

## TranslationArchitecture TM

Maria Alessandra Segantini

There is an environmental problem and there is an economical crisis.

Questioning the design approaches, which respond mainly through conventional technical solutions at the fragility of both systems, the present situation can be seen, instead, as a great opportunity for innovative horizons within the design disciplines.

Engaging and re-inventing the site itself, as a space rich of potentiality, reconfiguring the boundaries of the programs, re-writing the features of the place (materiality, topography, strata, culture, socio-political expectations) cross-sectioning through the different specificities of the disciplines involved, engaging bottom-up approaches, architects are able to reinvent both the boundaries of their interventions and their role in contemporary, dealing with the whole of the built environment.

This approach is particularly evident when urban renewal involves the void spaces of the city, should they be infrastructures, parks or marginal unused parts.

The High Line in New York City by Diller, Scofidio and Renfro, where a viaduct supporting a railway line was turned into a urban park floating on the city skyline (in a similar way of the Promenade Plantée in Paris) is the invention of a new city-topography. It produces different relationships with the surroundings and, at the same time, concurs in creating a new mental map for both the citizens and the city users in a similar way of the urban renewals of the huge dock infrastructures of the cities of Copenhagen or Antwerpen.

New York project is a turning point in the recognition of the potentialities, which are hidden in those parts of the cities, dismissed by the movement of the economical flows, but which can be reshaped by different types of economies, in this case dealing with tourism, leisure and culture. Physical and social potentialities of the existing viaduct laid both in the generous structure, which could support the weight of the earth and the systems, necessary to make the artificial park work, together with the recognition of the identity that this piece of 1930s infrastructure represented for the small community gathering in a committee and fighting against its demolition.

Working with a different kind of an existing infrastructure (a concrete structure protection from flood), Yongning Park by Turenscape landscape architects is an alternative approach to conventional urban water management and flood-control engineering which abandons the traditional concrete water protection in favor of an ecological approach and which reveals and rediscovers the beauty of the natural vegetation and the ordinary landscape.

The recognition and preservation of the natural processes of Tanghe River Park in Qinhuangdao City and their translation into a beautiful urban park is another example of the possibility of re-engaging a proactive relationship between the environment and the community, obtained through a minimal design solution, which adds a 500-meter red-ribbon bench integrating lighting, seating and environmental interpretation. Far from the urgency of budget control, the minimal of the intervention seems to become an ethical choice.

A similar attitude can be found in the philanthropic initiative for the renewal of Miyashita Park in Tokyo, designed by Atelier Bow-Wow. The precious zelkova trees of the park, already occupying the roof of an existing parking facility have become the starting point of the design, playing the role of defending the surroundings from the noise of the skatepark, which reshaped the ground, using the trees themselves as obstacles. This project is the built example of a broader research of the architects on the role of parks in Japanese cities. For Atelier Bow-Wow parks should have a passive and an active role furnishing a safe space in case of emergency, for example a huge earthquake and reinventing their space for a population which is growing older as in PKO. Project Kitchen Operation, a new structure at disposal to be activated by citizens<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Yoshiharu Tsukamoto, interviewed by Casey Goodwin, *Park as Philantropy*, in <<Threshold 40>>, Cambridge, Ma, USA, pp. 91-98

A new sensitivity in design disciplines seems to focus the attention on those unused and marginal spaces of the city. They aren't prohibited spaces, but they are void and inaccessible due to their invisibility.

Working with these voids, architects can shape different roles for the ordinary or invisible parts of the city, inventing new forms of collective space as it happens in Bjarke Ingels' waste filtration plant in the centre of Copenhagen which was turned into a sky-track.

