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Roman Diaforentities. Interdisciplinary insights for urban regeneration in Rome

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Abstract

The essay introduces a research proposal built from a new awareness on the approach to the urban existing heritage acquired after studying the anthropological meaning - not only architectural and spatial - of the concept of border. In his books, the anthropologist Piero Vereni develops the concept of “diaforentity” as the ability to build and affirm one’s own identity thanks to changes that can occur by will or due to unexpected external phenomena. This concept, used as a disciplinary loan for architecture, renews the meanings of non-place and junkspace and overcomes that of resilience for the regeneration or redesign of spaces and architectures modified by time or by catastrophic events. The case study taken to apply this theory is the Mandrione district in Rome, choice due to the recognition of its historical and cultural qualities despite the urban decay in which it lies after the demolition of the shacks built during the World War II.

Keywords

Diaforentity; Roman aqueduct; urban regeneration; self-constructions; public art.

1. From anthropology to architecture: a new insight

The anthropologist Marc Augé, in the autograph preface to the 2009 edition of his famous book *Non-lieux*, writes

I have defined an anthropological place as any space in which the inscriptions of the social bond (...) and of collective history can be read. These inscriptions are clearly rarer in the spaces marked with the ephemeral and passage seal. And yet in reality there are, in the absolute sense of the term, neither places nor non-places. The place-non-place couple is an instrument for measuring the degree of sociality and symbolization of a given space (Augé, 2009, p. 8).

This is a necessary adjustment to the definitions of place and non-place that he had provided in the first draft of the 1992 essay. The aim is to recalibrate his own considerations according to today's contemporary modernity, which we could define as "post-postmodern", in which the inhabited space is identified with the surface occupied by the single individual. He carries everything he needs to stay (connected) to the world: digital ubiquity neutralizes the need for the presence - and therefore - for localization, the minimum existential coincides with the minimum soil.

To say that a "place" and a "non-place" do not exist in themselves but only by the use we do of them, means to crack the buttress of the identity of the places, which has always been placed as a barrier to the modification of historic centres or sites of archaeological interest, which are threatened from the bulldozers of modernity aimed at the accumulations of memory and recognition. Augé re-establishes a two-way relationship: if a new existential condition can switch non-spaces of *transit* into spaces of *being* (for example introducing art in the subway stations: the distracted flow of the passenger is contrasted by the contemplative act of the savant), the excessive "museification" of places (endowed with identity, relationality and historicity) shifts their condition from being as stratification and multitude, to not being as a landscape to be crossed. Historical cities become theme parks in which the stratigraphy of life is replaced by the consumption of the moment. The dichotomy of place/identity and non-place/non-identity generates the further combination of permanence/mutation associated with the concept of resilience, understood as the ability of a place to maintain its own identity characteristics unaltered - as individuality, locus, design and memory (Rossi, 2000) - despite the modifications occurred in the face of an external shock.

To defuse the stalemate created by the fear of uncertainty, it is proposed to overcome the principle of identity in favor of the concept of diaforentity described by the anthropologist Pietro Vereni (2004, p. 19):

Diaforentity expresses the person's ability to vary syn- and dia-chronically while continuing to feel herself. From what has been said, the relationship between diafor-ENTITY and identity, understood precisely as permanence, should also be clear. The discriminating feature between the two is already in the etymology: diaforon-ENTITY vs. idem-ENTITY. In identity, what constitutes the entity is its permanence, and the variations are nothing but accidents. Diaforentity is instead the mutability that recognizes itself, the subject as hic et nunc, which adheres to itself without measuring itself against the immobile touchstone with an abstract self given once and for all.

Translated into a place, the diaforentity allows the mutation to occur without the need to resist, reversing the clash between existing and new in a dialogue capable of metabolizing the Fuck the context! by Rem Koolhaas, giving back to the city (or to the landscape) a living object that mends the tear between pastism and futurism. The diaforentity would allow to shift the topic of the debate from whether to modify to how to modify, at the same time favoring the spirit of the times and redefining the ways in which the architectural/landscape self can «remain in becoming, that is, to recognize itself not despite, but in the difference» (Vereni 2004, p. 18).

