

The factory of the city. A relational investigation between urban and countryside

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# A

Aisu International  
Associazione Italiana  
di Storia Urbana

# SU

## **LA CITTÀ GLOBALE**

La condizione urbana  
come fenomeno pervasivo

## **THE GLOBAL CITY**

The urban condition  
as a pervasive phenomenon

INSIGHTS

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# LA CITTÀ GLOBALE

La condizione urbana  
come fenomeno pervasivo

# THE GLOBAL CITY

The urban condition  
as a pervasive phenomenon

a cura di

Marco Pretelli  
Rosa Tamborrino  
Ines Tolic

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# THE FACTORY OF THE CITY. A RELATIONAL INVESTIGATION BETWEEN URBAN AND COUNTRYSIDE

CRISTIANO TOSCO

## Abstract

*The paper seeks to apply an experimental reading to the city-suburbs-countryside relationship. The point of view is one of environmental transformations, read by an approach derived from the studies of forensic architecture [Weizman, 2011]. The case of Terni, with its steelworks, is assumed as emblematic for a description through microhistories, as per Ginzburg, for which it is possible to describe various perturbations on a larger scale starting from a single material element.*

## Keywords

*Anthropocene; Forensic; Microhistory*

## Introduction

This paper objective is the reconstruction of some urban, peripheral and territorial happenings which are glued together by the exploitation of natural resources. The structure of this contribution is built in order to give general information about the analysis methodology, following a «neomaterialist» [Simon 2013] approach which, if stressed, would become a tool to reconsider the relationship between the two commonly distinct sides of “city” and “landscape”.

The first chapter introduces to non-traditional readings tools. The reason for appealing to this kind of investigations is related to the evident spreading condition of global warming and environmental crisis, as a breaking point for our geological era. This «strange new world» [Scranton 2015, 12] is here read through connection and opposition between urban and rural, as a relationship originally funded on the ratio consumption-production which turned out to be unsustainable.

The second chapter focalizes on the methodology here proposed. It consists in a forensic investigation which ensues the studies by Eyal Weizman on *forensic architecture*, which is «located at the limit between architecture, history and law of war» [Weizman 2011, 190]. This means, in term of our interests, that architecture becomes also a tool of investigation between conflictual dynamics. The investigated relation is not fitted in human-human terms but rather in object-human-object evidences. It is always a conflict, where people both generate and suffer their activity on the natural palimpsest. Starting

from small things, brief stories of daily life, it will be possible to synchronically link together medium and large phenomena out and inside the city walls.

The last chapter, before the conclusion, will suggest a case of study where contemporary and historical conditions permit to test this kind of methodology. Starting from small things, the evidences in the city of Terni are the pretext to go deep inside the industrial production of the huge steelwork factories. Terni indeed was considered «essentially a parasitic city» [Portelli 1985, 74] for its dependence from the industry. The phenomenon representation would work by material connections – productive first of all – able to bring the discussion on large areas of the region and defining some connections between time and space, in the knowledge of the human-non human and the urban-non urban ratio.

## A changed palimpsest

### *From “matter” to “material”*

In 1973, Robert Smithson, commenting the work by Frederick Law Olmsted in the project for Central Park, wrote about the dialectical dimension of a landscape. He considered Uvedale Price and William Gilpin as «forerunners of a dialectical materialism applied to the physical landscape. Dialectics of this type are a way of seeing things in a manifold of relations, not as isolated objects» [Smithson 1973, 160]. Together with the lesson of André Corboz – on his palimpsest [Corboz 1985] condition of the territory – where he charged of dynamic meaning the consistency of a landscape, a first assumption – obvious but necessary – is that the territory is not static. Together with the territory, neither the city is a stationary mechanism. The apparent limit urban-peripheral-rural is always changing in an extended and complex configuration which glues together human flows, land consumption, production etc. In order to better read these territorial limits and their physical consequences, it is useful to simplify components of the anthropized landscape. The entrance of the human being in the configuration of new global geographies and topographies is represented by the distinction between “matter” and “material”. Following reflections by Giuseppe Strappa, “matter” is distinct from “material” in so far as the first is the starting point of a process which is embodied by the second [Strappa 2013, 97]. The “material” is always an anthropic transformation, a shaping of a “matter” root. In this sense, the “matter” of the city – and, in general, of the anthropized landscape image – is to find in the rural, outside from it, where the natural organization of the territory defines exploitation possibilities.

