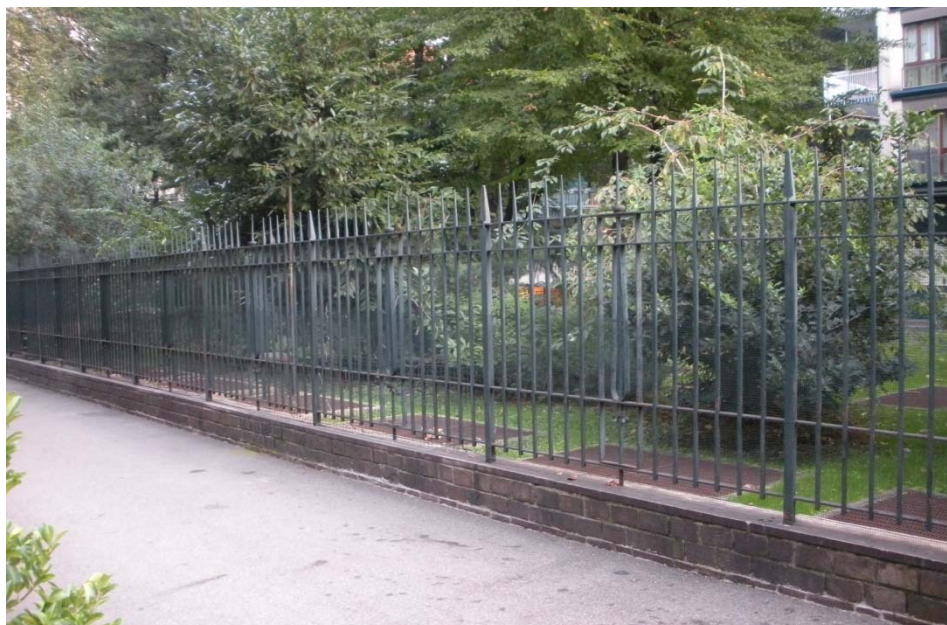# URBAN ICONOGRAPHY OF CONFLICT

An historical legacy in a city in transformation.

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Front garden.
Private residential housing
Piazza De Angeli, Milan.

Cyprian: *"With this bio-architecure it is impossible to understand where the public space ends in front of private housing…."*

Georg to Helen: *"You never close the gate and all the crazy people wandering in the park get in!"*

Botho Strauß, "Der Park" (1983).

When one of the outstanding contemporary German playwright wanted to update *"A Midsummer Night's Dream"* to the present time he transformed the magic forest, where all the plots take place, into a park as the modern social meeting point of our cities. In two short lines Botho Strauß imagined the old crazy artist Cyprian storming into the home of Georg and Helen with a rambling speech. Cyprian crossed the border between the park, a place where all the characters look for their way, happiness, love etc…and the quiet, domestic nest of a middle class couple in crisis. The separation between public and private places is a well known topic in urban studies. Although many scholars have focused in recent times the increasing sense of being unsafe in our cities (Baumann, 2005)[1] the process of withdrawal from the public realm into a domestic and intimate sphere goes probably backward to the impact of industrial capitalism on public life and according to Richard Sennet (1977)[2] bourgeois society had a specific role in shaping the phenomenon. But the concept proposed by Sennet based on barricades built from within to separate family assets from public space is deeply rooted in some contexts even before the nineteenth century. Since the rise of urban life in the late middle age in Italy the family residence took the form first of a tower house then of the typical "palazzo" with an inner court, deduced by classical literature, and closed by high walls around. This model had a great fortune in history beyond its specific architectural fascination (Raffaello, Michelangelo, Serlio etc…). The main reason of its success was the close fit with the need for protection of the assets and

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[1] Baumann, Z. (2005). *Trust and Fear in the Cities. Seeking Shelter in Pandora's Box*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
[2] Sennet, R. (1977). *The Fall of Public Man*. New York: Knopf.

