on a specific elasticity of the language employed by designers and theorists. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, terms such as preservation or reconstruction retained a positive connotation while simultaneously time undergoing a radical change in meaning. In the same way, the quasi-biological conception

---

<sup>10</sup> Criteria for the Inclusion of Cultural Properties on the World Heritage List: monuments: architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings and combinations of features, which are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science; sites: works of man or the combined works of nature and of man, and areas including archaeological sites which are of outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological points of view. (UNESCO)



of the city as a body with a life cycle, where “obsolete” neighbourhoods had to be regularly demolished, was gradually suspended.<sup>11</sup>

This kind of transformation processes can be seen in the cityscape of many European cities today: different forms of architectural expression built next to each other towards a unique whole. The interconnection of an architectural production over centuries can be considered as the formal identification of a European cityscape.

### The city of Rome



(figure 2: Porta Maggiore from Google Maps street view © Google 2015)

Since 2000 years within the influence of the Roman Empire and the Catholic Church many significant architectonic masterpieces were created. Rome is home and birthplace to many architectural typologies. “The town is not really like a natural phenomenon. It is an artefact - an artefact of a curious kind, compounded of willed and random elements, imperfectly controlled. If it related to physiology at all, it is more like a dream than anything else.”<sup>12</sup> Walking through the city of Rome is a spectacle which nobody can find somewhere else. The city is a collage of time between different architectural periods and

---

<sup>11</sup> F. Urban, *The Invention of the Historic City - Building the Past in East Berlin 1970-1990*, <http://opus.kobv.de/tuberlin/volltexte/2006/1204/>

<sup>12</sup> J. Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town The Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy and the Ancient World*, MIT Press, 1988, p. 24

archaeological sites. Rome's cityscape is a kind of architectural metamorphosis which is interacting on different urban layers in form of monuments, temples, churches and excavations. One of the conspicuous aspects is that the city consists out of many iconic buildings and monumental constructions. Buildings like the Coliseum, the Pantheon, St. Peters Cathedral are just view of these iconic architectures.

Less known to the visitors is the *other* Eternal City: if, on one side, Rome is built on the fully recognized value and appreciated historical sites, there is another side of the historical city, that consists in the non-functional fragments of the old built heritage. These ancient parts are adjusted and renovated based on the practical needs of the city, in an organic way – exemplary in this sense is *Porta Maggiore*, one of the main ancient Roman city gate built in the year 52 AD, a monumental double archway built of white travertine by the emperor Claudius, which is nowadays one of the main traffic junctions of the city. Just next to it was discovered by chance, in 1917, a subterranean neo-pitagorical basilica built in the first century, which is still closed to the public - a discovery that was at the time supported by these kind of declarations: “one may say, without fear of exaggeration, that this is one of the most important discoveries ever made in Rome, and it raises a formidable number of problems archaeological, historical and artistic.”<sup>13</sup>

This represents at the same time the amazement and contradiction of Rome: apart from the fully recognized value of the main tourist sites, the presence of numerous and not less relevant ruins that for some reason lay aside, mostly forgotten, organically fitted with the ongoing of the contemporary metropolis: they create unintentional compositions that are one of the major characteristics in the imaginary of Rome.

### **A stable image of Rome: the Nolli map**

To deal with Rome's unintentional composition, which took place over the succession of eras, is not an easy task, especially if you are an 18th century cartographer. The historical representation of the Eternal City changed radically after the *Nuova Pianta di Roma*, realized in 1748 by Giovanni Battista Nolli. The celebrated and extremely meticulous architect and cartographer with his team measured the entire city in eleven

---

<sup>13</sup> G. Bagnani, *The Subterranean Basilica at Porta Maggiore*, *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol.9 (1919), pp. 78-85

months using exact trigonometric methods.<sup>14</sup> The graphical expression of this new form of city map was very revolutionary for that time, using innovative methods such as the *Tavoletta Pretoriana*, a device used in land surveying to provide a solid and level surface on which to make field drawings. In the monumental Nolli map spaces are divided between black and white, which are indicating the streets and the buildings of the city into two very clear typologies of the urban landscape. As Pier Vittorio Aureli points out, “the figure-ground distinction that Nolli introduced has often been discussed if symbolizing the difference between public and private space, but such an interpretation is incorrect. Many of the courtyards and gardens represented as “open spaces” were inaccessible to the public; furthermore, it is problematic to apply the notion of public space to a church nave or a cloister.”<sup>15</sup> The discussion on what is a public space and what not can be seen as an ongoing question in the city of Rome until now. Aureli defines this question with the differentiation of urban space and architectural space:

Rather, [in the Nolli map] the distinction between the figure of architecture and the ground of the city introduces a more subtle but decisive difference in the cartographic representation of the city: the difference between architectural space and urban space. The *Nuova pianta di Roma* is one of the primary illustrations of the change in the representation of the city from architectural form to urban mass.<sup>16</sup>

### **The dialectic between modern and ancient city: Giovanni Battista Piranesi**

Another of the major protagonists in the history of the representation of Rome, who dealt and played with the importance of all its architectural composition, was the 18<sup>th</sup> century architect and archaeologist Giovanni Battista Piranesi, pupil and critic of Nolli. In opposition with Nolli, Piranesi's representation of Rome considers irreconcilable the dialectic between the existing and the ancient city. In Piranesi's view, the modern Rome was unable to integrate past and present.

Piranesi was one of the major figures in the history of Rome to give the city a significant image in form of his extraordinary drawings. In his *Scenographia Campi Martii* he is

---

<sup>14</sup> T. Kirk , *The Architecture of Modern Italy*, Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> P. V. Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, MIT Press, 2011, p. 109.