Piana del Fucino, in Abruzzo, is indicative in this sense. It was a former lake which was drained during the second half of the 19th century. The huge transformation input (“material”) started from a urban and diffused request: villages and towns rounding the lake were suffering the flooding dynamic (“matter”). The drainage produced, after some decades of work, an impressive planar countryside, a territorial shock which defined radical transformations in economies and urban developments. This example helps to admit that the dynamic feature of material facts is not only proper to objects (city, outskirts, rural areas) but also of the relational links between each other. Indeed,

as well as a cause-effect chain, the lake draining entailed the massive agricultural production, building new local and regional economies, new urban limits and new deep social questions.

### *A representation task*

What is here proposed is a changing perspective, less anthropocentric, based on facts evidences. This is motivated by a perceived changed paradigm of environment. Behind the term *anthropocene*, there is a structural transformation where human race is not just a spectator. Cities – the main responsible part of the anthropic production, in this sense – are facing a general overload which requires new policies in order to adapt existing structures. But new trajectories remain unknown without a clear definition of the existing condition. This last is clearly a task of representation: investigating and representing the city today is a propaedeutic challenge where traditional reading key are not adaptable to the diffused complexity of urban areas. The application of a «univocal and pure system» [Ungers, Viets 1997, 11] can't produce a true vision of the city, and this means consequently that design and planning tools are outdated. The obsessive research of contrast and opposition – e.g. between city and countryside – is not yet feasible to a universal protocol [Ungers, Viets 1997, 12]. A clearer image of the phenomenon requires obviously a more precise tool of description. The question could be summarized in the Bruno Latour's worlds: «what could possibly be the advantages of abandoning the static view of buildings in order to capture them [...] as a flow of transformations?» [Latour, Yaneva 2008, 85]. The request is for an adaptive approach, which starts from a methodology declined to specific investigated fields.

A way here proposed is the one of an explicit narration. The city, in the era of ecological crisis, should require a reading focused more on events, or better the chain of events which produced precise and instant images. In this sense, a first question is about representation, and a possibility could be the use of interdisciplinary tools: a more complex consciousness of a fact requires a more complex means of description.

## **Behaviours**

### *“Actors” in conflict*

The Oxford Dictionary defines the word “conflict” as «a serious incompatibility between two or more opinions, principles, or interests». From this first perspective, the conflict exists only between humans or animals, and this is completely true but too generic. As an Aristotelian “rational animal”, the human being has developed some prosthesis in order to adjust the physical and mental limit of its body. So, it seems true that the root of an action is very often delegated to some objects which are reflections of human activities. For instance, in 2004, the lawsuit around the wall construction in the West Bank territory – Beit Surik – demonstrated that conflictual dynamics cross the line of human activity as far as the “intentions of the wall” rather than the ones by the people were judged and made a «verdict related to the ‘behaviour’ of the wall itself» [Weizman 2011, 66].



This example explains that the “matter-material” ratio is the mirror of a conflictual reading. Behind economic and social needs, the use of soil, trees, air, water, sun, petroleum etc., defines the act of construction/production, the switch to a material image, which is representative of an exploitation logic. In the same way, is it possible to argue that nature – and so the original matter – responds to this stressful situation? In thermodynamic terms, yes, it is simply a reaction. But, if the human activity on the natural matter produces the so-called material, what about the reaction of the matter itself? It produces a damage to people and animals, of course. It is another form of materiality, which wasn't born by constructive logics but rather from perturbation of an originally balanced system, where environment works with a parametric rebalancing of the mechanism.

