

THE
LABORATORY_CITY:
SUSTAINABLE RECYCLE
AND KEY ENABLING
TECHNOLOGIES

EDITED BY
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"For the younger generations of South"

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FÖRE

WORDS

DEMOLITION ACTIVITY AS A FORM OF RESILIENCE IN THE METROPOLITAN CONTEXT

Rita Simone
→UNIRC

Demolition practices between need and chance for resilience

In Italy, demolition practices are prevented from becoming part of the regular building process by the deep-rooted instinct of “conservation” that characterizes almost every social and political aspect of the culture of the country. This – broadly speaking – “cultural” instinct hinders every attempt at resilience that entails a change produced by alterations of the structure, whether biological or of other nature. If – as already suggested in Venera Leto’s text – the activity of demolition and physical alteration of the built environment represents the premise for the process of resilience that should interest the Metropolitan Area of Reggio Calabria through the transformation of territory and landscape, its feasibility depends on a more radical change involving not only the built environment, but the whole cultural dimension to which the latter belongs.

Urban transformations in Italy have always regarded demolition as an “exceptional” activity, excluded from the ordinary process of alteration of the structure of the city. Demolition has been reserved to few, mediatically popular, architectural “monsters”, in what appears as a conservative strategy that aims, while destroying some of them, to preserve all the others. From North to South, Italian culture appears indifferent to transformative

logics and shows a real reluctance to alter the built environment and the landscape. Actually, although present in theoretical planning debates, the issue does not often find a concrete outcome in terms of physical transformations. On a more general level, however, the theoretical discussion on the “need” and “chance” for demolition is sometimes translated into real actions, a phenomenon that underlines a potential change in an urbanistic and administrative culture that finally seems to acknowledge the importance of concepts like “replacement”, “renewal”, and “cancellation” in the process of management and restoration of the built environment. This new trend culminates in an “anti-maintenance” approach towards the early modern built environment and marks a radical change of perspective, as demolition is finally recognized as a regular component of the normal process of transformation of the structure of the city and as the only sustainable tool against obsolescence and poor quality building.

As early as 2002, Ance, INU and Legambiente identified demolition as an instrument of renewal and consequently of resilience, showing the operational and economic results issuing from a series of theoretical research lines on “subtraction” and “demolition”. Even if it lacked actual implementation, the study showed that many of the issues raised throughout the years by the disciplinary debate had been acknowledged and reformulated simultaneously as a question to the social and political body and as an answer in terms of procedure and management. In addition to “tackling the conservation/innovation contradiction”, “planning decay”, or “facing the issue of big residential buildings”, the document listed as a field of study the use of demolition as a compensation for the illegalities perpetrated against the landscape and as a tool allowing the reconsideration of the scattered city and of its neglected parts. In this last point the document labeled “Demolish to Reconstruct”¹ intertwines both with the concept of resilience in general, and with the research interests of Re-Cycle Italy and their implementation in the metropolitan area of the Strait, particularly in Calabria.

While in psychology and biology the process of resilience involves an act of individual strength, when the object of renewal and transformation is a collective structure like a urban system or an entire territory, it must necessarily entail more complex steps and forms of sharing. In both cases, however, the change of status is achieved through an act of either psychic or physical “demolition”, an act that, when it involves built and

collective realities, implies a process of sharing between extremely different subjects.

As already mentioned, theoretical elaborations often anticipate real social and political changes – through the focus on problematic issues, the proposed solutions trace a path that others will follow. Inside this path finds its place also the discussion on demolition as need or chance for “self-reparation” of the damage suffered, on a small or large scale, by more or less urbanized territories. We will deal with elaborations that have progressively widened their scope from the single building to the urban pattern up to the whole landscape, but that represent now the real point of departure for collective actions made possible only by an altered cultural environment.

From a disciplinary perspective, until the 1990s theoretical investigations concerning demolition related to the processes of urban transformation and concerned in particular the urban element. However, although Bruno Gabrielli bestowed to the pair “subtraction/demolition” respectively an “exploratory” and a “decisional” character¹, Italy has been deficient both in explorations and decisions. The history of the country has always influenced the possibilities of transformation and while, quoting Freud², “demolitions and replacement of buildings occur in the course of the most peaceful development of a city,” it seems as if the built environment had been paralyzed by a dreaded loss of memory, an excessive instinct of conservation and a lack of selection which have thwarted the normal transformation of the urban structure. The preservation of antique buildings became a widespread reaction to the devastations caused by the war. This phenomenon, however, did not prevent, during the building boom, concrete instances of transformation and the implementation of policies aiming at the protection and conservation of the urban pattern. If the paradoxical long term result of this trend was the decay and neglect of the object that needed to be preserved, on the other hand it created suburban pockets destined to house new volumes.

The suburbs, considered by Ance, INU and Legambiente as the starting point for urban renewal, are still at the center of debates that, started in the disciplinary field, have now reached the social and political spheres. The product of the historical circumstances of the 1960s and 1970s – a mass of residential buildings excluded from the inner city – represents however, in the metropolitan area of Reggio Calabria as in other wide ter-

ritories, the scattered city, almost the totality of the architectural heritage. For this reason, the solutions that have been proposed to solve the problem of the Italian suburbs affect – in this particular geographical situation – an entire territory and landscape.

