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Restoration of Macrolotto 0 in Prato, Italy

A sustainable project for architecture and communities by Alessandro Gaiani

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Synopsis

Prato is a typical city that has to deal with the social integration and relaunch of degraded and abandoned neighborhood due to the coexistence problems of different ethnic groups (it is the largest Chinese communities in Europe) and the economic crisis which is affecting several industries like fashion.

A sustainable integration of degraded environments becomes a canvas to integrate meditation and contribution of pre-existing heritage, identify and evolving new ways of fruition of present participating communities.

The study focuses on:

- Defining a systemic mutation of reconditioning and recapturing the value of “urban waste” in a cost-effective approach.
- Define a strategic method for restoration of inherent value to abandoned urban heritage in the communities.

Define specific adaptive design tools, with minimal interventions “by a strategic architectural influence” to transform the value of the communities into a technical and societal intervention.

Key words: Sustainable society and architecture, humanity, strategies, reconditioning, multi skills.

1. Background

Like many medium-sized Italian cities, Prato underwent a substantial change of aim and perspective during the end of the last century, going from a city-factory, characterized by textile and fashion production, to a multiethnic center forced to face the Chinese mono-ethnicity immigration. Disused and incomplete sections of the city have started to appear due to the recent economic crisis followed by widespread social unsustainability: The Macro Area 0 is one of these realities.



Figure 1. Fashion factory of the Chinese mono-ethnicity inside an industrial building with total lack of hygienic regulations.

The largest Chinese community in Europe is located in Prato and despite its recent formation, especially since the '80s onwards, presents characteristics similar to those most dated in Europe. Activities related to the processing of leather and ready-to-wear have developed in the district of Florence and Prato due to the low rent prices of the artisanal warehouses, now in crisis for the relocation abroad. The characteristic of the Chinese community is to offer work to fellow countrymen, producing exclusively social relationships within their group and not relating absolutely to any other, even at the cost of working and sleeping within the same building. This model in crisis within the Macrolotto 0 has determined objects discarded by failed artisanal productions (functional deficits). It has also caused relational gaps due to the loss of importance of traditional forms of social aggregation forcing people to retire from using the public space.

The sustainable mutation of man-made places which are facing today crisis

becomes a catalyst for a work of mediation and contamination between pre-existence, heritage, identities and new ways of fruition, organization and participation of the communities.

2. Aims & Objectives

Virtual and real communities are born every day. It is within these communities that people aggregate and find themselves unified by a collective, although temporary, sense of group identity.

The real challenge for a social-economic sustainable mutation passes through the search and continuous tension from the global to the individual, from being visible for the world to recognizing oneself in one's own local space of life: *"Identity is built through relationships of otherness"*.

The study originates from these considerations, which find a variable that can guarantee future scenarios of sustainable socio-economic development thanks to the community dynamics.

It is necessary to recover and not replace the real connections between people in the places where they live, bringing back to the local dimension a lost identity. The community is the place where different stories, ethnic groups and generations meet.

Architecture has always been attentive to social changes. In fact, there is no design or form that is not an interpretation of a social idea. Therefore, architecture can collaborate in redesigning the places of urban living through reconditioning methods of the status quo, where the communities recognize an identity value.

This experiment can only be possible in Prato, the city of carded wool. This fabric born from the "scrap" of clothes represents the engine of the economic regeneration process of the area.



Figure 2. Typical neglected industrial building in Marcolotto 0, Prato.

The opportunity to work on Macrolotto 0 as a study for innovative experiments allows to trigger a new, enlarged and redesigned strategy of integration between the different realities. A benchmark for a "flexible" and communicative city, where to explore the possible hybrid, political, social and urban developments in the polychrome and varied reality of the 21st century.

3. Methods

The application of the method refers to the circular system concept. A model that puts back into circulation resources already used but that have not reached their total obsolescence. In this way it is possible to obtain not only primary material (recycling) but a new device able to transform waste into value. A device resulting from the integration between what exists and the new insertions. It is implemented with the logic of minimum intervention and transforming the circular system into the whole design process, defining a sustainable circular mutation. Using this method, what already exists will be overwritten, inserting different philosophies of life, shapes, spaces and materials. New tools capable of facing themes of complexity and definition of differences.

In this attempt to strategically respond to the new demands of the contemporary, is fundamental the relationship between history, as the story of ideas, and the cultural changes in process. Between pre-existence and momentum to the future, between the role of a pure technical architect of the project and the strategist architect, skilled master of urban overwriting.

The strategic actions focus on:

- create and endorse a sense of identity within the community through architecture;
- move the focus from the single building, object of design, to a catalyst element for a social change. The minimal intervention becomes an opportunity for the introduction of new tools;
- overcome the fleeting reality of new digital technologies with a system of direct relations between the internal and external spaces of the city, where time becomes a necessary condition to pass from existing to living in our world according to its own inner autonomy and respect of the values of the Community.