<sup>16</sup> P. V. Aureli *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, p. 109.

showing an image of the city which is based on its imperial past in form of different ruins which are isolated from the modern city of Piranesi's days:

The ruins are not restored but are represented in their current condition, as if they had been liberated from all subsequent historical layers. Here the ruins can be read both as what had survived the subsequent development of the city and as the conceptual guides for the reconstruction of a new city, which Piranesi would present in the *Ichnographia* plate. His *Scenographia* thus condenses three seemingly conflicting actions—destruction, restoration, and reconstruction of the city—into one representation.<sup>17</sup>

By isolating monuments and ruins in a deserted scenario, out of the urban space, Piranesi was contesting the attempt to objectify, scientifically, the city as a fact, already given, not modifiable and which could be only described, in the most accurate way, obstructing then every change, every possibility to imagine a different future:

Piranesi's method of surveying the city and reconstructing its form can be read as a critique of the urban epistemology that the Nolli map exemplified in the discourse implied by its techniques and goals. Against the scientific premises of the Nolli map, which developed toward a totalized mapping and thus control of the city, Piranesi recuperated the formal thinking of the *instauratio urbis* as an ideological reading of the city. While Nolli grounded his mapping in the scientific objectivity of measurement and surveys made with the most up-to-date technology, Piranesi turned these tools to the production of a knowledge of the city still informed by conjectures, assertions, and decisions rather than just scientific "facts."<sup>18</sup>

It could be said that the dialectic between ancient and modern traced by Piranesi on Rome was never overcome. It certainly has changed its topography and its terms, but its mechanism has not stopped being reproduced. The desert represented by Piranesi is the desert seen by the tourist when visiting the city, that arises around the monuments

---

<sup>17</sup> P. V. Aureli, 2011, p. 85.

<sup>18</sup> P. V. Aureli, *ivi*, p. 114-115.

and the main spotlights, something intentionally created on the purpose to threat cultural heritage as a form of economic income.

### **A sandwich with Dante's Divine Comedy: the contemporary Rome**



(figure 3: restauration works in Fontana di Trevi, 2013)

To be honest, the conception of culture as an economical income is far from being the predominant on the Italian contemporary scene: lets' just consider the declaration of Giulio Tremonti, at the time the economic minister in Berlusconi's government, when justifying the cuts on the cultural sector asserted: "Well, go ahead and try to make a sandwich with Dante's *Divine Comedy*"<sup>19</sup>. Tremonti, not by chance, was the very same person that closed the ETI, *Ente Teatri Italiani*, that provoked the closure of Teatro Valle. Despite the declaration of Tremonti, it is estimated that only in Rome there are about 12 million visitors per year (that makes the city one of the major tourist destinations in the world) which are imagining the urban scenario as an open-air theme park: 2000 years of visible history are leading the city of Rome into a world famous open-air museum.

---

<sup>19</sup> As declared in October 2010, during an interview discussing the budget in the cultural sector and university.

The Tremonti episode lead to a wide discussion about what is the sense and the role of culture in Italy. Some economists and theoreticians, as a reaction, wrote a manifesto in order to promote another concept of culture; part of the manifesto appeared as an article on an important Italian newspaper, *Il Sole 24 ore* (owned by *Confindustria*, the Italian employers' federation) with the title “No culture, no development” (“*Niente cultura, niente sviluppo*<sup>20</sup>”) which insisted instead on the importance of “culture as the oil of Italy”.

This debate can let us distinguish very clearly between two modalities to conceive culture, that goes beyond the Italian problematic situation. These can be synthesized in “we can eat with culture” and “we can't eat with culture”: it is worth analysing their meaning for our purpose. First of all, both of them seem to consider as the only declination of culture the “cultural goods”: these two alternatives – which at bottom hide an identity – seem fluctuating between the cultural goods as an obstacle, an encumbrance or a weight to be maintained (as, for example, Porta Maggiore's underground basilica) which certainly doesn't fill out the plate; and the other one, only apparently in contrast, that sees these goods as a resource for profit, petrol of Italy, for which “the matter has to become strictly economical”. These two visions deduce different conclusion from a same conception of culture: of its ability or inability to relaunch economics. No wonder in the manifesto is used the expression “Culture industry”, a term - *Kulturindustrie* – introduced in 1944 by M. Horkheimer e T. W. Adorno<sup>21</sup> to describe, in a critical way, the factory producing standardized cultural goods, for which “Culture as a common denominator already contains in embryo that schematisation and process of cataloguing and classification which bring culture within the sphere of administration.”

In the year 2000 the former mayor of Rome Francesco Rutelli decided to dedicate the plan towards an modernisation of the city especially in a cultural sense. The aim was to give Rome a more contemporary image to compete with the other global cities around the world:

---

<sup>20</sup> The *Manifesto* appeared on the newspaper *Il Sole 24 ore* the 18th of February, 2012: <http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/cultura/2012-02-18/niente-cultura-niente-sviluppo-141457.shtml?uuid=AaCqMotE> . Among the numerous signers, Giorgio Napolitano, the former President of Italy.

<sup>21</sup> M. Horkheimer, T. W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford, Calif. Stanford Univ. Press, 2002.

Francesco Rutelli's Grands Projets for Rome are coordinated in what he has called "a new master plan for growth for a city that does not need to grow." The master plan of 2000 is based not on the idea of expansion but on the vitalization of latent urban resources. The mayor explained, "Rome hopes to offer to visitors from all over the world an avant-garde metropolis with the ability to combine the patrimony of its glorious past with an improved quality of life, a modern and compatible infrastructure, efficient services and cultural stimuli."

