

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

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di Storia Urbana

SU

LA CITTÀ GLOBALE

La condizione urbana
come fenomeno pervasivo

THE GLOBAL CITY

The urban condition
as a pervasive phenomenon

INSIGHTS

1

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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INDICE GENERALE

A**MOBILITÀ E INTECULTURALITÀ. LA CITTÀ DI FRONTE A NUOVI SISTEMI DI RELAZIONE****MOBILITY AND INTERCULTURALITY. THE CITY FACING NEW RELATIONAL SYSTEMS**

Andreina Milan, Giuseppina Muzzarelli, Guido Zucconi

A1**La città medievale, la città dei frati: luoghi e spazi di confronto e scambi**

The medieval city, the city of the friars: places and spaces for intercultural exchange

Silvia Beltramo, Emanuela Garofalo, Gianmario Guidarelli, Catarina Almeida Marado

A3**La città che si protegge: controllo degli stranieri e gestione dell'ospitalità nelle città dell'Italia centro-settentrionale nel Trecento e Quattrocento**

The city that protects itself: control of foreigners and hospitality management in the cities of northern and central Italy in the 14th and 15th centuries

Aldo Giuseppe Di Bari, Edward Loss

A4**Città e infrastrutture nel contesto delle nuove reti di trasporto create nel XIX secolo**

Cities and infrastructures in the context of the new transport networks created in the 19th century

Alessandra Ferrighi, Adele Fiadino

A5**Concessioni straniere in Cina, da una città pioniera della globalizzazione alla reinvenzione del patrimonio nazionale cinese**

Foreign concessions in China, from a pioneering city in globalization to the reinvention of China's national heritage

Yue Lu, Christine Mengin, Thomas Renard

A6**"Città fluviale". Nuovi insediamenti e quartieri specialistici tra dinamiche di fondazione, crescita e declino urbano**

"River cities". New settlements and specialized districts through the dynamics of foundation, growth and urban decline

Andreina Milan, Enrico Pietrogrande

B

CITTÀ APERTE/CITTÀ CHIUSE. ISTITUZIONI, POLITICHE, COMPETIZIONE, DIRITTI

OPEN CITIES/CLOSED CITIES. INSTITUTIONS, POLICIES, COMPETITION, RIGHTS

Patrizia Battilani, Andrea Maglio, Luca Mocarrelli

B1

Il governo della città. Modernizzazione, sviluppo e visione del futuro

Governing the city. Modernization, development and vision of the future

Daniela Adorni, Alberto Grandi, Stefano Magagnoli

B2

Il ruolo dei turisti nella definizione dello spazio e dell'economia urbana

The role of tourists in shaping the urban space and the economy

Patrizia Battilani, Alessia Mariotti

B3

Immagini di città altre. Le *énclaves* del privilegio nella cinematografia

Images of other cities. The *énclaves* privilege in movies

Gemma Belli, Andrea Maglio

B4

Mobilità, culture e commerci nelle città del Mediterraneo dal medioevo all'età contemporanea

Mobility, culture and trade in Mediterranean cities from the Middle Ages to the contemporary age

Salvatore Bottari

B6

Istituzioni religiose e costruzione della città: dinamiche di globalizzazione e di apertura/chiusura delle comunità

Religious institutions and urban fabric: globalization and dynamics of opening/closure of communities

Andrea Longhi, Arianna Rotondo

B7

Città, governance e guerra nell'Ancien Régime: dinamiche di resistenza e tolleranza nei contesti bellici

City, governance and war in the Ancien Régime: dynamics of resistance and tolerance in war contexts

Susana Truchuelo García, Marina Torres Arce

C

STORIA LOCALE STORIA GLOBALE: DIMENSIONI, SCALE E INTERAZIONI LOCAL HISTORY, GLOBAL HISTORY: DIMENSIONS, SCALE AND INTERACTIONS

Manuela Ghizzoni, Massimiliano Savorra, Donatella Strangio, Elena Svalduz

C1

Storia locale, storia globale: dimensioni, scale e interazioni. La città del principe
Local history, global history: dimensions, scales and interactions. The city of the prince

Silvia Beltramo, Marco Folin, Manuela Ghizzoni, Elena Svalduz

C2

La città globale e la comunità locale raccontate dai media: dal cinema alle app
The global city and the local community as told by the media: from the cinema to apps

Silvia Beltramo, Tatiana Mazali, Fredo Valla

C3

Ripensare lo/gli scambio/i transatlantico/i: la circolazione di modelli, concetti, visioni e idee come veicolo di modernizzazione