The effectiveness of this theory lies in its transversality: it can be applied to an infinite number of situations and can be declined in an infinite number of attitudes, thus guaranteeing the experimentation of infinite combinations until finding the most suitable solution for the purpose of the places.

2. A case study: the Mandrione district in Rome

Rome is a round shaped city crossed in every directions by ancient aqueduct lines, many of them still functioning for the water supply. They stand out gloriously in the middle of the traffic jam, they face the blocks of flats without fear, they still are used as “crutch” for parasite buildings. The case study chosen is the proximity of Mandrione street that follows the line of the Acquedotto Felice, crossing the Casilino district in Rome¹, because of the stratified layers of historical evidences that this

1. The place has been study theme of the international workshop *On Pasolini's footsteps: the Mandrione landscape, recycled landscapes between urban space, the Appian archaeological park and residual agricultural areas*, organized by the Faculty of Architecture of Sapienza University of Rome and the Université de Liège, by professors: Pier Paolo Balbo di Vinadio, Fabio di Carlo, Enrico Genovesi, Rita Occhiuto, Sophie Dawance, Anne Rondia, Marc Gossens



Figure 1

Indication of the line of the Felice Aqueduct and the Mandrione canal in a map dated 1884

stretch retains in its morphology. Situated in the South-Est quadrant of the city, inside the G.R.A. and between San Giovanni and Cinecittà neighbourhoods, this quarter had been modified over time, but the most affecting ones were the building and the demolishing of a great amount of shacks that for decades welcomed displaced people from the Second World War. There were no reconstruction or restoration after the dismantling of the hovels' settlement, leaving the regenerating process unfinished. Its existential condition is by now trapped between a glorious ancient past (that must be preserved) and a recent past of misery and rubble (that has been indiscriminately demolished). Therefore, due to a new sensibility, Mandrione district is becoming part of local and national culture through the revaluation of the work of intellectuals (such as Pier Paolo Pasolini² and Alberto Moravia) who have told of a poor human condition - of which one cannot have nostalgia but which one cannot forget.

2. "I remember that one day driving through the Mandrione in the car with two of my Bolognese friends, anguished at that sight, there were, in front of their hovels, tumbling on the filthy mud, some kids, aged two to four or five. They were dressed in rags: one even with a fur coat found somewhere as a little savage. They ran here and there, without the rules of any game: they moved, fidgeted as if they were blind, in those few square meters where they were born and where they had always remained, without knowing anything else about the world except the little house where they slept and two palms of slime where they played. Seeing us go by with the car, one, a boy, now well planted despite his two or three years of age, put his dirty hand against his mouth, and, on his own initiative, all cheerful and affectionate, blew us a kiss. [...] The pure vitality that is the basis of these souls means a mixture of pure evil and pure good: violence and goodness, wickedness and innocence, in spite of everything.", Pier Paolo Pasolini in "Vie Nuove", May 1958.



Figure 2

Between 1936 and 1973 about 650 immigrant families lived in makeshift shacks built between one arch and another of the Felice Aqueduct in the Appio Claudio district in the south-east of Rome. Source: <https://www.dinamopress.it/news/ne-andato-don-roberto-sardelli-preti-lottava-gli-ultimi/>; feb. 19, 2019.

These *minima moralia* of living generate two realities: one of degradation, misunderstanding and demolition, the other of illegalities and the perpetration of a private use of a public good (Farina 2016):

The response that the inhabitants have found in the self-produced or self-promoted house is very coherent with the values of contemporary housing culture, so much so that living in the former abusive villages appears today much more desirable than the life that is led in large public housing complexes.