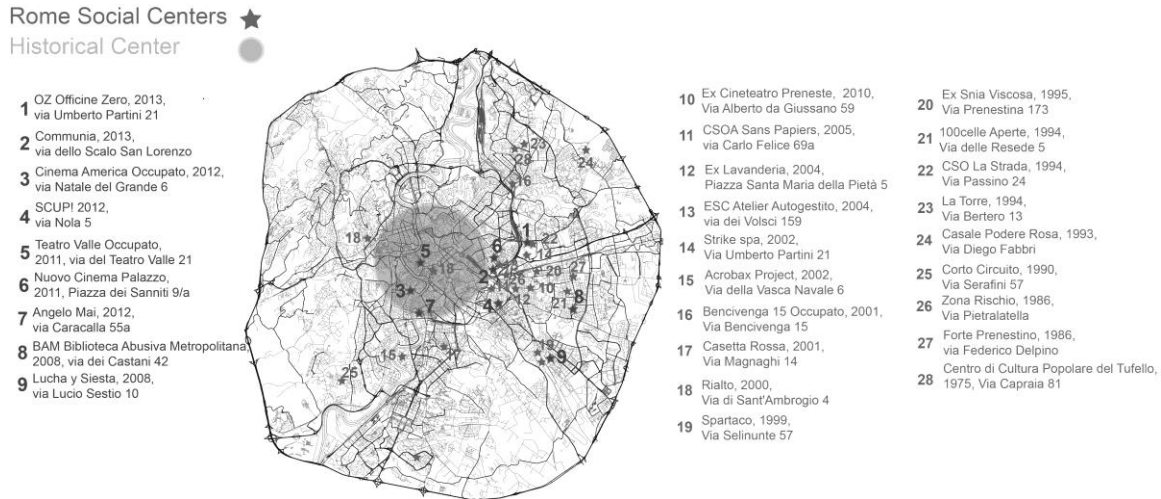
[...]The master plan is designed to govern the entire metropolitan area, not just the historic centre. As Paolo Portoghesi puts it, it is a plan to help correct "an overcongested heart and an invertebrate body." The problem lies in dealing with the far-flung periphery, forgotten places like *Tor Bella Monaca*, *Torre Spaccata*, *Tor Marancia*. Their evocative names derive from the medieval towers of the *Agro Romano*, but they do not conceal the lives of desolation of these former Fascist Settlements.<sup>22</sup>

Another strategy for the city was to change the tourist strategy from a post-industrial archaeology towards a contemporary modern one. A part of this strategy was the organization DARC (*Direzione Generale per l'Architettura e l'Arte Contemporanea*) which is a special institution for the support of contemporary art and architecture. DARC was founded in 2007 and since that many new contemporary collections and museums like MAXXI and MACRO appeared in the city of Rome. That was an important step for creating a more contemporary image for the 3 million inhabitants metropolis to be able to compete with other European cities. The financial support at least lasted for a couple of years until 2010 when different cultural organisations in the city of Rome went into serious financial problems. The cultural budget of the city declined drastically and the DARC organisation lost its function for supporting contemporary culture. Many of the new museums and cultural institutions lost significant parts of their yearly financial resources and had serious problems to continue their programme.

---

<sup>22</sup> T. Kirk , *The Architecture of Modern Italy*, Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005, p. 255.

## Social Centres in Rome and their impact on the City



(figure 4: a map of the *Centri Sociali* in Rome)

The economical configuration of culture moves first of all from its physical places, and goes hand in hand with the functionalization of urban spaces. Although it is without doubts the predominant, the conception of culture as an economic good is not the only existing one, and we should question which are the places who guarantee this other way of promoting and producing culture. For example, cultural associations, committee districts, volunteering activities and squats represent, in a very different way, a valid alternative to the functionalization of culture.

The existence of social centres in Italy is having a long tradition and started in the middle of the 20th century. The country was suffering from a 20 years fascist regime followed by a political hegemony of the Christian Democrats party. After the fascist period, many autonomous left wing organisations have formed a strong presence in the city of Rome, influenced by thinkers like Antonio Negri. Different independent groups formed the *Autonomia* movement, which used the classical Marxism ideology as their language.<sup>23</sup> The end of *Autonomia* in the mid-1980s concurrently generated the Social Centre Movement, which also absorbed a new generation of anarchists who identified themselves as “punks” and were defined by a repudiation of the rules of modern

<sup>23</sup> P. Mudu, *At the Intersection of Anarchists and Autonomists: Autogestioni and Centri Sociali*, ACME: An International E-Journal For Critical Geographies, 2012, p. 414



capitalist society through dress, music, and a simultaneous rejection of political participation and development of political consciousness.<sup>24</sup>

The earliest Social Centres were organised by workers organisations with the name *Casa del Popolo* (House of the People). With the process of de-industrialisation the Italian economy declined in the 1980s and the social centres became again places for a protest movement. These “Centri Sociali” are occupied urban spaces animated by different groups of people, which are fighting for the right to cultural places without any commercial or speculative interest. The movement is presenting a form of self-organised and anti-capitalistic cultural space production, which is protesting against the weak political and cultural landscape of the city of Rome. Some Social Centres underwent a nuanced paradigm shift in the 1990s, growing from militant pockets of resistance into more public spheres within the city that maintained their individuality while beginning to network in order to act in common over certain demands.<sup>25</sup> “Broadly defined, Social Centres are abandoned buildings, such as warehouses, factories, military forts, or schools that have been occupied or “squatted” and transformed into cultural and political hubs explicitly free from both the market and state control.”<sup>26</sup>

However, as Rome’s squatted Social Centres have always shared some ubiquitous qualities, primarily their role as sites of occupation where the political dimension is dominant over urban housing needs.<sup>27</sup> In general all of the “Centri Sociali” are self-financed and many of their members are working as volunteers without any salary. Different activities or renovation works are paid by fund-raising through cultural events, parties and private donations. The squatters are in most of the cases supported by the local neighbourhood and are places for everybody.

In seeking to exist outside the dominant capitalist bureaucracy, it follows that squatted Roman Social Centres generally attempted to organize horizontally to achieve a form of

---

<sup>24</sup> P. Mudu, *At the Intersection of Anarchists and Autonomists*, p. 419

<sup>25</sup> A. Solaro, “Forte Prenestino” trans. by Steve Wright in *A Window onto Italy’s’ Social Centres, Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture and Action* 1, no.1 (2007), 12-20.

