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## Awaiting reconstruction: the time of the project

Cristiano Tosco\*

### Abstract

*The seismic event, and catastrophic ones in general, determine essential consequences on the body of the city and the built fabric. The wait for reconstruction brings the built environment into a temporal limbo, between the wounds and collapses of a fabric that has been compromised and the hopes and visions of a place which will return to be alive and safe. Historical centres are a particularly indicative context from this perspective, as they often combine elements of a material history stratified over time with profound values and memorial elements. The post-disaster reconstruction sees a complex regulatory framework and varied strategies depending on cultural and political instances at the urban and territorial scale. What responses are generated following seismic events in those spaces of time that, although they constitute temporary phases by statute, have been historically transformed into long-lasting phenomena? By trying to answer this complex question, it emerges how the temporal factor produces an impact on the historical city, in its continuity as an aggregative, territorial and landscape phenomenon.*

### Premise

The paper observes the space of architectural and urban design in the post-earthquake and post-disaster reconstruction procedures. To do so, a key-reading element is the time, intended both as action space for designers, institutions, communities, and as specific dimension to which refer some approaches and actions within the design procedures. Working on a general overview on the phenomena that bring to the definition of emergency and reconstruction phases, the request for projects and strategies emerges as an invariant. Focusing on the reconstruction intervention within historical fabrics, the space of design has changed in the recent Italian history, intersecting cultural issues with normative and technical aspects. The time of project is traceable in the awaiting reconstruction, where top-down directions intersect with communities need, memory permanence and transformation possibilities, securing procedures and potentialities of urban renewal.

### Some Note on catastrophes and historical centres

In 1755, the same year of the disastrous earthquake that razed Lisbon to the ground, Voltaire wrote in his Poem on the Lisbon Disaster: "For us, the past is a sad memory, / And the present is awful if there's no future, / And the sleep of the grave takes every thing being. / One day, all will be well — this

is our hope. / All is well today — that is the illusion" (Voltaire, 1756). Here the author built a reflection not only on the human condition in the face of the catastrophic event but also on the expectations, despite the living conditions in a specific built environment, that open to hopes for renewal, for a return to life, for the rebirth of the wounded cities and communities. These hopes develop in the space of time between tragedy and rebirth, between destruction and reconstruction, a lapse of time that varies greatly depending on the multiplicity of factors, interests, and constraints at play, and characterized, as Paolo Marconi has observed, by that "sense of displacement [...] that comes from no longer being in the presence of the built environment that saw us born and grow up within those walls" (Marconi P, 2009, p. 4, translation by author). This sense of displacement is therefore rooted in those historical urban contexts that have constituted the place of growth, identification and the main reference for communities that populate a place. By elevating the built environment to its symbolic dimension, its loss inevitably determines awaiting and expectation, since the absence of the architectural and urban reference does not end merely in the impossibility of accessing services, but also in the negation of living in a place with certain characteristics.

At least as far as Italy is concerned, the history of post-seismic responses is broad

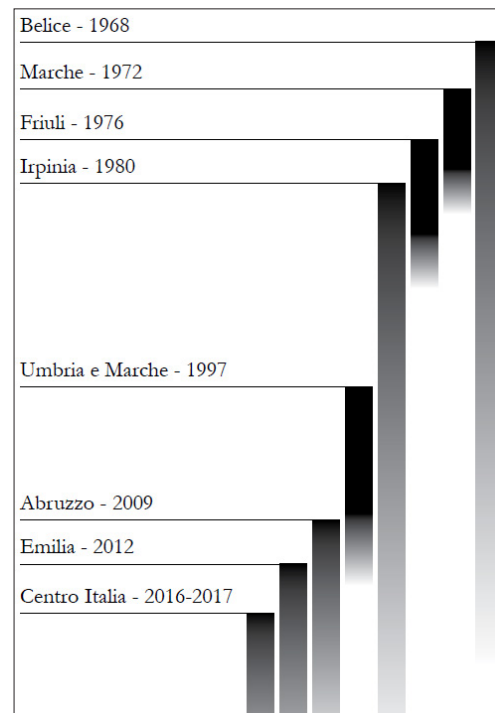


Fig. 1. Simplified scheme about the indicative duration of reconstruction processes following of major Italian post-war seismic events (Cristiano Tosco, 2022).

and varied, with multiple and well-known approaches, mirroring administrative infrastructures that have evolved over time on previous experiences and yet are always different. It is in this context that design action is placed as the crucial node of disaster response. The existence of such a vast damaged and destroyed building heritage, the need and urgency for innovative solutions capable of regenerating urban fabrics and rural areas affected by the catastrophe, are essential factors that allow architectural and urban design to establish a renewed interest in certain territories, by recognizing in disasters, beyond the drama and without falling back into cynical positions, "the opportunity for maximum mobilization of intellectual resources in the design of new or renewed cities" (Gabetti R, Olmo C, 1989, p. 22, translation by author). The project therefore carves out an important space in the so-called reconstruction and manifests itself in variable timescales which, even limiting observation to the main events of Italian post-seismic reconstruction since the Second World War, are demonstrations of socioeconomic contexts and boundary conditions which strongly influence the modalities and speed of design processes in consolidation, restoration, and reconstruction sites (Figure 1).