### *Narration of conflict*

The work by Forensic Architecture, a research agency based in Goldsmiths, University of London, is representative and inspirational for the methodology here proposed. They work on «architectural evidence – relating to buildings, urban environments – within legal and political processes» [Forensic Architecture 2010] using tools of architectural representation for describing variable dynamics of violence. These are expressed in a material sense, working on the architectural and infrastructural results of actions.

Following this kind of description – and for the same reasons expressed in the last paragraph – it could be interesting to use the same approach on the conflictual dynamics related to the natural resources' exploitation. Tools of investigation are different, particularly if the work involves the relationship between different areas of the same anthropized territory. The city, from this changed point of view, is a “device” [Agamben 2006], where the complexity is due to the high number of actors, causes-consequences chains, elements, variabilities, contingencies, necessities that bring the narration of the urban and its landscape events on a shared level, where more points of view are strongly required. The difficult relationship between the material appearance of a city and its history of landscape and territorial exploitation can be shown as a multiverse where there is not just one perspective but more routes of interpretation, linked together by the flux of the description speech.

## **The factory of the city**

### *Terni: building the city*

Long before the 19th century industrial development of the city, a common historical interpretation links together Terni with the water element [Bergli 1936, Marcelli 2010, 56; Tarquini 2015, 21] as a necessary resource for the city growth. The image of the preindustrial city is about a small-medium scale settlement, with a Roman urban structure yet, dominated by the Marmore waterfalls and the orographic basin of rivers Nera and Velino. The countryside was dominated by the small rural property, before being replaced by industrial sites [Portelli 1985, 48], quarries and hydroelectric power plant. With the Italian Unification, the choice to place a new steelwork to supply firstly the

National Navy fell upon the city of Terni. This decision is the result of policies external to Umbria region [Secci 1958, 11-22; Covino 1973-76, 87-140]: the detachment is still visible today, observing a city which has a local dimension and, inside it, factories faced to international economies (Fig. 1).