<sup>26</sup> McGann, Shaun J., “Interpreting the Roman Squatting Tradition”. Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2014. Trinity College Digital Repository, <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/429>

<sup>27</sup> P. Vereni, *Spaces In Between: Squats and Religious Practice in Rome*, p. 5.

direct, non-hierarchical democracy.<sup>28</sup> This horizontally is discussed in participatory weekly meetings debating the ideology and practice of squatted urban spaces. These debates are focused on the relationship between the consumer and the social centre, the relationship between political entities and the social centre (including the arguments over the legalization of these spaces), the relationship between the individual and labour, the provision of services in the context of the shrinking public welfare state, and a host of other, often hyper localized, issues. Perhaps the greatest division was between centres that accepted a relationship with the municipality and those that did not.<sup>29</sup> But, Social Centres were forced to collectively address other realities as well – how should the centres be funded? Should the workers be paid? Was it possible to develop a political consciousness while maintaining the core mission of an autonomous self-managed space?<sup>30</sup>

Most notably, they have helped to ameliorate the damage caused by the Roman tradition of speculative expansion by reconstituting abandoned and decrepit properties in the city for positive public use. Social Centers emancipated the antagonistic movement from the ghetto, but it is their continued connection to this secular movement which has made them somewhat incompatible with integrating the recent international immigrants who wish to keep their religious beliefs or involving citizens who do not want to operate outside of neoliberalism, but simply believe they are not being provided with the public services they are owed as tax payers.<sup>31</sup>

Social centres in Rome are places for “everybody”: migrants, workers, students, children etc. The aim is to create “common spaces” for the local population in Rome against the neoliberal city policies. The fact that most of this common spaces are in a constant danger to get evicted is bringing up a discussion for legalising some of the social centres and helps illustrate the different ideologies in the Roma squatting scene.

---

<sup>28</sup> P. Mudu, *Resisting and Challenging Neoliberalism: The Development of Italian Social Centers*, Antipode, 2004 p. 67.

<sup>29</sup> P. Mudu, *Resisting and Challenging Neoliberalism*, p. 67.

<sup>30</sup> Shaun J. McGann, *Interpreting the Roman Squatting Tradition*, Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2014, p. 21. Trinity College Digital Repository, <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/429>

<sup>31</sup> P. Mudu, *Resisting and Challenging Neoliberalism*, p. 76.

The oldest and one of the most important Social Centre in Rome is *Forte Prenestino*, located in a southern suburb of Rome. *Forte Prenestino* is a former medieval fortress, which is squatted since 1987 and can still be seen as an impregnable fortress against the commercialisation of the city. Located in a peripheral neighbourhood known for high levels of unemployment and heroin abuse, the occupiers sought to offer a radical alternative to the marginalization of fringe city life through bottom-up local self-development/management.<sup>32</sup> As an initial occupier expressed the excitement of the centre's genesis: "All of a sudden, we were inside, 'running' the place – we who had never managed anything except our unemployment, our homelessness, our own little patch, our streets."<sup>33</sup>

*Forte* reinforces the earlier discussion of the political fragmentation typical of the Roman Social Centers and how this affected the activities that were undertaken. "...From punks, who had pushed the concert programs...to people (not only autonomists) coming from the various political experiences of the seventies, who brought with them debates over nuclear power, anti-militarism and third worldism, the new left, censorship, psychiatry and so on."<sup>34</sup>

This ideology can be seen in most of the Roman social centres which are fighting for better cultural and social conditions in the city. At the moment there are around 200 self – managed social centres in Italy which have their aim to support the daily life of the local communities.

### **The Principle of “cultural squatting”**

Generally speaking, and even though each occupation has its own story and political reason, cultural squatting can be considered a reaction to the “end of the welfare state” and the missing position of the state as a provider and promoter for social and cultural spaces and the rights for each citizen to the urban common. “Neoliberal forms of dispossession complement the (intensification of) the older, time-tested forms by also

---

<sup>32</sup> *In the Shell of the Old – Italy's Social Centres*, trans by Steve Wright, <https://libcom.org/library/in-shell-old-italy-social-centres-wright>.

<sup>33</sup> A. Solaro, *Forte Prenestino*, trans. by Steve Wright.

<sup>34</sup> A. Solaro, *Forte Prenestino*, trans. by Steve Wright.

chipping away at common property rights that have been won in the course of the Fordist class struggle (such as access to education, health care, welfare and state pensions) and reverting them to the private sector.”<sup>35</sup> Neoliberal planning ideologies are leading into a total commercialisation of urban space. Especially in recent years “cultural squatting” became a reaction to the financial crisis especially in countries like Greece, Spain and Italy where the local governments cutted a major part of the cultural budget. This kind of conquering space for culture is rooted in the “Squatting” movements from the 80s particularly in England, Germany and Switzerland. These social centres “offer not merely spaces for performances, happenings, concerts, exhibits, community organizing, and homes, but also for organizing protest and political events” and “manage to be open not just to movements and the alternative scenes, but also to urban residents beyond those circles, which allows them to serve as “recruiting” spaces.”<sup>36</sup>

Squats and occupied social centers in Europe have been bastions of alternative and radical culture for decades now. They announce their presence with painted banners and murals, and their posters line the walls of the urban districts in which they arise. In the evenings and late into the night, they often exude music, and the sounds of revelry. Inside, young people, who don't work for wages to pay rent do what they want to do. And what many of them want to do is be artists, or at least be creative with their own lives, find out how to live together, and do social and political work.<sup>37</sup>

Cultural squatting is the production of an alternative approach towards urban space. This spaces should substitute the missing interests for culture by politicians and decision makers. Often, people decided to take matters into their own hands by squatting a diversity of spaces: office blocks, factories, theatres and bars as well as houses. For some squatters, squatting is a purely individual solution; others feel that the possibilities

---

<sup>35</sup> M. Meyer, *Squatting in Europe: Radical Spaces, Urban Struggles* Squatting Europe Collective, 2013, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> M. Meyer, *Squatting in Europe: Radical Spaces, Urban Struggles*, p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> A. W. Moore, *Whether You Like It or Not, Making Room: Cultural Production in Occupied Spaces*.

of squatting should be developed further, feel solidarity towards other squatters and work to build a squatters' movement.<sup>38</sup>

Squatting is illegal, no matter the purpose, whether it be simply for living or to make public provision for non-commercial activity, to “commons” a vacant and disused building or patch of land. As this securitized century of endless asymmetric war against non-state actors has begun, squatting has been repressed ever more energetically. In Europe, important long-lived centers of social, political and cultural life have recently been strongly attacked.<sup>39</sup>

### **“New generation occupations”**



---

<sup>38</sup> M. Martínez, G. Piazza H. Pruijt, *Squatting in Europe: Radical Spaces, Urban Struggle*, Squatting Europe Collective, 2013, p.11.