This consideration appears powerful for the Mandrione district, in which, immersed in neorealist suggestions, small artisan businesses, architectural studios and artists' residences have begun to occupy, in a different legal way, the residual residences of the post-war shackle phalanx. Re-evaluating the shacks, means restoring dignity to an offended existence, to the existenzminimum of a spontaneous living that has been able to "use" the ancient beyond its role as a ruin, giving it a new life and a new urban meaning. The adoption of these urban anomalies to reconvert them into everyday places is driven by numerous anthropological mechanisms of projection and social reconquest, of re-appropriation of spaces and therefore of history, of rehabilitation of places and human destinies, of acceptance of degradation and of its cancellation thanks to the beauty of artistic creation. The dominant feature of the two settlement principles is the symbolism of measure, directly proportional to the human condition of the builder: the heroic of the Roman aqueduct is flanked by the misery of the shack. Inhabitants build what they need with what they can (Giancotti, 2012): it is the exaltation of an obligatory existenzminimum that becomes an essential requirement for an effective typological declination of new models for contemporary living (Riciputo, Salimei, 2019).

The complexity of the cultural and architectural stratifications of the Roman villages requires the doctrine of conservation to take on the evidence of a near past, albeit inconvenient, whose action has produced modifications with the potential to rewrite landscape, urban and architectural projects through which memory is reconverted into future. Furthermore, it is also necessary to doubt the principle of unchangeability of the ancient space when inserted in peripheral contexts characterized by discomfort and abandonment, in which the presence of an archaeological asset could become the trigger for a broader regenerative action and deep site specific interventions. It is necessary to affirm the one-to-one non-correspondence between the "city" and its historic centre, claiming its constitution as a multiple organism of which the suburbs represent the last bulwark before the external landscape, a threshold place between the inside and the outside, a privileged habitat of the social, planning and building legality contrasts that an architect can help resolve thanks to a work aimed at understanding the spirit of the place in order to be able to convert it from problematic to potential to experiment with new theories and new forms of responsible living.

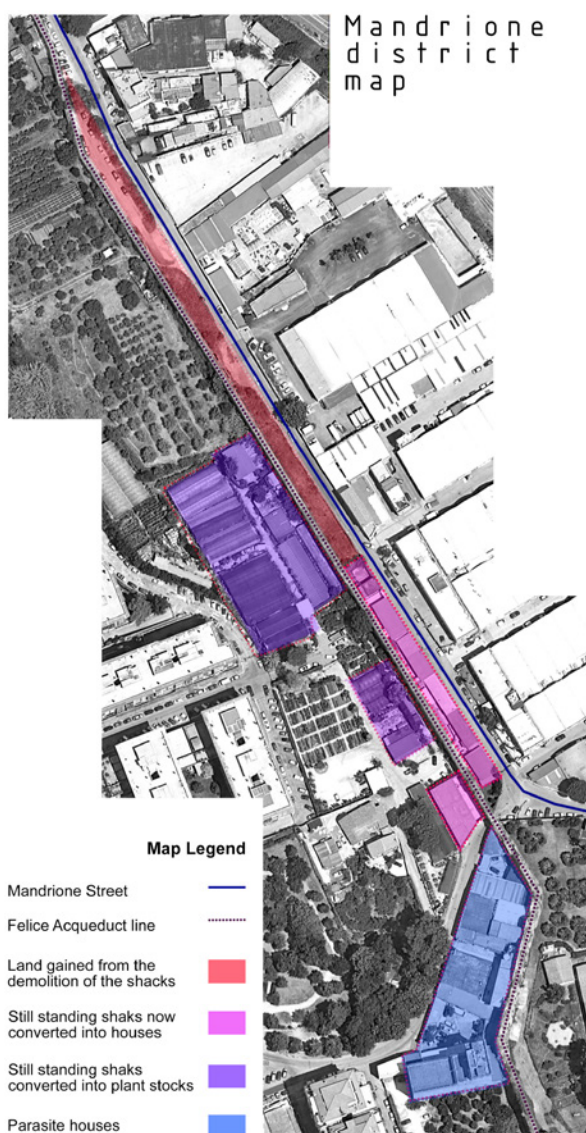


Figure 3
 Mandri one district map

3. Steps of the research

Theoretical consolidation. The multidisciplinary nature of the research requires the focus of the theoretical approach, the derivation of which from an anthropological neologism guarantees originality in the architectural field which therefore requires a disciplinary study and the preparation of a solid argumentative basis. This can be done using the extensive literature on the relationship between archeology, landscape and urban context³, but it will be necessary to start from the concept of diaforentity to consolidate the urgency of compositional thought as an aid to conservation and restoration so that the integration between the archaeological object and the city does not shy away from the reasons of contemporaneity.