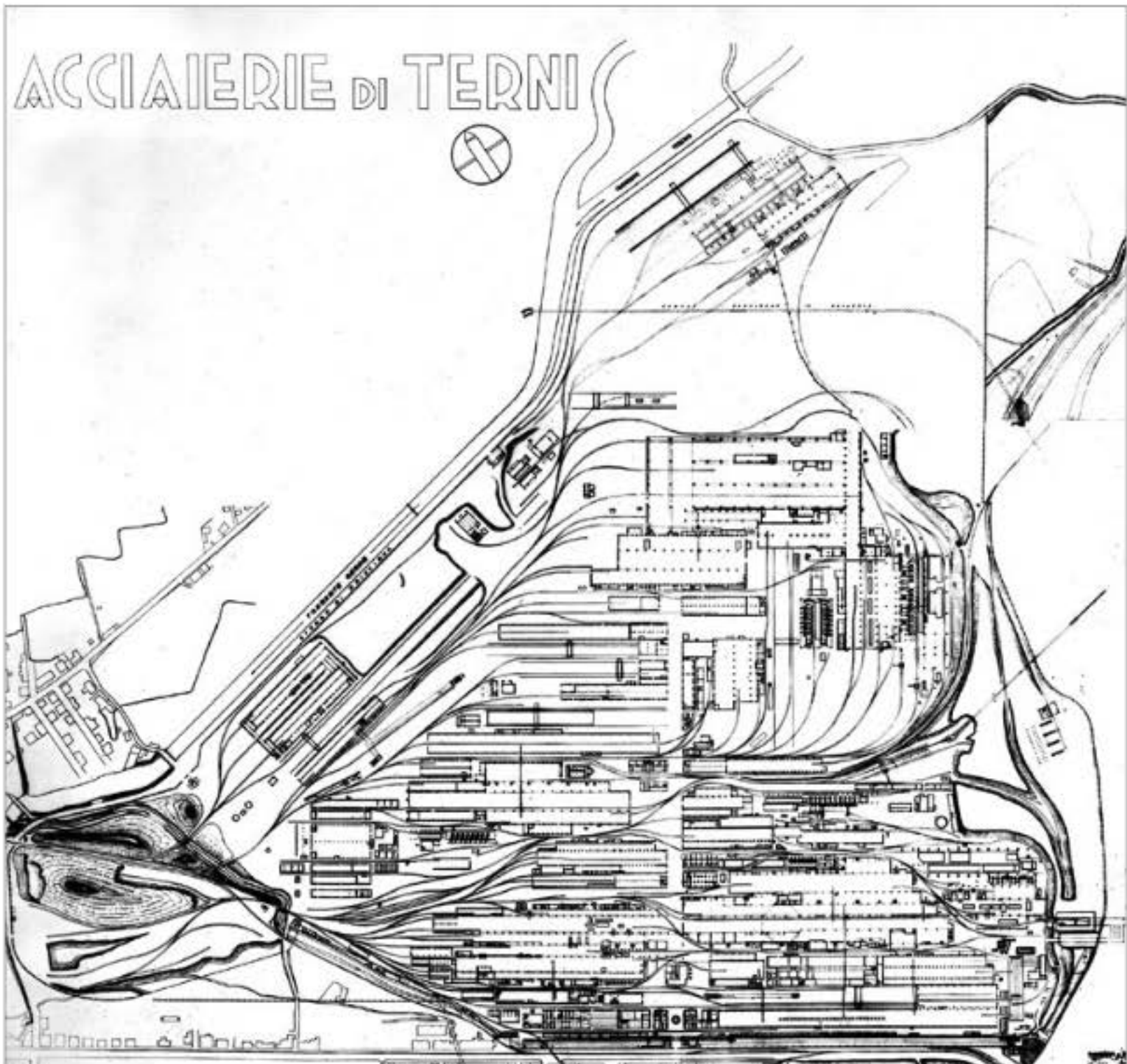


1: View of the iron and steel plant in Terni, May 1948 [original name and location: Terni, Archivio Storico Acciai Speciali Terni, B. 1304, Panoramica degli stabilimenti siderurgici di Terni].