<sup>39</sup> A. W. Moore, *Whether You Like It or Not, Making Room: Cultural Production in Occupied Spaces*

(figure 5: an illegal film projection organized by Cinema America Occupato, after the eviction in 2014)

The already quoted occupation of *Teatro Valle* is inscribed in a more wide process of a new kind of occupation in Italy, starting from 2010, that were defined “New Generation Occupations”<sup>40</sup>, which seems a further answer and protest for the current political and cultural policies. Although there is not a sharp dividing line between these two typologies of occupations, or often a gradual transformation of some of the “old” ones, nonetheless, the introduction of this category can help to trace some relevant characteristic to better understand this phenomenon. First of all, this process is inscribed in the progressive distinction between squat and *centro sociale*. While at first occupations were meant for both the purposes of social housing and cultural centres, these two finalities progressively diverged, to the point that in the new generation occupations usually no activist lives in the occupation. The political argument used by activists for this decision is that living in these spaces involves inevitably an appropriation of the space on the side of its inhabitants and would have as a consequence a not fully open and accessible space to citizenship. On this purpose it is often declared by activists that these places are more free than occupied spaces. Another of the main distinctions with the 90s occupations is in the way these new generation occupation are crossed: it is not – or rather only at first<sup>41</sup> - a collective of people who have a specific political orientation that occupies an abandoned space, in order to make there its political headquarters. As a consequence people who live and use the place do not necessary coincide with the activists of the collective.<sup>42</sup> The result is that these new kind of occupations are much more open to neighbourhoods and inhabitants, with (almost)<sup>43</sup> no barriers of the

---

<sup>40</sup> In Italian: “occupazioni di nuova generazione”.

<sup>41</sup> The typical experience the birth development of a new occupation is the almost immediate encounter and interest from the neighbourhoods and districts, starting from open assemblies to define projects and spaces.

<sup>42</sup> <http://corrieredelmezzogiorno.corriere.it/napoli/notizie/cronaca/2014/20-marzo-2014/mezzocannone-occupazione-si-fa-3le-nuove-rivoluzioni-fanno-base-bar-2224243293291.shtml>

<sup>43</sup> There are, nonetheless, some strong principles pursued: anti-fascism, anti-nazism, anti-racism, anti-zionism, anti-omophobia, against torture: principles we believe to be coherent of any authentic democracy, and which coincide more or less with human rights – proclaimed, for

subjects and projects allowed to enter, define the space and as concerns the typology if activity proposed. The centrality of the cultural initiatives has also a more thick meaning, compared to the traditional ones: it's true that *centri sociali* were always focused on promoting culture, but this was deriving from the political thinking and activism; in the *New Generation Occupations*, instead, the political attitude is more an effect that arises after months of attendance at the occupation, than its cause. In other words, while traditional occupations appeared as a politicized collective with some already well defined political orientation, the new generation ones present a wide range of political ideas, and alterity is what affects the collective instead of being "integrated" or refused (or "recruit", in Pruitt's words), defending the principle of the right to the city. It seems that these occupations are shaped by alterity, if by alterity we mean otherness, or rather the possibility of the irruption of what is totally other (more than a definition of what is alterity in an ontological way – which would be reducing alterity to the excluded parts). In the contemporary map of these *centri sociali* we can find many experiments of occupied cinemas and theatres (*Nuovo Cinema Palazzo, Nuovo Cinema America, Teatro Valle, Volturmo Occupato*) self-organized libraries (*Communia, BAM – Biblioteca Metropolitana Autogestita, BAC – Biblioteca Autogestita di Casal Bertone*), culture, sport facilities and other social institutions (*Ex Snia, Esc Atelier, Sans Papiers, Scup*), houses for women (*Casa delle Donne Lucha y Siesta, Centro Donne Dalia*) and many others.

As concerns their geographical location, it is also noticeable an important change. While the previous occupations, like *Forte Prenestino*, tended to be in the periphery, these new ones are leading a process of re-centralization. Instead of going more on more on the outskirts of Rome, their political claim is the purpose to reduce the distance between the centre and periphery: by occupying and offering low-price services they overcome one of the most strong social barrier, and they oppose themselves to the sell-off process of public heritage, seeing that these occupations arose mainly in public abandoned buildings, or built heritage on the point to be privatized.

At first sight the kind of occupation that *Teatro Valle Occupato* and these other new occupations are practising may seem subsidiary in relation to services and political

---

example, by organizations such as Amnesty International (which, no wonder, has done some cooperations with these occupations).

cultures that the institutions are not able to guarantee. A better look evidences that this is only partially true. In fact, what these spaces claim is not simply to make evidence of the institutional lacks and supply to their gap of responsibility, but to propose new ways of cultural production and the challenge to make a more just city – that means, what vivifies and confers sense to cultural identity of a nation or of a city. We believe that starting from these practices can be deduced some interesting characteristics on the organization of space, the exercise of citizenship, on the way to interact with the territory and on the relation between historical city and contemporary culture production; these characteristics can be useful tools to rethink the quality of public space. Functionalization of spaces and mercification of culture in Rome are actually only an example of a much more wide process – neoliberalization of capitalism - that affects not only Italy, but Europe, and that represents one of the ways contemporary architecture is undertaking. And more than anything, that these experiences pose again the question of what is cultural identity and what are and should be the spaces of its production.

### **Informal space production forced by the global financial crisis and the decline of European architecture**

The modern crisis in architecture in the 70s and 80s in form of a total technical and functional minimalism and the conservative education in most of the European architecture schools provoked many young architecture students at that time. Modernism - which evolved from the ideology of Fordism - became translated into architecture by architects like Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Adolf Loos, Frank Lloyd Wright etc. and schools like the Bauhaus produced the “anti form” of architectural production. After the Second World War, Europe was in a period of economical and physical reconstruction and modern architecture was a perfect functional form for the fast and efficient construction of buildings. This lasted into an extreme expression of simplicity and reduction, which was a provocation for many architects at that time.