If Benevolo⁴ and Gabrielli⁵ focused, on a national scale, on the use of demolition as an act of transformation or as a consequence of the sudden obsolescence of the urban heritage – despite the “recycling period” during which preservation was accompanied by functioning reconversion – this shows the utter inability of “conservative” Italy to maintain and take care of its heritage. This lack of a care that involves also the practice of demolition engenders what, in the transition from building to territory, could be defined as a proportional syllogism that defines well the southern and Calabrian landscape, once the latter acquires the title of cultural heritage.

This change in scale, expressly mentioned as an aim in the Ance/INU/Legambiente document – that assigns to demolition the task of compensating the illegalities suffered by the landscape and that implies a new awareness of the issues of the whole national territory – has as a starting point the theoretical preview offered by Casabella⁶ in 1991 on the physical landscape and its cultural interpretation. Already at that stage, the papers proposed a reinterpretation of the Italian landscape, observing its decay and underling its crises and wounds. Among the others, Franco Purini⁷ reintroduced the idea of demolition as a compensation for thirty-year-old injuries. The picture that emerged was that of a territory altered not so much in its original features as in the man-made and recent ones. If the city – that had witnessed the crisis of its structure, proportions and territory – had to rely on the landscape as a scene for new possibilities, its compensation became urgent in order to start afresh from its strong, deep-rooted, and variously represented memory.

If on the one hand the debate focused on the immaterial transit of the architectonic body within strict aesthetic codes, the 1990s saw also the emergence of qualitative, in opposition to quantitative, requirements, establishing for the first time environmental sustainability as a fundamental factor in planning choices. The decade opened with a new outlook towards the landscape and, significantly, in the 1995 convention “The subtraction plan”⁸, Antonino Terranova kindled a discussion on the pair demolition/subtraction, considered in a completely different acceptance than that of “construction scrapping” that had characterized the 1980s. The theoretic-

cal debate anticipated again a renewed collective awareness assigning to the practice of demolition traits of “need and/or chance.”

The readings of the period, concerning in particular some regional situations, are a paradigm of the post-urban condition, and encourage to reconsider the scattered city and the neglected parts in the light of the acknowledged features of Italian transformations, characterized by acts of addition rather than subtraction and by the intangibility of the inner cities and of the clusters that coexist in their neighboring territories. City and landscape have become inseparable in their common loss of identity, and the concept of demolition as need/chance has become increasingly popular, as destruction starts to be seen as inherent to the post-urban condition.

Interestingly, Massimo Ilardi⁹ observes a “destructive character in the era of the placeless city,” and wonders in what it differs from the one described by Benjamin¹⁰ as the symbol of modernity. In the new condition, the “destructive” gene leads to premature disposal and consumption that rapidly leave behinds heaps of wreckage. Facing and accepting the scattered city, then, does not mean erasing the post-urban potential nor regret the original *forma urbis*, but rather using demolition as a tool to select the layers, meeting the implicit expectations of the built environment. If empty spaces have played a leading role in modernity, with their celebration of volumetric density, the practice of demolition performed within the post-urban entropy acquires an evocative and suggestive potential. The neglected, the abandoned, the unfinished appear full of built material, social history, obsolete plant design – “machines” of the modernity transformed into wreckage that crowd a new *forma urbis* which is scattered and spread on wide areas, creating new, changeable landscapes.

Ilardi’s considerations mark the end of the 1990s, a decade that can be considered as the cradle of still relevant ideas about the relationship between demolition, scattered city and landscape. Since then, the disciplinary debate has continued, triggering, as we have seen, a new awareness in the political, civil, and economic spheres. Demolition has been included in official texts and legislative decrees but rarely implemented.

Various reasons explain this negligence, as the paradoxical circumstance in which, through several building sanctions, completely illegal territories and landscapes have been declared legal. To this peculiar phenomenon we need to add, especially in the south, economic interests, the clutches

of mafia organizations involved in the building business, and a peculiar cultural tendency that considers the house, even the abusive one, as the only inheritance of future generations. Moreover, in relation to the disposal issue, the south is burdened by political and entrepreneurial choices that have found their materialization in unfinished and non-functioning buildings that, together with the excess of legal and illegal residential volumes, form a landscape crowded with what Ilardi calls the "wreckage of modernity".

The metropolitan area of Reggio Calabria appears thus as a scattered city packed with organic waste, dead cells that invade the urban structure and the landscape. Why should we not, then, think that this structure can repair itself only through a process of resilience? And as, paraphrasing Ilardi, the destructive character belongs to our postmodern condition and erases even the traces of destruction itself, not as it loves ruins but as the path that runs through it, why should not the actually effective tool of demolition be entrusted with the task of compensating and highlighting the complex and often astonishing layers of this scattered city on the Strait?

Notes

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3. Freud S., Disagio della civiltà, Bollati Boringhieri, 1985.
4. Benevolo L., Roma da ieri a domani, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1971
5. Gabrielli B., op. cit
6. Il disegno del paesaggio italiano, "Casabella", 1991 n. 575-576
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10. A. Criconia - A. Galassi, (a cura di), op. cit., pp. 36/39

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