Reconstruction of history. This step involves research in both private and public archives, to find unpublished or little-known drawings and documents to be re-read according to the approach proposed by this study; a bibliographic research that allows in order to take a new position and be able to fill any gaps. In this way, different types of data will be obtained: historical, social, cultural, artistic, design, technical, constructive. In addition, we could gather any variation of the morphology of the Felice Aqueduct starting from Porta Furba, collecting the eighteenth-century views (including an engraving by Piranesi); the photographs (such as those of Thomas Ashby and Franco Pinna) kept in the private archives and in the Photo Library of the Central Institute for Catalog and Documentation; the films of the Istituto Luce and the films of Pier Paolo Pasolini (among all from Accattone movie) and other neorealist directors; at least, the texts by Alberto Moravia, Goffredo Parise and others, from which it is possible to outline a story through images and words of the changes that occurred over the centuries of Mandrione whose diaforentity made it a hamlet, a historical periphery.

Draw a reasoned map of the Mandrione, of the path of the aqueduct, of its surroundings and of its interactions with the roads, the railway and the town, detecting the points where the buildings come in contact with it, evaluating and detecting the modalities, the depth and degree of modifiability.

Draw up a time line in which to trace all the urban and morphological variations undergone by the Aqueduct and the Mandrione district from the Roman period to the contemporary, evaluating the consequent variations in the identity of the places.

Systematize all direct sources from which evidence of the different architectural and social realities that the neighbourhood has taken on over the centuries and in particular over the last sixty years can be extracted.

3. In particular, some researches carried out within the projects of the Department of Architecture and Project of the Sapienza University of Rome are: *L'intervento nelle aree archeologiche per la musealizzazione e la comunicazione culturale*, resp. Lucio Altarelli, PRIN 2008; *Roman infrastructure. The urban walls and the central area in new vital cycles of cultural promotion, technological innovation, socioecological reactivation and new competitiveness for the city of Rome*, resp. Orazio Carpenzano, 2018; *Colosseum_ Square and Museum. Moving through history in the time of global tour*, resp. Orazio Carpenzano; *Il patrimonio come armatura urbana. Servizi e mobilità per la Piazza del Colosseo*, resp. Filippo Lambertucci, 2017; *Tra Monte Mario, Ponte Milvio, Villa Glori e Porta del Popolo. Analisi urbane e strategie di progetto per il quartiere Flaminio, distretto culturale di Roma*, resp. Piero Ostilio Rossi, 2016; *Il nuovo nell'antico: valorizzazione e riutilizzo delle testimonianze storiche nei processi di riqualificazione e rigenerazione urbana*, resp. Maurizio Pietrangeli 2018-2019; *Metodi e strategie di trasformazione per tessuti urbani accessibili ed ecosostenibili. Studi e proposte per due quartieri della periferia romana*, resp. Domizia Mandolesi, 2014.



Figure 4-5

The land gained from the demolition of the shacks // Still standing shacks converted into houses



Figure 6

Shape of the shack demolished "printed" on the aqueduct wall

Study urban self-constructions, virtually reconstructing those demolished and analyzing those that remained, drawing a typological potential from them; understand the role of the aqueduct as a structural and formal element, the variation of its meaning within the urban structure and in the perception of the inhabitants.

Assess the state of the existing and the possibility of urban regeneration of the entire sector; considering the modification as a state of affairs and preparing strategies for a possible evolution of parasitic architectures into architectures of interest for public use.

Experimenting with new forms of living, space occupation, plant infill, ephemeral architecture, public artworks for an integrated museographic approach, the conservation of the remains of the recent past not as scars but as signs of life on the past ancient.