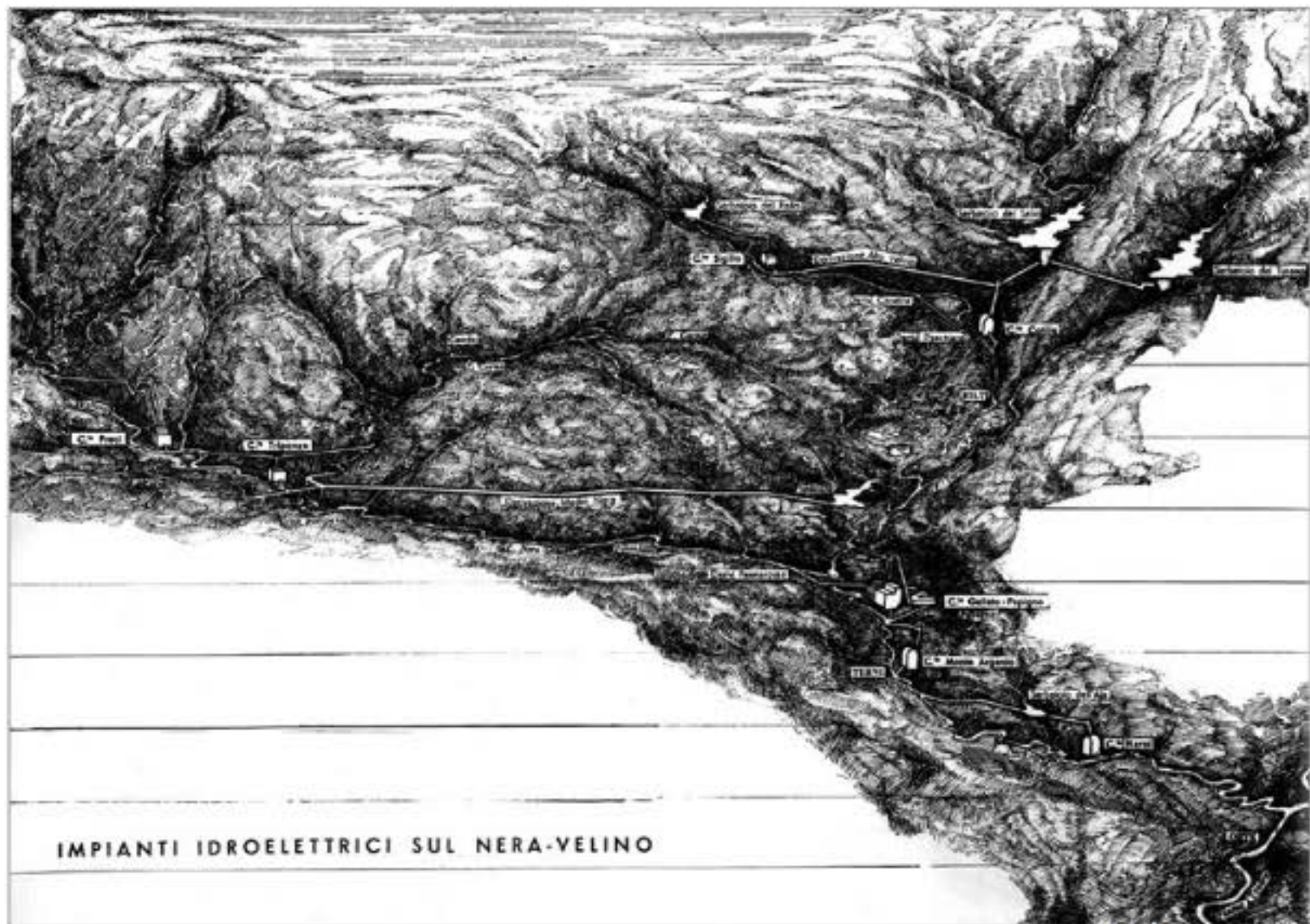


2: Comparison between the city in the early years of the 19th century and the today cityscape. On the top: Terni, view of the iron and steel plant, 1908 [original name and location: Terni, Archivio Storico Acciai Speciali Terni, 1, 178, Terni, stabilimento siderurgico, panoramica]. On the bottom: View of the AST steel plant [Photograph by Mario Scipioni].

The first big industrial site named SAFFAT (*Società degli Alti Forni e Fonderie di Terni*) dates back to the 1884, close to the Nera River, exploiting the drop-in height of Marmore waterfalls. The existence, enlargement and development of the factory defined the whole history of Terni, organizing the urban structure, the landscape image, the relationship between the city and other part of Italy and Europe (Fig. 2). The story here proposed is a narration of relationships between things: at the end the full picture would not be visible, but rather it will be more clear how much a material element, small-medium-large-extra large [B. Mau, R. Koolhaas 1995] scale that it is, is able to define new trajectories in the becoming of a city and in its inhabitants life. Following these objects, it will be useful to catch a kind of «social life of things» [Appadurai 1988] and the consequences that some productive/economic instances have on a large-scale phenomenology.



3: Plan of the iron and steel plant in Terni, 1949 [original name and location: Pianta dello Stabilimento Siderurgico di Terni, 1949, Archivio Storico Acciai Speciali Terni].



4: Chorography of the hydroelectric system built along the shores of Velino and Nera rivers, 1940-1950 [original name and location: Corografia degli impianti idroelettrici costruiti lungo il corso dei fiumi Velino e Nera, 1940-1950, Archivio Storico Acciai Speciali Terni].