Rethinking transatlantic exchange/s: the circulation of models, concepts, visions and ideas as a vehicle of modernization

Gaia Caramellino, Nicole De Togni

C4

La costituzione trans-urbana della città. Genealogie oltre il pensiero scalare
Trans-Urban and Global Systems: two perspectives emerging beyond the Scalar though

Niccolò Cuppini, Louissette Rasoloniana

C5

Il fotolibro e la città

The photo-book and the city

Davide Deriu, Angelo Maggi

C6

L'eccezionale normale: per una storia urbana a scala variabile

The exceptional normal: for an urban history on variable scale

Paola Lanaro, Giovanni Favero

C7

Ri/leggere i classici. Storiografie della città nell'Italia contemporanea

Re/read the classics. Historiography of the city in contemporary Italy

Sergio Pace, Massimiliano Savorra

C8**Sviluppo locale e città industriale nel XX e XXI secolo**

Local development and the industrial city in the 20th and 21st centuries

Alberto Rinaldi, Donatella Strangio

C9**Le città universitarie: spazio d'incontro tra dimensione globale e realtà locale. Spazi, culture e forme in età moderna e contemporanea**

University cities: meeting point between global dimension and local reality.

Spaces, cultures and forms in the modern and contemporary age

Stefano Zaggia

D**LA VOCAZIONE INTERNAZIONALE DELL'URBANISTICA. SCUOLE, ISTITUZIONI, RIVISTE, MOSTRE, ÉLITE URBANE E MODELLI DI PIANIFICAZIONE****THE INTERNATIONAL VOCATION OF URBAN PLANNING. SCHOOLS, INSTITUTIONS, JOURNALS, EXHIBITIONS, URBAN ELITES AND PLANNING MODELS**

Fiorella Dallari, Gerardo Doti, Heleni Porfyriou, Marco Pretelli

D1**Esportare il centro storico. Il Dossier Benevolo**

Exporting the urban core. Benevolo Dossier

Benno Albrecht, Anna Magrin

D2**Notizie dai paesi nordici o un'epoca d'azione**

News from the Nordic countries or an epoch of action

Chiara Monterumisi, Monica Prencipe, Antonello Alici

D3**Le riviste di urbanistica, tra sollecitazioni locali, nazionali e transnazionali**

Town planning journals, among local, national and transnational solicitations

Angelo Bertoni, Gabriele Corsani

D4**Tradizione e modernità nella costruzione delle città europee e nel dibattito urbanistico della seconda metà del Novecento**

Tradition and modernity in the construction of European cities and in the

development of the town planning debate in the second half of the 20th century

Heleni Porfyriou, Francesca Romana Stabile

D5**La dimensione globale del patrimonio culturale**

The global dimension of cultural heritage

Elena Pozzi, Marco Pretelli

D6**L'architettura del XIX secolo: uno dei primi stili internazionali nell'urbanistica?**

19th century architecture and urban planning – one of the first international styles in town planning?

Angelika Psenner

D7**Strategie e strumenti di ricostruzione in Europa nel secondo dopoguerra**

Strategies and instruments for reconstruction in post-war Europe

Simona Talenti, Annarita Teodosio, Vassiliki Petridou

E**URBANO/RURALE: IDENTIFICAZIONI, CONTAMINAZIONI, POLITICHE, EREDITÀ CULTURALE**

URBAN/RURAL: IDENTIFICATIONS, CONTAMINATIONS, POLICIES, CULTURAL HERITAGE

Paola Lanaro, Giovanni Leoni, Rosa Tamborrino, Simona Tondelli

E1**Censurare, dimenticare, narrare l'architettura dei totalitarismi del Novecento**

Censoring, forgetting, narrating the architecture of 20th century totalitarianism

Micaela Antonucci, Elena Pozzi, Leila Signorelli

E2**Forme, processi e immaginari del continuum urbano-rurale in Europa e nel bacino del Mediterraneo**

Forms, processes and collective consciousness of the urban-rural continuum in Europe and in the Mediterranean area

Marco Assennato, Federico Ferrari

E3**Paesaggi urbani tra età moderna e contemporanea**

Urban landscapes in the modern and contemporary ages

Gianluca Belli, Carolina De Falco

E4**La dimensione globale nella città e nel territorio del Seicento e del Settecento: strategie e politiche a confronto**

The global dimension in the city and its territory during the 17th and 18th centuries: strategies and policies compared