Designing a model of urban regeneration in which the archaeological ruin is not flanked in a paratactic way by greenery, but fits into an entire system consisting of a linear park (Capuano, 2017), public facilities and special homes, capable of becoming the backbone of the entire district by reconvertng the pre-existing structures in responsible architectures and reconnecting the areas of the Mandrione District, reinserting the neighbourhood in the wider fruition basin of Casilino and Pigneto by studying a system of infrastructural connections. Although the Mandrione has overcome its suburban status to become a hamlet - a quarter that is foreign to the original nucleus but subsequently incorporated into the compact urban sector, which over time has developed its own historical, social, cultural and architectural identity - the importance of a correct system of connections to avoid the (self-) exclusion of the outer districts from the orbit of the centre is a topic well studied for others roman unconnected territories (Caravaggi, Carpenzano, 2019),

4. Suggestions and aims

Since the research is at its starting point, it is not possible to provide specific results, but suggestions and objectives can certainly be proposed. Within the history of urban experimentation in which art is used as an instrument of regeneration, it is considered interesting to propose experiences from the Italian 60s and 70s thanks to their declared social as well as cultural intent. In fact, searching for a greater integration between artistic sense and civic sense, urban voids and archaeological sites were turned into museums through the temporary and widespread installation of sculptures and the creation of a exhibition on an urban scale. Among the most successful occasions were: *Sculptures in the city* in Spoleto in 1962 (conceived and edited by Giovanni Carandente, still functioning in nowadays with the exposition of contemporary artworks in archaeological places); *City space sculpture* in Rimini and Contemporary sculptures in urban space in Parma both in 1973; the most complex *Volterra 73* exhibition; *Sculptures in the city* in Fano in 1974 (Pioselli, 2015). In all these cases, the objectives aimed at bringing the inhabitants closer to art (through the breakdown of the front museum system to achieve a sort of "democratization of art") and to prepare a new dialectical strategy between old and new. The choice reaffirmed that it was not urban decoration: the works provoke a different interpretation of the environment, underline its salient points, introduce the screech of contemporaneity into the old city, give an indication of the changing and stratified character of the urban fabric, grafting a more problematic temporality than the idea of immutability of historical space.

A pioneer city has always been Naples in which art has been used as a "seed" to regeneration both social and urban. Architect and artist Riccardo Dalisi still works to convert urban space into



Figure 7-8
 Parasite houses



Figure 9
 "Vision on the Mandrione", original artwork from the author

social laboratories (among which we remember the workshops with the children of the Traiano neighbourhood from '71 to '74 and with the inhabitants and artisans of Ponticelli, Siberia, Sanità and Marianella since 1975). In 1972 Pierre Restany had promoted Operation Vesuvius, an attempt - unrealized - to organize an artistic and cultural park in which to exhibit the works of over one hundred national and international artists, many of whom exploited displacement as an act to create utopian and atopic contrasts and screeches with the context, which remained essentially natural. Nowadays, started in 1996 and still under construction, is the project for the enhancement of the Metro stations (settled in historical, archaeological and suburban neighbourhood) and the urban regeneration of the adjacent areas. Inserted within a practice already widespread elsewhere in the past (in Europe there are notable cases of the Moscow and Stockholm subways), the project of the Naples Art Stations differs in the attempt to create widespread centralities in the spaces at the exit of the actual stations. The intervention mediates the nature of the site-specific with the authorial landmark: the need for the emergence and recognisability of the new iconographic, environmental, structural and artistic systems remains clear, aware that the "spectacular" component would have distinguished the artistic nature of re-signification of the place from a simple restructuring that would have ensured the decor but not changed the urban role (Natalini, 1966).

Using these suggestions as a starting point, it is possible to define the two main objectives that the research *Roman Diaforentities* sets itself. The first one is to draw up a project for the regeneration of the Mandrione district capable of responding to the real needs of the inhabitants of the IX Municipality. This project will propose both the possible configurations of the neighbourhood and the immediate surroundings of the Aqueduct, and the experiments of special homes that reinterpret and renew the memory of the system and of the pre-existing types, responding to the needs of contemporary living, including the insertion of a public park (to be included in the largest program of parks in Rome). The second wide-ranging objective aims at extrapolating from this project a series of general strategies applicable to other cases of cities in which the concept of diaforentity can be defined as the very reason of the urban structure, helping them to accept changes as opportunities to resettle living habits and shapes.

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