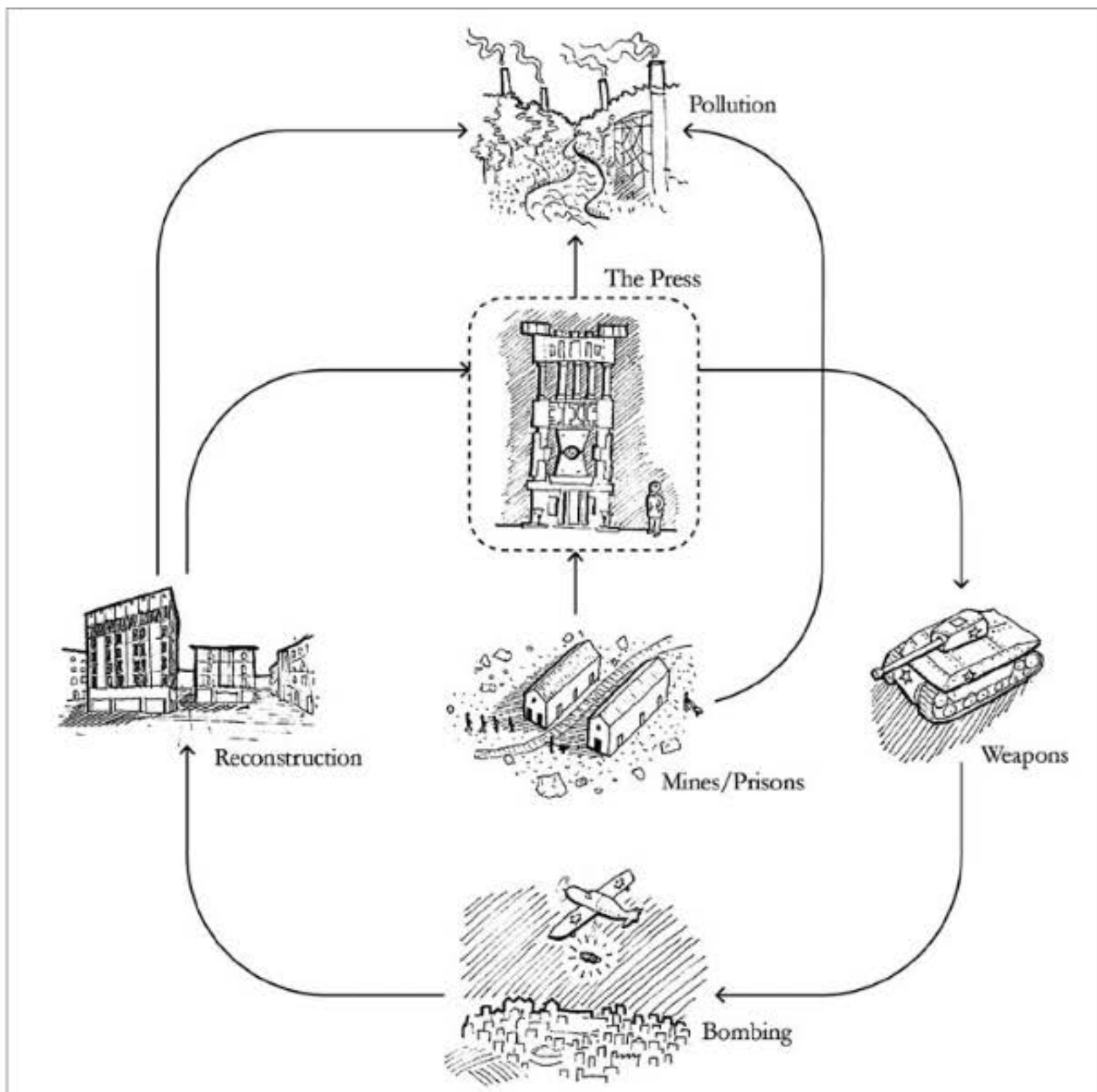
At the end of the 19th century the city covered a surface of 657.310 sqm while the new big factory – with all its properties – 703.550 sqm and an effective extension of industrial buildings of 22.000 smq circa [Marcelli 2010, 56-57]. From this point of view, Terni was defined by its industrial component, a city in a city, where houses and ancient fabrics were ideally replaced by factories, power stations, rails, channels, warehouses etc. The city structure grew up in this way: while the city limits were gradually occupied and expanded by new workers' districts, then the huge factory continued to expand (Fig. 3) in the landscape helped by the hydroelectric energy (Nera and Velino basin was the core of production, but the distribution system was extended longitudinally from the Centre of Italy to the Northern side) (Fig. 4).