4. Results

The strategy is based on precise urban insertions able to revitalize first the object and then the surrounding through an osmotic principle, able to change the status quo with a different scale of values. This is no longer founded exclusively on their architectural quality as in the past, but mainly on the society-community relationship.

On one hand, the project guidelines originate from an interpretation of the typological classification system as an evolutionary and dynamic principle applied to spaces and situations not yet codified. On the other from adaptive mechanisms relying on a circular structure that changes and configures according to the conditions of the context. The strategy is structured using

different adaptive tools that include interventions at different scales on diverse spaces:

- **Graft**, with the Landmark, Urban Markers and Box in the Box strategy
- **Parasite** with the adaptive prostheses strategy
- **Edge**, in the sense of Limit, Border, Inhabited margin
- **Level 0** as a system of connections, platform and meeting engine
- **In-between** with infill and Pocket Park.

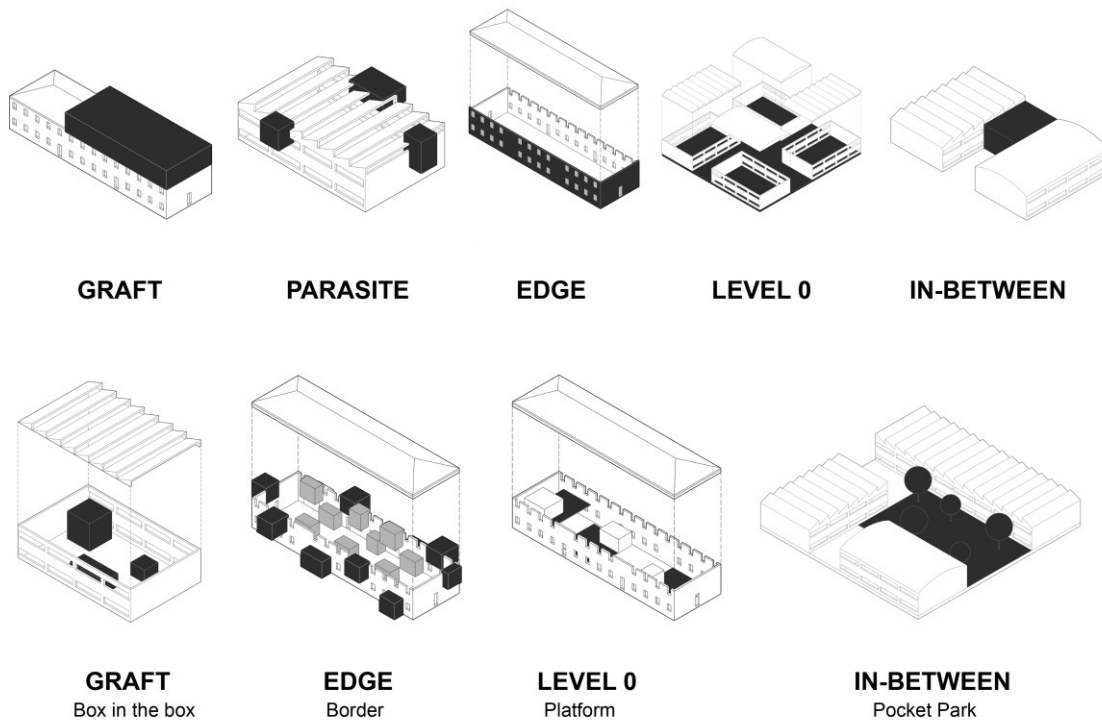


Figure 3. Adaptive tools for an urban redesign.

The neglected buildings, now in temporary mutation, are a synthesis of many actual requests able to be an evolutionary principle for future adaptations. Inventions that to adapt to a different role, able to solve an incomplete situation and to enhance it. They are the result of an experimental project between the Public Administration of Prato, the private owners of real estate, the University that has implemented the strategy through a Convention with the Municipality, and the local community, composed by some groups of artists, cultural associations and fashion and technology start-ups.

The Modern had modeled objects that defined themselves through their masses, the organization of solids and voids, the constructive system and the functional organization. The Postmodern has proposed single objects based on completely personal, self-referential languages. Nowadays, can the method of re-conditioning existing buildings and the related adaptive tools answer the questions of integration of the social and architectural scale?



Figure 4. Neglected industrial space temporarily used by the Chi-na Cultural Association as a venue for exhibitions, events and co-working.



Figure 5. Corte Genova, craft buildings enhanced by artists using "waste" elements found in different spaces, Prato.

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Biography

Alessandro Gaiani. Architect, since 1999 is a university researcher in Architectural and Urban Composition at the Department of Architecture of Ferrara. His own design is based on the strategic hybrid and sustainable approach, winning national and international design competitions. He is a firm supporter of the value of balance and influence between socio-economic disciplines and architecture.