social status of a family during political disorders. It is no coincidence that the architect Leon Battista Alberti wrote four books on family[3] to explain the ways to resist an unkind fate. Italian cities were so dominated by typologies that, in Genoa for example, fascinated foreign artists such as Rubens[4] (Fig. 1): high and massive buildings with large squared façades totally introverted (Fig. 2). The great success of this collection[5] of private palaces (about five reprints from 1622 to 1755) spread the images of the Italian palazzo in Europe.
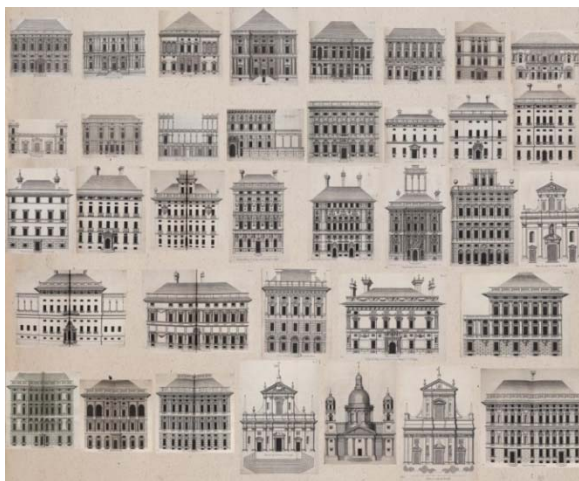

Fig.1. Piter Paul Rubens. Palazzi di Genova.   *Fig.2. Genova. Palazzo Bianco. Photo by fondo Paolo Monti.*

The image of Italian cities was so perceived as monumental, devoted to art and beauty and with a strong figurative tradition as in the famous 88 views of Milan[6] (Fig. 3). But beyond the facades the truth lies in complex political and historical matters. Renaissance wars between Spain, the Empire and France to dominate Italy showed all the weakness of the country and the fanciful ambition of Italian elite to have a political role in the modern age.

Thus the only available solution was to retire to the country or inside the family's palaces in order to protect and preserve private properties and personal careers, the well known *"particulare"* by Guicciardini[7]. The need to keep wealth, land investments and private assets under control could find in the palazzo the visual metaphor of a solid and firm occupation of the urban space by private property to resist the reversals of fortune. It was so founded one of the most outstanding leitmotifs of Italian cities that can be detected in its deep impacts and repercussions until the present time.

MILAN, A CONSERVATIVE CITY.

The Renaissance with political turmoil and military devastation was followed by relatively more quiet periods but the long-time trend of upper and middle class to find security in private property instead of social integration was still evident in front of the eruption of the masses into political and economical life after in the XIX century. Milan faced the challenge through the Beruto plan (Fig.4), a "prudent and modest"[8] project of development outside the bastions without great ambitions if not to turn country estates to

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[3] Alberti, L. B. (1433-1440). I libri della famiglia. In Grayson, C. (eds). *Leon Battista Alberti. Opere volgari*. Vol. 1. Bari: Laterza.

[4] Rubens, P. P. (1622). *Palazzi di Genova*. Antwerp.

[5] Lombaerde, P. (eds.). (2002). *The Reception of P.P. Rubens's 'Palazzi di Genova' during the 17th Century in Europe: Questions and Problems*. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers.

[6] Dal Re, M. A. (1745). Vedute di Milano.

[7] Guicciardini, F. (1512-1530). *Ricordi. 28.*

[8] Oliva, F. (2002). *L'urbanistica di Milano: quel che resta dei piani urbanistici nella crescita e nella trasformazione della città*. Milan. Hoepli. p. 25.

profit. The design of the new city was based on a street network and on large housing blocks with a weak distribution of parks and a limited diffusion of essential public services.
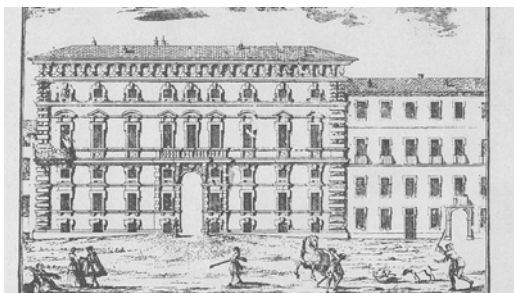

Fig.3. Milan palazzos. Marc'antonio dal Re. 1745.

Fig.4. Beruto plan. Final version 1889.

