

## RECYCL-ISM. TOWARDS A CHANGE OF PARADIGMS

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### INTRODUCTION

Since 1970s, the theoretical debate on environmental sustainability is oriented towards a new ecology of the artificial, where environmental constraints offer to the design culture the extraordinary opportunity to propose different solutions based on renewed criteria quality. In 1965 Vittorio Gregotti claims that, 'nothing is created, nothing is destroyed: however everything is accumulated, waiting for being transformed. There are not only cemeteries of men, dogs and elephants: our entire urban periphery is a graveyard of objects [...] and it stops, skeletal, somewhere, waiting the time for its convenient recovery.'<sup>1</sup> This is increasingly happens nowadays. In many western European countries we have built more that the real necessities. Very often uncontaminated landscapes and ecological systems have been drastically compromises by the construction of new buildings or infrastructures. Dramatically many of these have never been used or have remained unfinished. In the last ten years, 4.3% of the European Union's territory has been affected by urban development, a shocking amount if we consider that only 13.4% of the total surface is actually urbanized. Such numbers double and triple when we look at Italy, Germany or the Netherlands.<sup>2</sup> In the meanwhile changes in technology, economy and lifestyle continuously drive the abandonment of what is considered obsolete, leaving behind polluted and undetermined landscapes while shaping new urban configurations that literally consume the territory and its resources. This is particularly evident, in the current situation, where the financial crisis is making even the new appear obsolete: in Spain alone 1.5 million new buildings are empty, in Italy 1.2 million.<sup>3</sup> These changes have happened so fast that well tested solutions and historically based planning are no longer viable. The result is a mismatch between populations and available resources, in which the environment and landscape are paying the highest price.

Recycle, in landscape and urban terms, is a process that transforms the original material by adding proprieties not related to the original use.<sup>4</sup> Recycle works on existing structures and territories from open perspectives and covers issues with wide contents such as hybridization and integration, always aiming to confront the old and new through the merging of mixed uses, epochs, attitudes and technical solutions. It has been affected by new cultural and esthetical attitudes of contemporary society and these discourse necessarily bring into a dichotomy between aesthetic and ethic. Aesthetics—intended as a subjective but shared perception of our bond with the environment—is defined by a deep and balanced dynamic harmony. Ethics instead is the ability, subjective and

intersubjective, to conceive and accomplish actions that can keep a healthy and balanced bond with the environment. Therefore, ethics and aesthetics are two sides of the same coin. If aesthetics is the (inter)subjective feeling of the harmonious “immersion” in the environment and ethics is the (inter)subjective feeling for the respect and harmonious actions on the environment, then the ethics allows to maintain the aesthetics, and the aesthetics guide for ethical actions.<sup>5</sup>

#### LA RE-ÉPOQUE <sup>6</sup>

Rehabilitate, rebuild, recalibrate, reclaim, reconnect, recover, recycle, redistribute, reform, refurbish, regenerate, reinvent, remake, remediate, renovate, reorganize, repair, restore and reuse are some of the most significant RE- key words used in research projects during the last decade.<sup>7</sup> It seems to be a time of reflection and reuse of what has already been produced: the *RE-Époque*. It has an implicit assonance to the *Belle-époque*, one of the most optimistic periods of the modern history, where new arts flourished underneath a general optimistic and positive attitude. At that moment the concurrence of many technological innovations, joined to a quite stable international politic condition caused—in a relatively short time—considerable technological, scientific and cultural innovations. Similarly, we are now in a time of change, but with economical, political and environmental conditions very different and less stable. However, the concept of recycling has been present in architecture, city and landscape since ancient time but the conditions for which it is proposed have changed. According to Mosè Ricci, ‘architecture and the city have always recycled themselves. Examples like Split, Marcello Theater in Rome or the Dome in Syracuse are just a few of the most obvious manifestos of recycling’ (Figure 1).<sup>8</sup> It’s not a question of restoration: the idea of conservation tends to embalm the image of architectural or urban space by attributing value to the unchangeable.” In fact, recycle differs from operations of restore and reuse. Reuse refers to operations at the medium scale and is based on reprogramming the uses rather than on refurbishing the building or infrastructure. Whereas, recycle breaths new life into structures, which will reincarnate in a different body. Recycle is a process that transforms the original material by adding proprieties not related to the original use. Recycle works on existing structures and territories from open perspectives and covers issues with wide contents such as hybridization and integration, aiming to confront the old and new through the merging of mixed uses, epochs, attitudes and technical solutions.