Cristina Cuneo, Lucia Trigilia

E5**Se studi la sedia, scopri il mondo**

If you study the chair, you discover the world

Elena Dellapiana, Jonathan Mekinda

E6**I paesaggi fluviali tra innovazione e identità**

River landscapes between innovation and identity

Claudia Pirina, Marco Ferrari

E7**Le relazioni città-campagna: tra ordine e conflitto (1500-1850)**

The city-countryside relationship: order and conflict (1500-1850)

Domingo L. González Lopo, Roberto J. López, Fernando Suárez Golán

E8**La narrativa urbano-rurale nel campo del patrimonio culturale: modelli culturali, strumenti e competenze in ambito didattico e professionale, politiche e pratiche**

The Urban-Rural Discourse in the field of Cultural Heritage: cultural models; educational and professional tools and skills; policies and practices

Giovanni Leoni, Simona Tondelli

E9**Globalizzazione, città e territorio rurale. Memorie e progetti per il futuro**

Globalisation, cities and their rural territories. Memoirs and projects for the future

Francesca Martorano, Angela Quattrocchi

E10**Paesaggio urbano e paesaggio rurale: i territori della continuità**

Urban landscape and rural landscape: territories of continuity

Julia Piretti

E11**Stadtluft macht frei? Partecipazione urbana e rurale nella formazione di storie e memorie**

Stadtluft macht frei? Urban and rural participation in shaping histories and memories

Peter Stabel, Rosa Tamborrino

F

IMMAGINI, FORME E NARRAZIONI DALLA CITTÀ GLOBALE **IMAGES, FORMS AND NARRATIVES FROM THE GLOBAL CITY**

Sergio Onger, Anna Rosellini, Ines Tolic

F1

“Comprendere” la città in uno sguardo. La veduta a volo d’uccello come marcatore del DNA culturale della civiltà spaziale italiana

“Understanding” the city in a glance. The bird’s eye view as a marker of the cultural DNA of Italian spatial civilisation

M. Beatrice Bettazzi

F2

Evoluzione dell’immagine delle città d’Italia tra età moderna e contemporanea: dal vedutismo alla fotografia artistica, dalla cartografia alla fotografia aerea

Evolution of the image of the cities of Italy between the modern and contemporary ages: from landscape painting to artistic photography, from cartography to aerial photography

Alfredo Buccaro, Francesca Capano

F3

Città deformate: narrazioni e ritratti urbani dissonanti in età moderna e contemporanea

“Deformed” cities: narratives and dissonant urban depictions in the modern and contemporary age

Salvatore Di Liello, Pasquale Rossi

F4

Leggere le storie della città attraverso i documenti visivi

Reading the city’s histories through visual documents

Nancy Stieber, Anat Falbel, Min Kyung Lee, Jeffrey A. Cohen

F5

Città globali in scena: le esposizioni universali

Global cities on display: international exhibitions

Elena Gianasso

F6

Storie che raccontiamo: narrazioni dello spazio cittadino

Stories we tell: narratives of the city space

Shelley Hornstein

F7

Verso la città globale. Spazi urbani e forme d’arte

Towards the global city. Urban spaces and art forms

Elena Manzo, Chiara Ingrosso

F8**L'esperienza fotografica della città**

The photographic experience of the city

Claudio Marra, Federica Muzzarelli

F9**CityScopes. Luoghi e scenari urbani per la fruizione cinematografica**

Cityscopes. Urban places and scenarios for cinematic enjoyment

Roy Menarini

F10**Moda e città fra dinamiche globali e ricadute locali**

Fashion and the city in their global dynamics and local repercussions

Simona Segre Reinach, Ines Tolic

F11**Immagini urbane delle città europee dell'Est**

Urban iconography: looking at eastern urban images from outside and inside

Anda-Lucia Spânu, Massimo Visone

G**CITTÀ E AMBIENTE NELL'ERA DELL'ANTROPOCENE E DELLA GLOBALIZZAZIONE****CITY AND ENVIRONMENT IN THE ERA OF ANTHROPOCENE AND GLOBALIZATION**

Salvatore Adorno, Raffaele Milani

G1**Geografie sonore. Il suono come elemento dello spazio urbano nell'Italia dell'età moderna**

Sound Geographies. Sound as element of the urban space in modern Italy

Luigi Collarile, Maria Rosa De Luca

G2**Green commons. Gli orti urbani come fattore di integrazione sociale nella città contemporanea**

Green commons. Urban gardens as a factor of social integration in the contemporary city

Giovanni Cristina, Maria Elena Seu

G3**La vulnerabilità dei centri storici: metodi di valutazione della resilienza del patrimonio urbano**

The vulnerability of historical city centres: an assessment of the resilience of urban heritage

Giulia De Lucia, Stefano Salata

G4**La città nell'età degli uomini e della materia: spazi urbani antropocentrici o reti ibride aldilà dell'umanità?**

Cities in the Age of Humans and Matter: Anthropogenic Urban Spaces or More-than-Human Hybrid Networks?