Working with C+S (the architects' firm of which I am partner, with Carlo Cappai) in Sant'Erasmus island urban and landscape renewal project, was the occasion of considering some of those issues. Engaging and cross-sectioning through the inputs and suggestions coming from the specificity of the disciplines involved, such as architecture, urban design, the design of the landscape, botanic, transport engineering, the island was re-invented and re-shaped through multiple scales in search of producing a frame of open infrastructures as a backbone for punctual architecture interventions to grant a new accessibility, which had the aim of economical equilibrium, more than that of growth, but then finished to attract tourism, cultural events, investors. Water canals were re-dug to improve natural circulation engaging the reuse of the fishing lands, accessibility was improved and historical monuments transformed into open museums and school labs.

The edges of the island were manipulated and unfolded to regain a lost relationship between earth and water, which was once one of the most important features moving the fragile lagoon system. Turning the boundary wall into a space with a variable section and different materials, the design engages a multiplicity of different uses to be activated by the inhabitants (leisure, commercial and tourist activities populate the edges of the island and the terminals, where the parks are a possibility of bigger events such as concerts or camping).

In the same horizon, the design of a new water filtration plant is critical to the idea that it is nowadays challenging to engage a new attention to the invisible parts of our city spaces, reinventing the role of energy systems, water or waste filtration plants. Giving Sant'Erasmus's water filtration plant a role which can be compared to that of the well in the sixteenth century Venetian urban space of the 'campo', the place where the community met around drinkable water, C+S settled the infrastructure in the middle of a park, merging it with the landscape through the use of local earth coloring the concrete. Not the conventional steel-made box, rather four one-meter thick walls define the space envisioning an adaptable solution in the future possibility of becoming something different, thanks to their durable simple structure, in the same way as we today inhabit the monuments which the history has preserved, giving them different and transitional uses. The water filtration plant constitutes the manipulation of the existing Venetian typology refusing the identification between form and use. Architecture is a medium, the necessary interface for the user. It celebrates the joy of inhabiting in the sense of experiencing and being part of. At the same time, it is the built manifesto of a responsible use of ecological and economical resources. It needs to be the nail of a urban acupuncture process (referring to Manuel de Solà-Morales). In this horizon there is a necessary continuity between the scales of the intervention, in a way that it is possible to act similarly when working on the urban renewal of the 325 hectares of Sant'Erasmus Island or in the smallest refurbishment of a 19<sup>th</sup> century space in The Venetian Arsenale where we like to define the architect as a 'translator', who chooses the best words to bridge the *text* to his time and culture. In HBB. Harbor Brain Building, which will control the dock openings after the completion of the MOSE project), the text was constituted by an existing 19<sup>th</sup> century space in the Venetian Arsenale. The technological solution used to push the building 'off the grid' thanks to the introduction of a glazed roof with a texture of photovoltaic cells, becomes the translation into contemporary of the Venetian light, always cut by water into pieces of reflection. As for Haroldo and Augusto De Campos<sup>2</sup>, our TranslationArchitecture™ is comparable to an act of cannibalism, not considered in the Western culture meaning, but as an act of respect, an act of nutrition, which absorbs the properties of the text and the words (materials) in a way which is very similar to that of

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<sup>2</sup> E. Genzler, *Teorie della Treduzione*, original title: *Contemporary Translation Theories*, Torino 1998, p. 211

Benjamin/Derrida, for whom the translation is a vital force necessary to the survival of a text. In this sense the translation/design gets rid of the sense of loss (we always lose something when practicing design) and becomes an act of joy and pleasure, re-contextualizing signs, bridging them into different time-scapes, when HBB is a device which changes every single moment of the day according to light and climate condition and activates the building.

Going back to the void, unoccupied and invisible parts of the cities, a series of recent interventions can be considered translations of the contemporary economic crisis, engaging a proactive relationship between the environment and the community.