The main purpose was so to organize and maximize investment property and private enterprise basically through a privatization of space and of urban resources. The fear to give rise to riots and protests by large masses of urban workers demanding higher wages, decent housing or minimal levels of welfare support provisions which could undermine the political and social order led only to few inadequate social housing projects[9] if not to the expulsion to the suburbs. The conservative background of a city like Milan could not forecast alternative solutions to face the great urban development of the new mass society. The request for social justice and more comfortable life conditions was so left to private initiative. That was a policy totally in line with the historical tradition to enclose private estate and to preserve property values. The lack of green space in Milan, for example, is not so dramatic from an aerial overview (Fig. 5-6) but many of the gardens are still nowadays private spaces isolated from the city behind the facades of old or renewed palaces.
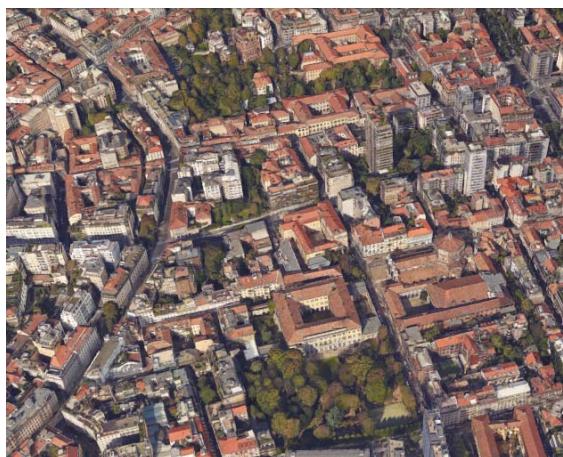

Fig.5. Milan aerial view. Via della Passione.

Fig.6. Milan aerial view. Via della Manzoni.

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[9] Consonni, G., Tonon, G. (1977). Casa e lavoro nell'area Milanese. Dalla fine dell'800 all'avvento del fascismo. In *Classe* n° 14.

The traditional cares of the ruling class to maintain land and urban property as safe haven assets turned into new forms of closure and separation in front of the anxiety for social claims and traces of old and new conflicts are still visible in the city.

A TRADITION OF BORDERS, FENCES AND CLOSED SPACES.

The outcome is a city of borders and thresholds. Milan is a city with a tradition of introverted spaces that try to carve out a private dimension away from the public realm which appears like a place not always worthy of care and attention. Many examples could be done such as monasteries (Fig. 7), churches with fences to establish a clear separation from the street (Fig. 8), empty parking lots of office buildings squandering the opportunity to shape alternative urban morphologies (Fig.9) not to mention sophisticated chain barrier bollard systems as well as the ubiquitous cctv (Fig.10).

Fig.7. Centro culturale Angelicum from inside. Milan.

Fig.8. Church of S. Bartolomeo. Milan.

Fig.9. Parking lot. Via Clerici, Milan.

Fig.10. Barrier and cctv. Via Cavalieri S. Sepolcro Milan.

The matter is definitely the conflict for urban resources that outlines a common pattern across time. The post war reconstruction, under the pressure of emergency measures (25% buildings damaged or destroyed by bombs), followed in fact the same approach and allowed an hypertrophic growth with the expulsion of factories to leave space to more profitable financial buildings[10].
Moreover the general plan of 1953 provided simple building regulations for the historical city that were deeply used by property speculation for the demolition even of prestigious monuments.

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[10] Oliva, F. (1993). Milano: la "deregulation" urbanistica. In Venuti, C. e Oliva F. (eds.) *Cinquant'anni di urbanistica in Italia. 1942-1992*. Bari. Laterza.

The last age of this clash between land property and public realm involves the process of deindustrialization of western countries. Milan, as many other European cities, had to face the post-industrial society and the decrease of manufacturing and trade[11] owing to globalization and economical redistribution of wealth. The economic effects are most of times social inequality, unemployment, dismissed industrial areas and urban decay[12]. Many municipalities tried to find a solution in urban renewal to resist the complex consequences of globalization on developed countries[13] and to remain among the advanced economies. The strategy includes mega-events and large urban transformations to increase development or revitalize the social framework. Thus wide derelict industrial sites, former military compounds, no longer used warehouses or factories have been involved into a process of rehabilitation. Once again, but this time with a more specific focus on selected areas, the urban resources are involved in a process with strong economical and social implications.

Milan has found in its past of manufacturing and trading centre the opportunity of transformation for abandoned areas such as Porta Nuova zone, ex-Varesine railways, Citylife district on the former area of the Fiera campionaria, the ex-OM compound, the new outer Fiera space on the abandoned Agip oil refinery and the Expo 2015 project. The high economic potential of wide areas are so under the pressure of politicians, investors, other stakeholders and the direction of transformation can condition the development of the city for the next future. The international exhibition of EXPO 2015, for example, cost more than 1.200 million euro of public funds and, at the end of 2015, there was still a debt of 400 million[14]. The budget deficit should not come as a surprise as the main purpose was actually to promote a large financial and political project about the entire city. That was simply the last stage of a long time process started with the transfer of the Fiera outside the municipality border. To finance the relocation the old area was sold to an international consortium of corporations (Citylife). The final plan of Citylife is a project with 150.000 sq. m for residential buildings at the cost of 12.000 euro per square meter.