This was the critic of these young architects at the beginning of their carrier and created a revolutionary and radical thinking in form of a new architectural “avant-garde”. But how much is the thinking of special aesthetics relevant 30 years after its starting and how is the impact of this kind of architecture in our cities? This is questioning the future of architecture and the starting point for the next “avant-garde” movement. As more iconic hyperdesigned “materpieces“ will be built as less is the effect on the spectacle. If we see



architecture as a discipline which is mainly related to art and technology then we reduce architecture to only two points.

After the radical invention of neo “Baroque Architecture” at the end of the 20th century as an answer to the modern rationalist movement, the profession went into the direction of producing global trends similar to the field of fashion design. Most of the big architectural firms are working worldwide and are having many different projects at the same time. The Asian market became very important and many architects opened their sub offices on this continent. At the same time especially since the finance crisis started in 2008, the European and North American production declined radically. The architecture of the big global player or “star architects” and their work became geographically reduced to China, Middle-East and Russia. The North American European cities are in an urban architectural crisis and on the way to switch from an “iconic” architecture towards a more social, functional and contextual one.

The American theorist Sanford Kwinter is questioning the control of political regimes and powerful investors, which are creating our urban reality today. He is one of the few architectural theorists, which are criticizing the excessive fascination of new technology and the cult status of the architectural object. Kwinter refers in his writing to “poor formalism” architecture without any “deeper sense” totally narcissistic and with few functional and contextual qualities. The individualism was producing global objects which are not relating to any place identity in urban conditions. The city, however, is not this but rather a perpetually organizing field of forces in movement, each city a specific and unique combination of historical modalities in dynamic composition.<sup>44</sup> This specific composition which is based on the urban history and context of each city is missing in most of the projects designed by “global” architects.

Also the Italian theorist and architect Pier Vittorio Aureli is one of view architects of a younger generation which are beyond the recent architecture avantgarde with protagonists like Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind and among others. He is questioning in his neo marxistic writings, the scene of individualistic iconic anti-regional architectures, without local identity and social mission. According to him the quality of an architectural project can be measured by the resistance to capitalism, the recent architectural “avant-garde” and their approach to urbanization.

---

<sup>44</sup> S. Kwinter, *Requiem: For the City at the End of the Millenium*, Actar, 2010,

Since the 2007 economic recession, the culture of architecture has witnessed the rise of activism and participatory practices. With the 1990s avant-garde architects on the decline of political correctness, we are witnessing a new wave of socially concerned architecture. Symposiums, exhibitions, biennials, magazines, and journals have amplified this phenomenon by promoting new ways of practising architecture that invest design with a social and political mission. The new generation of young architects feels the urge to focus not on aesthetic and formal concerns, but on the improvement of our urban condition.<sup>45</sup>

These shift and the openness towards a “global” international architectural production, reduced the interest for a regional local place identity.

This problematic of postmodernity and current architecture, is leading into the total “global” architecture without critical regional relations. Using contextual realities would bring a much deeper success of the individual architectural project. The production of global architecture is guided by private interest, economical profit and the fascination of higher technology. This ideology is making architecture very superficial and soulless, but can be seen nearly everywhere around the world. The so called “Bilbao Effect” in the sense of creating architecture icons around the world is producing an architecture which is not serving local needs. On the other hand low budget or temporary architecture can be seen as an alternative understanding of urban planning. Instead of leaving the urban development to politicians and economics “informal” users can propose their own ideas for their living environment. Temporary projects are often stimulating the questions for urban changes. They are role models for citizen initiatives and can provoke a new way of urban politics. For Rome these role models could change the perceptions of the city from a “museum city for tourists” towards a vibrant town. A 20th century inflexible strategy for urban planning is no longer useful. We need a more flexible thinking for city development and space for informal actors and their ideas. The democratic principle of participation in urban planning and the possibility for a flexible architectural use on specific development sites can avoid planning mistakes and would make master planning more easily.

---

<sup>45</sup> P. V. Aureli, *The Theology of Tabula Rasa. Walter Benjamin and Architecture in the Age of Precarity*, New York, Log 27, Spring 2013.

### **Self-organised architecture and the production of a “common” space**

In Rome itself it is very hard to find contemporary buildings in the setting of the historical city: Piranesi's dialectic between the modern and the ancient city certainly changed configuration, but never disappeared. “Most of the new construction that Rome is witnessing- Massimiliano Fuksas's *Congress Center* at E.U.R., Zaha Hadid's Center for Contemporary Arts, Renzo Piano's *Parco della Musica* Auditorium, Meier's Jubilee Church - have been built on the city's periphery.”<sup>46</sup> With their outer city positions, the success of these architectures is relatively hard to judge. Until now, there is no project in the city centre, which could gather the battle with the ancient masterpieces. This situation will hardly change in the future and conservative right wing politicians, as the former mayor of the city Gianni Alemanno, who forced that kind of preservation strategy, and nonetheless the current centre left mayor Ignazio Marino, who is prosecuting the policy of not changing the face of the city. Many of the prestigious projects like the Congress Center at EUR or the new *Città dello Sport* designed by Santiago Calatrava are still under construction or more or less stopped by financial problems. These contemporary “ruins” are representing the “state of the art” of the current architectural production of the city of Rome. A city in which architectural innovation was produced for nearly 2500 years is not having a current identity of an architectural discourse. Successful Italian architects are constructing their projects in foreign countries and not in their capital city and also at the academic level a discourse of an innovative strategy for dealing with past, the presence and the future is missing. On the other hand the post-industrial change in European cities created many social, economic and spatial changes in the urban space: in the last 40 years a radical urban transformation took place and produced unused industrial areas and vacant places. In the industrial Fordist growth model of the past, cities were firmly embedded in the regulatory and redistributive framework of the centralized welfare state. In the transition towards a “flexible accumulation regime”<sup>47</sup> operating on a truly global scale, this has become dysfunctional. Many European cities had transformed into post-industrial cities and their former industrial sites became vacant and forgotten. The reanimation of this kind of vacant plots

---

<sup>46</sup> P. Singley, *Roma Macchiata, The Stain of White*, New York: Log Magazin

<sup>47</sup> D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers

can be often seen as a low budget intervention towards the archaeology of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In many cases we can see a very informal architectural strategy in the transformation process. Informal or self-organised architecture is usually a term which got used in many cases within the rapid urban transformation of different megacities in Asia and south America; this kind of architectural production can be defined as “Architecture Without Architects” a term which was introduced by the architect Bernhard Rudolfsky in 1989. Since the global finance crisis in 2008 we can see in many European cities similar tendencies. More and more buildings became vacant concerning financial pressures and collective groups from different backgrounds are using and interpreting the different spaces in their own way.