Claudio De Majo

G5**Il fattore acqua nel metabolismo urbano: da risorsa a rifiuto**

The water factor in urban metabolism: from resource to waste

Massimo Galtarossa, Laura Genovese

G7**Trasformazioni urbane e ambientali: l'industria mineraria come polo di attrazione e di lavoro. Una realtà ancora presente in Europa**

Urban and environmental transformations: the mining industry as a centre of attraction and work. A reality still present in Europe

Sonia Salsi

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).

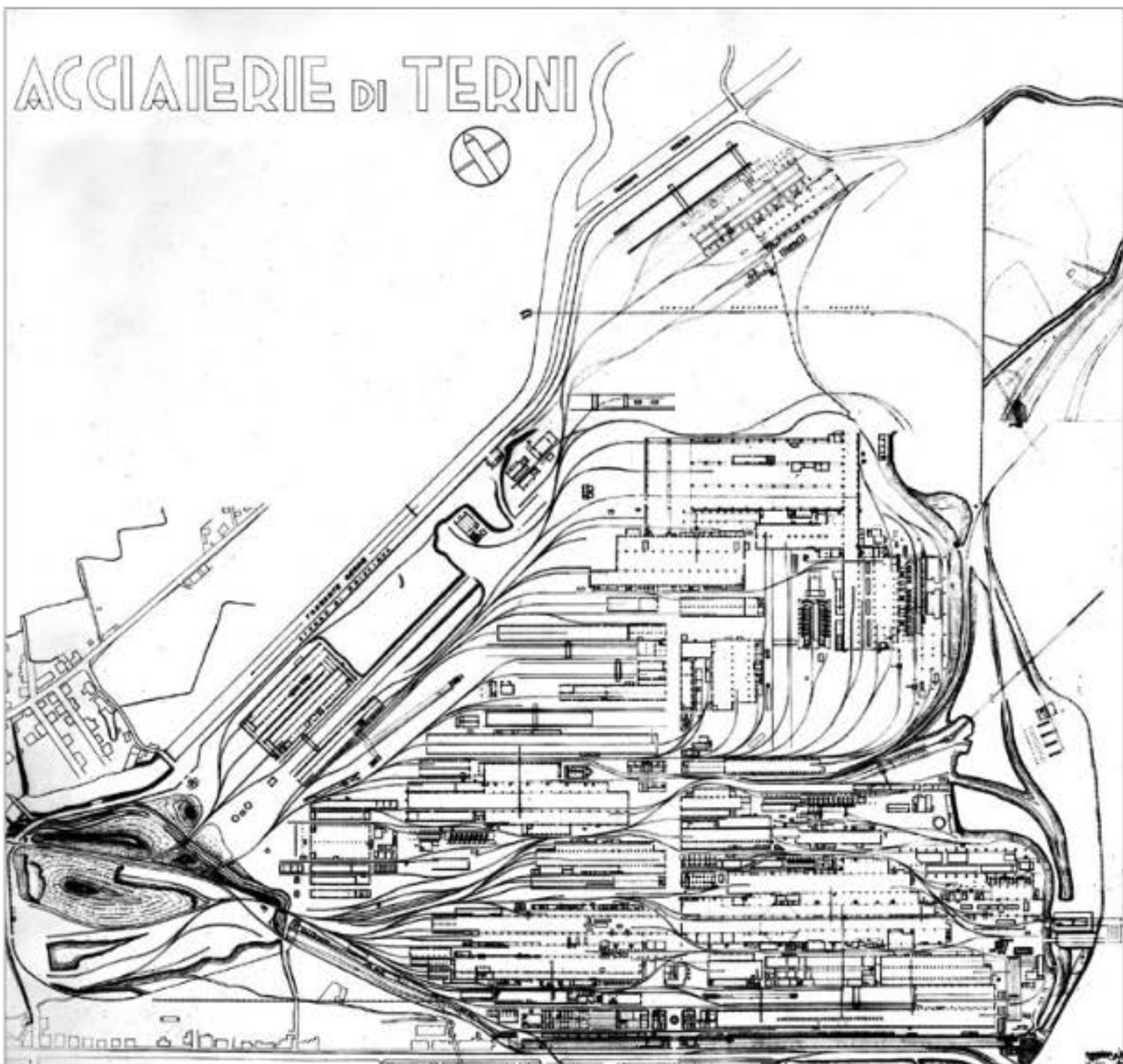


1: View of the iron and steel plant in Terni, May 1948 [original name and location: Terni, Archivio Storico Acciai Speciali Terni, B. 1304, Panoramica degli stabilimenti siderurgici di Terni].