The design of the new quarter shows very clearly the high class destination of the housing project and confirms perfectly the historical pattern of an urban space strongly shaped on the basis of hierarchical orders, separation, exclusion, protection of private investments, preservation of quality from the rest of the city which is not allowed to take part to an expensive project. The borders of residential areas are sometimes scarp walls that recall in some way a fortress (Fig. 11) or fences as a pale of civilization (Fig. 12).

Fig. 11 Citylife. South border on via Senofonte

Fig. 12 Citylife. South border on via Senofonte

[11] Kucera, D., Milberg, W. (2003). Deindustrialization and Changes in Manufacturing Trade: Factor Content Calculations for 1978–1995. In *Review of World Economics 2003*, Vol.139. Issue 4. pp 601–624.

[12] Cowie, J., Heathcott, J., Bluestone, B. (2003). *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization*. New York. Cornell University Press.

[13] Brady, D., Beckfield J., Zhao W. (2007). The Consequences of Economic Globalization for Affluent Democracies. In *Annual Review of Sociology* 33 pp 313-334.

[14] http://www.repubblica.it/economia/2016/05/12/news/expo_e_costata_2_2_miliardi_di_euro-139636070/

Many times the entrance to the blocks are designed as modern gates of bastions to separate and self segregate a privileged upper class (Fig. 13) and even when a secondary pathway crosses the district it gives the impression of containment and physical restriction (Fig. 14).

Fig. 13. Citylife. Entrance on via Senofonte

Fig. 14. Citylife. Secondary inner pathway.

The conflict between the new gentry (or super-gentry) who can afford an exclusive dwelling and ordinary people who are excluded from the benefit of a quality of life they can only perceive with a glance seems to be part of the iconic side of the incoming city. Probably, in comparison with the historical tradition of the city, it happens now in a more conscious way during the age of neo-liberal policy and alleged post-ideological times.

MEDIA, IDEOLOGY AND DIGITAL COMMUNICATION. A PLACE FOR ALTERNATIVES?

For the promotion of important projects that bring intense and wide phenomena of urban metamorphosis it is necessary to engage international investors as well as "archistars"[15]. Some of the most important and famous names of contemporary architecture signed the projects of the new Milan: Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates, Pelli architects, Boeri studio etc…
But also investments on media and communication are important to create expectations within the citizenship and to give media and press coverage to the incoming transformation (Fig. 15-16).

Fig. 15. Citylife. Screen in the Underground

Fig. 16. Citylife on public monitor.

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[15] La Cecla, F. (2012). *Against Architecture*. Oakland Ca. PM Press.

From a political point of view it is necessary to present the transformations as an unique opportunity in order to have iconic buildings and to assure the city of a competitive position among the cutting edge global cities[16]. The outcome is a great production of images, building projects, footages on the media system to arouse people's expectations about the process. Unfortunately it corresponds very well to the purpose of the great architectural firms to build their own brand in association with the city brand. The total overlap of designers with economic powers reflect a deep crisis in the urban debate which should be definitely wider and involve social life, equality, participation and integration.

The trend of past municipalities, for example, was not just in favour of park benches to prevent homeless people from informal dwelling and that is just part of an urban ideology that promotes segregation, expulsion and a selective use of the space of the city. The same vision of a city that faces the social conflict with repression, surveillance and constraint can be seen in the restrictions on the free use of piazza Duomo (Fig. 17), especially on the stairs that lead to the main church. Fortunately this limitation was withdrawn after considering that even in the past the main square of the city was a meeting point and a place for socialization among the different classes (Fig. 18).

Fig. 17 Barriers in piazza Duomo

Fig. 18 Piazza Duomo by Angelo Inganni 1839.

In such a conformity of material and immaterial globalized social and economic conservatism is there a role for the disillusioned by neoliberalism[17] and globalization[18]?

There are good reason in fact to be disappointed and unsatisfied when the intense building activity and the land consumption are considered as a simple lever of development within the economic circuit of reproduction of capital more than an opportunity to answer to the needs of citizens.