In the case of the architecture of the “social centres” in Rome most of the occupied buildings are used in a multifunctional way. The biggest and most famous example is the already quoted *Forte Prenestino*, the former medieval fortress which became the first cultural centre of Italy in 1986. A transformation of a fortress into a contemporary space of cultural production can be seen as a reinterpretation of the tradition of a Roman ruin or the fact of building on or into the old. The same kind of transformation that occurred with the Aurelian city wall, the *Teatro Marcello* and with many other ancient buildings towards the history of Rome.

It is useful to distinguish two types: *material reappropriation* and *character-conserving transformation*. The first is a literal adaptation of building materials and structures, repurposing them for new uses or, more radically, deconstructing them for salvage and incorporating *spolia* into very different new configurations. Depending on the specific outcomes, such reappropriations may be genuinely adaptive—as in the Temple of Hadrian or the Theater of Marcellus, where the original composition and character of the monument remain legible despite successive alterations—or they may prove catastrophic, as in the “crudely cannibalistic” reuse of antique columns, statuary, marbles, and rough masonry for the construction of the medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque city. But the visible survival of old materials and structures in Rome would represent little more than a recycling program of

unprecedented longevity and scope were there not also considerable continuity in formal principles— preeminently the classical language of architecture.<sup>48</sup>

In the cases of the social centres we can generally define two different types of transformations: the first is the historical building with a strong architectural value and a very defined space, which is where often former theatres or cinemas like *Teatro Valle*, *Cinema America*, *Cinema Palazzo* where these existing “open” spaces got interpreted in different ways connected to their current program. The other typology is the post-industrial ruin, a space which is often defined by its flexible steel structure, easy to transform with some low budget interventions. The indoor space is in many cases combined with an outdoor space in form of a courtyard or the classical street level. The budget for their architectural changes are financed most of the times with their events, parties or private donations. Sometimes architects are included into the decision-making processes depending on the need of the multifunctional uses. The aim of the occupants is to provide a space which is interacting with its neighbourhood and their residents. The buildings get basically adapted with multifunctional spaces which are hosting activities like concerts, lectures, libraries, sport activities, language courses etc. All the decisions are discussed in the weekly public assembly meetings where everybody can participate. This kind of participatory decision-making is one of the key elements of the production of this alternative way of architecture. A self-organised system with a very clear outcome: “We are now beginning to understand that our success as architects, planners, preservationists, and policy-makers depends on our ability to imitate the processes by which both natural systems and traditional human communities sustain their character or identity while accommodating growth and change. Adaptive principles have particular relevancy for the design of new construction in historic settings, whether additions to landmark structures or infill construction in historic districts.”<sup>49</sup> What could be deduced from the many experiences of the “centri sociali” is to proclaim the need for a rethinking of “formal” architecture and its dynamics towards a new architectural avant-garde with young protagonists. To guide and design low budget interventions to vacant spaces

---

<sup>48</sup> S. W. Semes, *Adaptation as a Model for New Architecture in Historic Settings: Some Observations from Rome*, Change Over Time, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2012.

<sup>49</sup> S. W. Semes, *Adaptation as a Model for New Architecture in Historic Settings: Some Observations from Rome*.

between historical monuments and buildings can create a new kind of architectural avant-garde which is dealing with history and low financial resources.

Another and perhaps more revolutionary aspect of these spaces is their function of informal public spaces. Compared to what nowadays is meant by public space, that is often downgraded to “open” or “free” space, these informal – and not completely - public spaces absolve its aggregation programme, giving the structures to make decisions and have a political effect (in their cases, mostly coincides with the physical place of the occupation); in other words, the possibility to act. Space is never neutral in relation on how we behave. More a space is functionalized and specific for a certain activity (transport, a museum, a restaurant, a shop) more the resulting possibility of action is limited.

### **Public sphere, built heritage, cultural identity**

According to Hannah Arendt, action is the only activity that relates directly men without the mediation of material things: as distinguished from labour and producing art, which are activities that can be realized in complete solitude, action has as its condition of possibility human plurality, and opens out in that “relational space”, different for every group of people, consisting of the plural interest of a certain group. Interpreted in this way, it wouldn't make sense to act in complete solitude: we act to reveal ourselves to others. This *infra* it's not a neutral space that action fills out, but is already saturated of that twist of human relations that precede action, in which action inserts:

Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction. [...] In man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings. Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness.[...] With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world [...]. This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labour, and it is not prompted by utility, like work; its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative. To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin (as the Greek word *archein*, “to begin”, “to lead”, and eventually “to rule”, indicates), to set something into motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin word *agere*). [...] It is in the nature of beginning that

something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before.

Furthermore, action presents two characteristics, representative of human beings: its unpredictability and irreversibility, that distinguishes it from any mechanical form of action and guarantee the emergence of the new and unexpected. While nowadays we tend to consider speech and action as distinguished, for the Greeks “speech in itself was considered *a priori* a way to act” Arendt's effort is directed to recuperate the original connection between action and word: in her opinion is in their interconnection that public space is created. To restore this link is nowadays essential when questioning about authentic democracy, which should not be reduced to the right of vote and choosing between already-given options, leading citizens into a political quietness. The ancient Greek *polis* is then analysed by Arendt for this purpose, not as a “nostalgic” or “utopian” of the *polis*<sup>50</sup>, seeing that the *polis* form arose in a precise and unique historical and cultural moment, but for the exemplarity of its mechanism: “The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be”.<sup>51</sup>

The decision-making processes held by new occupation generations can be considered an interesting example of how the link between action and speech is restored. In the assembly form, for example, the decision making process is not made by raising hands but rather on *persuasion*, an ancient Greek and Roman concept which Arendt has particularly at heart, not to be confused with the mystification and inauthenticity: to persuade is to physically put oneself in the light, to take risk, discussing in the attempt to convince the other of one owns reasons. Furthermore, any considerable action that is undertaken by the occupants passes through word, through assemblies, long discussions – if needed. New generation occupations represent, paradoxically, what is more close to a public space – an illegal public space. *Illegal*, nonetheless *just*, because it brings back the authentic role of the citizen: the possibility to build, rebuild, determine,

---

<sup>50</sup> J. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action, Volume One: Reason and the Rationalisation of Society*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press.