## The project as space for reflection

In the complex framework of procedures that is set up after a seismic event, the space for design becomes today a very precise path, with clear boundaries of intervention and a well-identified action space. This path is inherited and developed by the reconstruction history of a country, which in Italy has been very layered, with several approaches and attempts in search of models and good practices. Post-seismic reconstruction in Italy, during the last 50 years, tells of processes where the architectural discourses on the city run sometimes in parallel with the definition of a methodology, a procedural flow that is crucial still in our time (). The design speech, in more architectural and urban terms, emerged in well-known cases also through publications and research activities. Within the research activities that materialized the time of the project during the reconstruction phases the "Friuli model", well explained by Luciano di Sopra, can be mentioned as an analysis of the reconstruction practice after the Friuli earthquake (1976) in its holistic terms, observing normative, urban and design implications (Di Sopra L, 2016). Other experiences are more architecturally oriented, such as the work by Pierluigi Nicolini observing, after fifteen years from the Belice earthquake (1968), that "the reconstruction plans are nearing completion [...] and the result is an inextricable tangle of infrastructures, new quarters, destruction, and memories, out of which arise new problems" (Nicolini P, 1983, p. 7, translation by author). In the case of Irpinia earthquake (1980) the research around the project was very varied and heterogeneous, with some emergent answers as the one by Giorgio Grassi in the reconstruction of Teora, where the author himself admitted that "about a third of the old settlement cannot be rebuilt. The shape of Teora will be profoundly altered" (Grassi G, 2004, p. 136, translation by author). Very different ideas and practices emerged from these three reconstruction episodes, building a critical basement for further developments. In the more recent cases of L'Aquila (2009) and Emilia (2012), the reconstruction procedures have systematized some models of intervention and methodologies, developing a design discourse more oriented on the historical cities' images more than on a critical reflection about the reconstruction projects implications. One problematic element in L'Aquila case was, for instance, the application of a "building and developmental approach of the public real estate

enhancement without a justified demand of real use" (Andreassi F, 2018, p. 10, translation by author) that has unbalanced in qualitative and quantitative terms the architectural and urban reconstruction.

Recent developments, with the two priority tools of Reconstruction Plans for historical centres and Special Offices for the public spending control (Andreassi F, 2018, p. 6) are demonstrating again a lack of a general strategy beyond the seismic events. In fact, after the Central Italy shocks occurred in 2016-2017 (), reconstruction is proceeding on different levels. Considering the geographical and environmental peculiarities of the territory, the Central Italy area is mainly made of "minor" settlements, with some medium-scale towns. This contextual framework is the basis for the general principles set up by the Special Office for Central Italy Reconstruction enhancing that the "reconstruction can [...] be an opportunity to experiment with new models of attractiveness of internal areas, small municipalities and historic villages, which today may well be candidates for becoming poles of sustainable development complementary (if not partly alternative) to large metropolitan conurbations and traditional urban agglomerations" (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2020, p. 2, translation by author). Even with this main goal in mind, projects and interventions are developing with many imbalances and mismatches for differences in priorities, technicians, and urban and architectural contexts. What is particularly evident is the lack of a design discourse that for five years has been mainly replaced only by more technical or rhetorical speeches. Some projects and general reconstruction strategies are therefore more advertised, and others remain in the background without any conceptual connection between each other. If, on one hand, well-known projects by Stefano Boeri Architects in Amatrice (*Piazza del Gusto*, 2016-2017 and *Casa Futuro*, from 2018) and by MATE Engineering (with, among the others, Boeri) in Castelsantangelo sul Nera define an approach, on the other hand, there are several small villages, hamlets and buildings that are variably going to be demolished and rebuilt or carefully conserved. The post-seismic issue is thus a matter of relations between different aspects of a huge problem and "an undoubtedly fundamental node in the management of reconstruction concerns the relationship between political decision-making and technical knowledge on the one hand, and between these and the

perceptions and expectations of the affected communities on the other" (Gritti A, Menoni S, 2017, p. 767, translation by author).