### *The cyclical story of a press*

Coming to Terni by train means necessarily the view, just outside the rail station, of a huge monument from the Modern Age. It is a press, an industrial one, of 12.000 tonnes, decontextualized in a public garden in front of a busy space. This industrial press worked between 1935 and 1993, printing steel blocks for the production of armors and guns before the end of the second world war [Portelli 2008, 10]. This is a so-called piece of industrial archaeology and it could be considered as a material witness [Schuppli

2014-15] of the conflictual events between the steelworks, the city and their environment. Furthermore, it was not just a spectator, but a sort of “maker” which directly and indirectly brought to a chain of events (Fig. 5).

During the war, the press used wreckage and raw materials. Part of the printing process was made possible by the exploitation of some quarries and mines all around Umbria region. The story of some of these working sites are related to the detention of prisoners during the two fascist Italian decades. Villages like Ruscio and Morgnano (Spoleto) were directly connected – for a part of their history – to the steelworks of Terni [Nardelli 2013; Pregolini, Nardelli 2014]. So, both the mines/prison colonies supplied the factories of steel in Terni, the same factories which were bombed – by weapons similar to those produced by the factory – on the 11th August 1943. Here the story splits: on one



5: Scheme of the “material facts” around the press [Graphic elaboration of the authors].

hand the destruction of Terni defined its same future, on the other hand some mines were abandoned and landscape changed. The city saw the reconstruction plan by Mario Ridolfi and others and rebuilt its image both in the old town and in the peripheral areas, where residential districts for the industrial workers increased, with emblematic examples like *Villaggio Matteotti* by Giancarlo De Carlo (1969-1975). In this sense, the city expanded, and new uses of the countryside were possible, in particular on the West side: variation in production, malls, medium-size factories. Meanwhile, mines and caves suffered a period of partial abandon: the ones used as prison camps were closed while other remained in activity and defined, together with other environmental factors, a changing landscape around the city. In fact, existing quarries around Terni (e.g. between Papigno and La Romita) rounded the Marmore waterfalls, tributaries of Nera river. This last emerged, tight between factories, for its alarming environmental conditions as early as the end of XIX century, described as a river with a «dirty and stinking [water] for the drains and discharges of the “lady” steelworks» [Portelli 1985, 78]. And again, in the 90's, the river was titled as «poisoned» [Ciliani 1990, Bernardini 2014, 197]. The same speech is valid for the air conditions, where exhaust fumes, together with the car traffic and the topography of the Terni basin, represent another critical element of the contemporary ecology. The reconstructed and polluted city, on 1999, received from the steelworks the press, and decided to elevate it to a contemporary monument. From a translated point of view, this object should communicate more than its direct hard-industrial work.

## Conclusions

The last attempt is a test to stress the communication power of urban objects. As seen for the press, the description works with a logical sequence of events which bring with them material happenings, traces on the ground, on the sky, on the water and on the city.

In this text there are not descriptions of buildings. This decision, strange and difficult for an architect, is motivated by the limited space of this paper. Cities are complex, landscapes too: the conflictual meeting between each other can produce a level of complexity that needs a deep and extended research. Of course, the buildings actually composing the industrial field, and the ones which are empty and suffer abandon, if correctly investigated, contain microhistories [Ginzburg 1993] bringing the reflection on different trajectories far in time and space. But the building is itself a complex structure, and it needs to be well described in its material consistency before being activated as a witness of historical-environmental phenomena, as a non-human actant [Latour 2005, 9].

So, this brief and final consideration is about the possibilities of this approach. A spread campaign of testing, on different cities which are suffering a strong social-environmental-economic crisis, could open new routes of reading for the city structure. This doesn't mean to avoid the traditional schemes and structures of interpretation, but rather it opens new possibilities of hybridization, adapting cognitive mechanism to the contemporary evidences. Of course, this is not a new system of investigation, but it was already used by authors like Eyal Weizman in his study of war ruins in Gaza [Weizman 2011,

187-245]. The great potential of these “forensic” and “narrative” studies, applied to architecture, city and landscape topics, is the interdisciplinarity of the description which opens different hyperlinks connecting more subjects, studies, sciences and interpretations all together, in order to reach an expanding puzzle of knowledge and, maybe, more possible solutions to contemporary and future problems.

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