FIGURE 1. Marcellus Theater, Rome. Photo by Davide Favargiotti, 2016.

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, the idea of recycling the existent to design landscapes and cities has growth in importance in many European nations due to social problems connected with the conditions of certain suburbs, but also as urban tool for institutions to regulate the land use (Figure 2).<sup>9</sup> Several superimposed crisis—financial, political and environmental—brought a higher sensibility to climate and social changes and even a change of paradigms in the dynamics of urban transformation. Design projects and theory turned towards environmental, efficiency, cost or energy saving factors. An increasing number of design projects aim to recycle existing buildings in particular contexts, with specific attention to social and ecological issues. In fact, ‘two disguises have been applied to the architect in recent decades: firstly, that of destroyer of the past and secondly, that of interpreter of history, and now he has become an ecologist.’<sup>10</sup> But recycle also allows for a range of imaginative and metaphorical associations, moving towards an attitude of understanding and balance with the legacy that has been inherited. It arises from two main themes: the progressive abandoning of buildings in the post-production city and the new ecological urban dimension. ‘The trend is moving away from the modern attitude of domination and submission which characterized previous decades towards a mechanism of atonement for the excesses of the past’ with an attitude of understanding and reclaiming what we have hyper-produced.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to other urban and architectural theories, recycling is not a formal or spatial approach. It works with the specificity of each context and improves their potentialities. In fact, recycling means the reuse of waste materials, which have lost value or meaning. It is a practice that helps to reduce waste, to limit its presence, to reduce disposal costs and to limit production of new waste. Recycle means, in other words, to create new value and new meaning. ‘Another cycle is another life. [...] Recycling is the ecological action that pushes into the future by transforming the existing waste in the prominent features and producing the city’s culture, the beauty and the urban quality.’<sup>12</sup> It is also evident that recycle offers different possibilities of action. According to Francesc Muñoz recycle could also mean new activities that reinforce (enhance) the principal function use and not necessarily as the simple replacement (substitute) of the original use. However, recycle’s main purpose is to work on the sense of things, on their meaning, on their memory. In that sense, recycle offers different possibilities of action. Although it depends on each case, generally the more immediate idea of recycling is to take out what is there and put in something else. But Muñoz approach adds value to the complexity of the recycle process because there might be several alternatives instead of one single project.



FIGURE 2.  
Unfinished, 15 International Architecture Exhibition  
Venice, Spanish Pavilion,  
2016. Photo by the author.

## THE ECOLOGICAL FOOTPRINT OF RE-CYCLE

Contemporary society seems to lose solidity: its organizations become plastic, its living attitudes become fluid, projects tend to be flexible, and choices reversible. Or at least this is the tendency. Even if this is not completely new in philosophical terms, everything changes in practical terms.<sup>13</sup> As it was between the 19th and 20th centuries, the *Re-époque* is not only a temporary vogue but it brings a real change of paradigm with a significant impact on cultural, ethical and aesthetic values. The recycling process is generally linked to the need for recovery of the obsolete heritage, the land preservation through the reduction of land use, the redevelopment of abandoned areas and, in particular, of obsolete infrastructures in an economic environment of reduced resources. Infrastructure gives life to cities. If it's true that infrastructures sustain cities, what happens when they ends their life cycle, becoming obsolete?<sup>14</sup> They compromise our landscape and cities, often generating problem of degradation and social security. Designing landscape and cities, today, claims for a shift in the design approach. The exploration of potentialities—spatial, social and aesthetical—in recycling obsolete structures achieves an implementation towards sustainable and ecological solutions. Furthermore recent projects highlight the challenges in re-thinking not only the abandoned and unused infrastructure in search of a new identity, but also recycling all those infrastructures that are already active but poorly operating and unproductive.