Even if, after a disaster like the recent stronger Italian earthquake, responses and solutions are different because of the variability in the conditions and of the damaged buildings and fabrics, an evident problem is the lack of connections between the ongoing projects. This time of reconstruction should be – within all the limitations due to economic, political, and social needs – also a space for architectural and urban design debate. This would need a real network, a system of ideas and scientific positions, avoiding a patchwork of disconnected initiatives. This urgent effort could be materialized by the reintroduction of the design discourse both in the theoretical and in the practical sides. Even if the evolution of reconstruction procedures in Italy have offered a more efficient system of public practices and protocols, it would be a risk to renounce the design discourse, intended as a tool for critical reading and innovation, with its "strategic role [...] both from the theoretical point of view and the applicative one [...] enabling the innovation needed to solve complex problems and overcome the dichotomy between technology and architecture" (Terpolilli C, Bologna R, 2005, abstract). Advantages from this critical approach to the reconstruction are not limited to a more aware cultural environment in the act of rebuilding, transforming, or conserving a single building as well as fabrics and settlements; in fact, the comprehension of damages and destruction from a more "culturally equipped" (Dal Pozzolo L, 2021, back cover) perspective it would be also useful for the urban analysis. ■

## Note

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SESSIONE SPECIALE

STRATEGIE TEMPORANEE POST-DISASTRO  
NEI TERRITORI FRAGILI ITALIANI

## Un network tematico come proposta di metodo nella ricerca dottorale: "TEMP-"

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### Abstract

*The chronicization of crisis phenomena, well represented by the Central Italy region, triggers confrontation between multiple disciplinary approaches.*

*In response to this need, "TEMP-" was founded as an interdisciplinary and inter-university network of doctoral students and researchers that aims to investigate and debate the topic of post-emergency temporariness in its complexity. The network becomes an expression of cooperation among multiple domains of knowledge toward a growing need for open, shared, aware and plural research. This challenge becomes even more evident when the discussed topic is characterised by rising multidimensionality and complexity, that the consolidated sectorial approach and the individual cannot control or face.*

*Within a transversal perspective, the discussion will focus on the possible meanings and effects of post-disaster temporariness, reinterpreted as an opportunity to construct collectively new trajectories for possible futures.*

### Un contesto tematico per "TEMP-"

Nell'attuale condizione di «policrisi» (Morin E., 2020) si fa sempre più necessaria una riflessione sul concetto di "normalità" e dunque sul rapporto tra continuità e discontinuità nei sistemi socio-ecologici, tra cui includiamo le comunità umane e dunque gli insediamenti urbani. Al contempo, come nell'evoluzione del concetto di "resilienza" - via via adottato con differenti accezioni da molteplici ambiti disciplinari - il concetto di "equilibrio" costituisce una chiave di lettura primaria dei fenomeni globali che impattano sui fattori di sviluppo e, a volte, sopravvivenza, delle società, in relazione specialmente al grado di complessità e incertezza che le caratterizza.

Al glossario correntemente adoperato dalla comunità scientifica si aggiunge il concetto di "cronicità" (Gammeltoft Hansen et al., 2022). Questo è prezioso per inquadrare l'attuale condizione di emergenza permanente in cui «alcuni fenomeni fortemente destabilizzanti (si pensi al cambiamento climatico, alle migrazioni o all'aumento delle disuguaglianze) si stanno verificando con una velocità e un'intensità superiori a quelle previste solo alcuni anni fa proprio perché, quando l'instabilità di un sistema cresce, le interazioni esistenti fra le sue diverse componenti

provocano un'accelerazione dei singoli processi» (Giovannini E., 2019).

Il tentativo di comprendere e dunque scomporre, analizzare e verificare per poi ricomporre, seguendo gli apparati logici usuali, svela in maniera sempre più evidente l'inadeguatezza dell'approccio attualmente praticato e trasmesso, causata - l'inadeguatezza - dalla rigidità e settorialità su cui si fonda, che costringe a semplificazioni che minano l'efficacia dei processi conoscitivi. A questo si collega un'ulteriore utile distinzione tra i concetti di "adattamento" e "trasformazione" (Pelling M. et al., 2015). Alle società forse non si richiede più tanto la capacità di adattarsi - quindi rivedere e modificare un sistema esistente per renderlo capace di funzionare all'interno di mutate condizioni contestuali - quanto piuttosto la capacità di reinventare il sistema, dunque di trasformarsi a partire dalla base per definirne uno nuovo. Se, infatti, fino a tempi recenti la comunità scientifica parlava di *natural hazards* e *un-natural disasters* - (World Bank & UN, 2010) volendo sottolineare come la "naturalità" riguardi le fonti del pericolo e non il disastro stesso, evidenziando la relazione tra pericolo naturale e le condizioni insediative umane - adesso anche l'origine naturale degli *hazards*, ovvero delle fonti di pericolo, viene messa in