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].

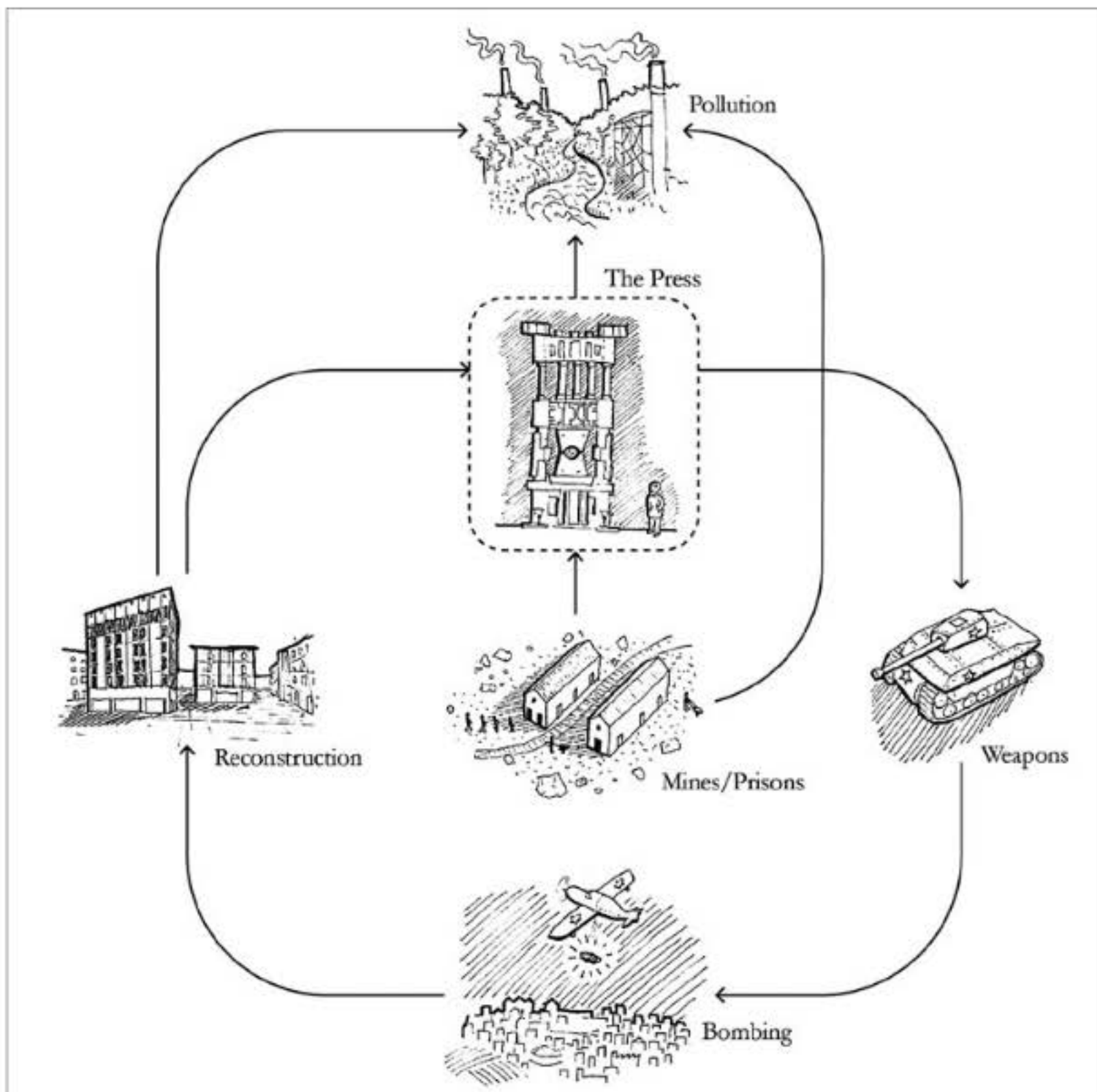
The first big industrial site named SAFFAT (*Società degli Alti Forni e Fonderie di Terni*) dates back to the 1884, close to the Nera River, exploiting the drop-in height of Marmore waterfalls. The existence, enlargement and development of the factory defined the whole history of Terni, organizing the 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].

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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