Recycling practices are therefore very important because they imply a reconsideration of the role of architects, landscape architects and urbanist nowadays in society. The challenges of design (the landscapes and the cities) are moving beyond the creation of fascinating new forms that introduce new aesthetics and new materials. Anne Lacaton clearly stated that the most important questions for architects now are: 'How and where do we want to live? What can we do to improve living conditions in cities? How can we define that and reformulate the notions of comfort and of quality of life?'<sup>15</sup> An answer to these questions is given by the recycling the obsolete heritage, structures and spaces. In contrast to the French policies of demolishing and rebuilding, Lacaton and Vassal propose the recycling of obsolete social houses buildings. According to the French architects, it is not possible to consider these elements only as a single architectural issue. The residential blocks of *Tour Bois Le Prête* in Paris, among others, are not at the end of their lives—even if they are in bad condition with numerous problems—and they still have a high potential for improvement. The project works with the on-site materials that are the building per se, and the people who inhabit it, in order to make it again 'a nice place to live'.<sup>16</sup> Adding roof gardens and balconies, remodeling the skin through new openings and materials, the project has brought an improvement in the quality of the interior spaces, creating an immediate transformation of the image of the building as well as generating an improvement of the surrounding area. Lacaton and Vassal propose not simply replacement of the superficial skin, but rather they implement a place with a lasting transformation that comes from the inside, directly from the substance of the building.

Accordingly, recycling approaches, defined case-by-case, offer a network of paths in the landscape rather than presenting one-way routes that strongly limit the way of living in the territory. Focusing on infrastructure, recycling is an emerging attitude in the reactivation of obsolete urban infrastructures. Obsolete and interstitial spaces of the city become the palette to be used in order to build a new ecological and environmental sensibility shared by communities and citizens. These are generally projects that activates a new life cycle to communicate, share, enjoy, and experiment a different way of living an abandoned or obsolete spaces, but also to and rediscover their beauty. Often they can be accomplished through collaborations between institutions and individuals, associations and groups, with a collaborative attitude as a political act. Urban recycling, temporary installations, and land-art increasingly become regular practices rather than occasional actions, thanks also the contribution of interdisciplinary languages like arts and media. These projects are driven by the need and the search of a new life (a new lymph), to follow the traces of the past but even more to begin a new story. The High Line in New York (Figure 3) and the Trento Tunnels in Trento (Figure 4) are two of the most renowned and discussed case studies of the last decade. They clearly show how recycling practices could be profitably extended to the landscape and urban scale





FIGURE 3. The High Line by James Corner Field Operations, Diller Scofidio + Renfro, Piet Oudolf, New York. Photo by the author, 2013.



FIGURE 4. The Trento Tunnels by Elisabetta Terragni Studio, Trento. Photo by the author, 2013.



to recover abandoned structures through a new interpretation of landscape within the city. These projects experimented the reinvention of infrastructure's significance and identity, the mending of a tear in the urban fabric. In fact, these recycled structures reinterpret surfaces, buildings, and fragments of former transport infrastructures, converting them into public places with pedestrian and cultural uses with a renewed aesthetic.