ECObox is a demountable and transportable garden of pallets together with tool boxes, moving in different places of the city of Paris and engaging their collective activities such as cooking, debating, reading. The project is recognized as a “politically emancipatory experience for the city residents involved in the project, who learned how to negotiate space for collective use. It was emancipatory for AAA too, who learned that architects don’t need a client, a budget, and a site to practice architecture but can rely on their status as citizens to create nomadic space through urban tactics”<sup>3</sup>. Positioned hybridly between a bottom-up and a top-down intervention, the urban acupuncture, Spanish project ‘Estanoesunsolar’<sup>4</sup> shows the challenge of a collaborative work between the municipality, the architects and the neighborhood associations. Sawing together a series of vacant lots of the city of Zaragoza, the small voids inside some denser parts of the city were reinvented as a series of public spaces with a very small economic investment and engaging unemployed people. The success of this first seed pushed a series of private owners to collaborate linking their areas to the net with the creation of a technical office to manage the interventions.

Through a series of uncompleted, adaptable micro-intervention of a part of a dismissed viaduct in the centre of El Cairo, a group of young people have turned the infrastructure into one of the city epicenters, producing both culture and wealth.

In this contest we need not to forget that the Egyptian capital city is the theatre of informal economies granting the economical survival such as the car spare parts market, which temporarily occupy the streets during the day. It is this sense of property of the common streets when the viaducts’ unused space is reinvented as a ‘community dining room’ which engages, together with the already cited informal markets’, a special possibility of using all the parts of the city beyond their programmed roles and boundaries<sup>5</sup>. These informal economies are spreading all over the Western World with the sustainable ‘farmer markets’ transforming either a parking lot or a large street into an informal market in the aim of healthier food, reduce distances of the products’ growth and cut of the expensive marketing chain.

The topic is also relevant if thinking at the shrinking city of Detroit and its phenomenon of urban farms which have colonized some vacant sites developing as a new economic business and, at the same time, improving the identity of the inhabitants where the urban grid is no more a desolated abandoned space but the symbol of a healthy future<sup>6</sup>, or the active urban protest of Ecocity Builders’ who claim the streets as spaces for citizens with actions of ecological depaving<sup>7</sup>. In a softer way a plan for the city of Leuven in Belgium, decided that every 15 days a part of a street is closed to traffic and becomes a playground, offering in this way a new mental map to the children who claim the possibility of using spaces and producing a form sociality far from their houses, a kind of ‘broader neighborhood’.

When speaking of the ‘Weak metropolis’ as the city of the present, a high-tech favela, with a computer every 20 square meters, avoiding rigid and definitive solutions, specialized typologies or identification between form and function, the territory of experiences, the visionary Italian architect

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<sup>3</sup> AAA., *ECObox/Self-Managed Eco-urban Network*, in: M. Mostafavi, *Ecological Urbanism*, Baden, Switzerland 2011, pp. 510-511

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8Dr\\_oBFt7M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8Dr_oBFt7M)

<sup>5</sup> M. Navarra, *Repairing Cities*, Venice 2006

<sup>6</sup> <http://organicgardenproject.com/blog/urban-farms/from-motown-to-hoetown/>

<sup>7</sup> M. Zardini, *Asfalto: il carattere della città*, Milano 2003, pp. 220-222

Andrea Branzi describes a “...great transformation through microstructures...”) where, “...as with the microcredits of Muhammad Yunus, we have to enter in the home economies and the interstice of daily life...”, a metropolis “...less anthropocentric and more open to bio-diversities, to the sacred and to the human beauty”. Branzi concludes writing that “...The quality of the weak metropolis is in the quality of its objects...<sup>8</sup>”.

When speaking about ‘Weak architecture’ Ignasi de Solà-Morales refers to the architect as the designer of objects producing ‘decoration’ in the sense of the etimologic meaning of the word *decorum*, “...not in the sense of vulgarity, of triviality, of the repetition of established stereotypes, but as a discreet folding back to a perhaps secondary function, a pulling back to a function that projects beyond the hypothetical ground of things”<sup>9</sup>.

Is there a casuality in this repetition of the same word *weak*?

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<sup>8</sup> A. Branzi, *The Weak Metropolis*, in M. Mostafavi, *cit.*, pp. 110-113

<sup>9</sup> I. de Solà-Morales, *Weak Architecture*, in: <<Quaderns d’Arquitectura i Urbanisme>> n. 175, October-December 1987