<sup>51</sup> H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 198

change and imagine the city through speech and discussion – that makes the whole difference between *living* and *inhabiting* their city. A more just city is perhaps a city in which citizens are defined not on passports but on the way they *appear* to each other – meaning, according to Hannah Arendt, to act in a public space, visible to many. The conditions (and the risks) for achieving a more just city lay in this struggle for (re)creating public spaces.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, speech and action are two strictly related characteristics of human beings. But to guarantee their emergence, they need a physical space. The Italian as much as the European built heritage should accomplish this function:

For centuries, indeed for millenniums, the form of the State, the form of ethics, the form of civilization in itself where defined and have recognised themselves in the form of public places. Italian cities arose as a mirror, and at the same time as a school, for the political communities that inhabited them. The Italian squares, the churches, the civic building are beautiful *because* they were born to be for everybody: their function was letting the citizens meet in an equal level.<sup>52</sup>

As we saw before, for example with the UNESCO programme, this type of political culture is what is missing in the contemporary concept of preservation and on the value conferred to art:

The civic value of monuments has been denied in favour to their economical income, meaning their touristic potential. The development of the doctrine that sees the built and artistic heritage as “Italy's oil” (born in the 80s of Craxi) went along with the progressive transformation of our historical cities in *luna parks* managed by a plethora of avid usufructaries.<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, this is precisely why the privatization of built and artistic heritage affects the emergence of an authentic democracy: because it generates “not aware citizens, but passive spectators and loyal customers” instead of protecting their civic value. The “civic value” means here not only a pure contemplation act, but the formation of a public

---

<sup>52</sup> T. Montanari, *Le pietre e il popolo*, Minimum Fax, 2013, p 10.

<sup>53</sup> T. Montanari, *Le pietre e il popolo*, p. 162.



space. What the occupants of *Teatro Valle* were trying to do was giving back to an ancient theatre (destined either to be abandoned or to privatization) its civic value: that means, not only its mere preservation (what the Italian State clearly failed), but, in taking care of its heritage, triggering there the production of the new – contemporary art *and* a 'public' space – in other words, what guarantees a lively and authentic cultural identity.

From the urban planning and architectural perspective, the Roman social centres could be a prototypical example for an innovative form of low budget urban interventions. A kind of “Berlin Strategy” for Rome to create interesting urban spaces, which serves the needs of the population. There is no need in the current European urban landscape, to construct more glorified new museums and opera houses designed by “star” architects. The need is to provide spaces for a “post-neoliberal” urbanity to give shelters for independent culture and urban freedom.

## References

Adam, Robert (2013) “Globalisation and Architecture”, <http://www.adamarchitecture.com/images/PDFs/RA-Globalisation.pdf>

Arendt, Hannah (1998) “The Human Condition”, The University of Chicago Press.

Aureli, Pier Vittorio (2011) “The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture”, MIT Press

Aureli, Pier Vittorio (2013) “The Theology of Tabula Rasa. Walter Benjamin and Architecture in the Age of Precarity”, New York, Log 27.

Akcan, Esra (2011) “Manfredo Tafuri's theory of the architectural avant-garde”, *Journal of Architecture*

Bagnani, Gilberto (1919) “The Subterranean Basilica at Porta Maggiore”, *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol.9.

Freud, Sigmund (1962) “Civilization and its discontents”, New York : W.W. Norton.

Habermas, Jürgen (1981) “Theory of Communicative Action, Volume One: Reason and the Rationalisation of Society”, Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press.

Harvey, David. (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers

Horkheimer, Max and Adorno, Theodor W. (2002), "Dialectic of Enlightenment", Stanford, Calif. Stanford Univ. Press, 2002.

Kirk, Terry (2005) "The Architecture of Modern Italy", Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press.

Kwinter, Sanford (2010) "Requiem: For the City at the End of the Millenium", Actar.

Mattei, Ugo et al. (2012) "Teatro Valle Occupato. La rivolta culturale dei beni comuni", DeriveApprodi.

McGann, Shaun J. (2014) "Interpreting the Roman Squatting Tradition", Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT. Trinity College Digital Repository, <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/429>

Meyer, Margit (2013) "Squatting in Europe: Radical Spaces, Urban Struggles", Squatting Europe Collective.

Montanari, Tommaso (2013) "Le pietre e il popolo", Minimum Fax, 2013

Moore, Alan W. (2015) "Whether You Like It or Not, Making Room: Cultural Production in Occupied Spaces".

Mudu, Pierpaolo (2004) "Resisting and Challenging Neoliberalism: The Development of Italian Social Centers", Antipode, 2004

Mudu, Pierpaolo (2012) "At the Intersection of Anarchists and Autonomists: Autogestioni and Centri Sociali", ACME: An International E-Journal For Critical Geographies.

Rossi, Aldo (1984) "The Architecture of the City", MIT Press.

Rykwert, Joseph (1988) "The Idea of a Town The Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy and the Ancient World", MIT Press.

Semes, Steven W. (2012) "Adaptation as a Model for New Architecture in Historic Settings: Some Observations from Rome", Change Over Time, Vol. 2, No. 2.

Solaro, Alba (2007), "Forte Prenestino" trans. by Steve Wright in "A Window onto Italy's' Social Centres, Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theor"y, Culture and Action 1, no.1.

Urban Florian (2006) "The Invention of the Historic City - Building the Past in East Berlin 1970-1990", <http://opus.kobv.de/tuberlin/volltexte/2006/1204/>

Vereni, Pietro (2012) "Spaces In Between: Squats and Religious Practice in Rome", International Workshop Contested Social Spaces.