## FINAL REMARKS

Nowadays, think about what is an environmentally friendly, sustainable and costless lead to a different ethical principle: a project based on reuse and wastes' reduction, with ecological performances and environmental protection. All this created a new expressive and procedural language. Recycling is neither a temporary vogue nor a mere metaphor: it is a design process carrying ethical principles and expressing the new aesthetic changes of contemporary society. It is an adaptive and contextual practice that works with tactics rather than with models. The missed use is replaced with a new one, very often unexpected, that comes from other forms of expression. Its "essence" is superimposed on that of the original place, thus creating meaningful images and places with strong narratives. Recycling guides behavior models rather than good practices. Recycling projects propose a pervasive vision, able to interpret the contemporary change of living landscapes and places. In that sense, ethics and aesthetics are not in opposition but rather complementary paradigms. Recycling as a design approach calls into question the figure of the author: it opens the possibilities to the active participation of citizens in reshaping the future of their cities. Landscape architects, architects, or in general designers, reaching with their works in the field of ethics, deliberately or unwittingly, does not say anything that has not already been said in other fields of the thought. Their rather interpret and translate into shapes and materials those messages already articulated by others in different languages. The author, single or together with a community, becomes an interpreter of the change of a new expressive language. Landscape architects, architects as well as urban designers and planners are called to re-encode the change.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Original quotation, translated by the author: 'nulla si crea, nulla si distrugge: tuttavia tutto si accumula in attesa di essere trasformato. Non ci sono solo più i cimiteri degli uomini, dei cani e degli elefanti: tutta la nostra periferia urbana è un cimitero di oggetti [...] e si ferma, scheletrame, a metà strada, attendendo che torni conveniente il suo ricupero.' See Gregotti V., Battisti E. (1965). 'Periferia di rifiuti'. *Edilizia moderna* 85: 28.
2. Source: ISTAT, 2001-2011. In the Netherlands soil consumption was 13.2 % of its surface, 9.8% in Belgium, 7.3% in Italy, 6.8% in Germany, 5.2% in France, 3.6% in Spain.
3. The financial crisis made visible the consequences of overproduction in the European construction industry: in Spain, over 1.5 million new residential buildings, completed after 2007, have remained unsold (Source: *L'Internazionale*, December 6, 2012). The land consumption in Italy continues to grow significantly, although there has been a slowdown in recent years. Between 2008 and 2013, the phenomenon covered on average of 55 hectares per day, between six and seven square meters of territory that were lost every second (Source: ISPRA Istituto Superiore per la Protezione e la Ricerca Ambientale, *Il consumo di suolo in Italia*, 2015).
4. Ricci M. (2012). 'New Paradigms: Reducing Reusing Recycling the City (and the Landscapes)'. In Ciorra G., Marini S.(eds.), *Re-Cycle. Strategies for Architecture, City and Planet* (Milano: Electa), 72-73.
5. See Longo G. O. (2010). 'Etica, estetica e libero arbitrio'. In *Scienza in Rete*.
6. Some concepts in the following paragraphs have been deduced and developed from my publication: Favargiotti S. (2016). *Airports On-hold. Towards Resilient Infrastructures* (Trento: LISt Lab).
7. Javier Mozas defines these operations as Re-processes whose aim is to intervene on the world that is already built Mozas J. (2012). 'Remediate, Reuse, Recycle. Re-processes as atonement'. In *Reclaim. Remediate, Reuse, Recycle* (a+t architecture publishers), 39-40: 25.
8. See Ricci M., op. cit., p. 73.
9. Among other projects, it refers to a sequence of events, projects and exhibitions including: *Convertible City. Modes of Densification and Dissolving Boundaries* (German Pavilion, Venice Architecture Biennale, 2006); *Vacant NL* (The Netherlands Pavilion, Venice Architecture Biennale, 2010); *RE-CYCLE. Strategies for Architecture, City and Planet*

(MAXXI Museum, Rome, 2012); *Reduce/Reuse/Recycle. Architecture as Resource* (German Pavilion, Venice Architecture Biennale, 2012); *Unfinished* (Spanish Pavilion, Venice Architecture Biennale, 2016); and *The FAR Game: Constraints Sparking Creativity* (Korean Pavillion, Venice Architecture Biennale, 2016).

10. Mozas J., *op. cit.*, p.15.
11. Ibid., p.15.
12. Ricci M., *op. cit.*, p. 73.
13. Manzini E. (2006). 'Il design in un mondo fluido'. In Bertola P., Manzini E. (eds.), *Design multiverso. Appunti di fenomenologia del design* (Edizioni POLI.design, Milano), 17.
14. Referred to the conference organized by Michael Jakob entitled "Urban Infrastructure", *Séminaire théorique 9*, Geneve, December 2012.
15. Lacaton A. (2009). 'Introduction'. *Changing Practices*, RIBA Research Symposium 2009, conference proceedings, London.
16. Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal in conversation with Wellner M., 2012. Surplus. In: Petzet M., Helimeyer F. (eds.), *Reuse, Reduce, Recycle. Architecture as Resources*/German Pavillion, 13th International Architecture Exhibition.