Sometimes project started after a weak previous analysis of costs and benefits or without any documentation of planned developments that could make them obsolete or unnecessary. That is the case, for example, of the road tunnel under the old fair, completely useless after the relocation (Fig. 19). Some other times prestigious building are planned to be demolished as no more economically profitable losing the opportunity to rescue them for social use. In some cases association of young people, squatters or self-managed social centres promoted illegal occupation and tried to rescue the building to arts, social meetings, public performances.

This is the case, for example of one of the first skyscrapers of Milan, the "Galfa" tower. The technological equipment was too expensive to be updated as well as the necessary asbestos removal so the artists collective "Macao" occupied the tower and started to adapt it to new social functions (Fig. 20). But the obsession for control and monetization of every initiative imposed a forced eviction frustrating most of the opposition movements.

[16] Sassen, S. (2001). *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton NJ. Princeton University Press.

[17] Chomsky N. (1999). *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order*. New York. Seven Stories Press.

[18] Stieglitz, J. E. (2002). *Globalization and Its Discontents*. New York. W.W. Norton & Company.
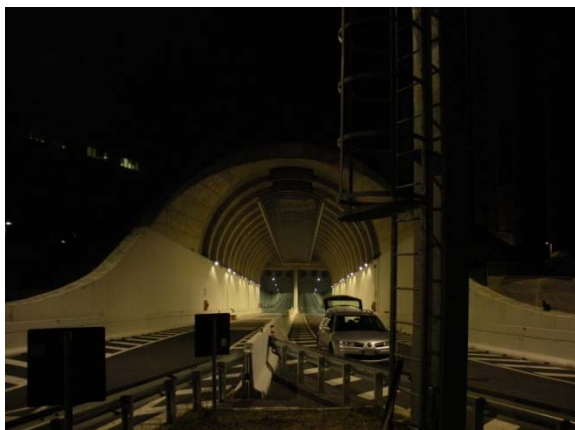
Fig. 19. Abandoned road tunnel under the former fair.   *Fig. 20. Torre Galfa. Ghost building..*

There are cases anyway in which it is possible to read new successful ways to state a claim on the city by people. There are still about 100 old farmsteads of the XVIII, XIX century or older, still publicly owned, now absorbed or besieged by the city growth and no longer with agricultural functions left. Especially outer farmsteads, away from the centre of Milan and in some cases endowed with a certain natural beauty, are targeted by property speculation. According to ISTAT Green urban areas are in Milan only the 12,6 % of the territory[19] and so it is clear the attractiveness of leftover agricultural lands for business. The original intent of municipality was the privatization to banks or building corporations but a strong spontaneous reaction by citizen could stop, most of times, the plan.

In recent times some of them have been occupied by self-organized citizen which, with significant efforts, could rescue and restore the relics to a new life. Some of the farmsteads (Cascina Cuccagna, Cascina Torchiera) are now places of reference for the neighbourhood and for young people who cannot afford other opportunities of meeting.

Through a process of citizenship empowerment abandoned places were restored by ordinary people and became space for social interaction, art performances, public discussions, meeting point to organize protest against eviction and selling etc… (Fig. 21-22).

Fig. 21. Cascina Torchiera. Theatre.   *Fig. 22. Cascina Torchiera. Protest against plans to sell.*

Such interesting cases of urban resistance to a commoditized city show the presence of alternative grassroots movements who fight for a supportive and inclusive city. When the historical urban conflict turns into a social fight for resources, notably the resource of space, the problem is visibility. The idea of a city that does not accept an unconditional surrender to the driving forces of capitalism has actually little space on the media system but in spite of few possibilities to communicate widely their proposal these citizens had the capability to narrate themselves through the open web. The images above reported are

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[19] https://www.istat.it/it/files/2016/05/VERDE-URBANO.pdf?title=Verde+urbano+-+24%2Fmag%2F2016+-
+Testo+integrale+e+nota+metodologica.pdf

just taken from YouTube channels through which closely-knit groups, new urban tribes, underground movements or activists find different ways to express freely their need for spatial equality and dissatisfaction for the traditional ways to plan a city.

Probably through an interaction just on social media and open platforms it will be possible to engage the hidden intelligence of citizens to create an embodied social space and to outline innovative ways to build a sustainable society between ordinary people, stakeholders, architects and public actors according to alternative urban paradigms. It is time to cross the borders, to overcome fences and probably to re-write another final scene for the drama of Strauß.

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