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Reimagining unfinished architectures:
Ruin perspectives between art and heritage

Abstract

For the past five decades, hundreds of unfinished public works have been erected in Italy as the result of inconsistent planning and the presence of corruption and organised crime. A third of these constructions are located in Sicily alone and so, in 2007, a group of artists labelled this phenomenon an architectural style: 'Incompiuto Siciliano'. Through this creative approach, the artists' objective is to put incompletion back on the agenda by viewing it from a heritage perspective. This article reviews the different approaches that the artists have envisaged to handle unfinished public works; whether to finish them, demolish them, leave them as they are or opt for an 'active' arrested decay. The critical implications of these strategies are analysed in order to, ultimately, conclude that incompletion is such a vast and complex issue that it will surely have more than one single solution; but rather a combination of these four. This is important because it opens up a debate on the broad spectrum of possibilities to tackle incompletion – establishing this as one of the key contemporary urban themes not only in Italy but also in those countries affected by unfinished geographies after the 2008 financial crisis.

Keywords

Introduction

In 2004, Alterazioni Video, the group of artists started by Paololuca Barbieri Marchi, Alberto Caffarelli, Matteo Erenbourg, Andrea Masu and Giacomo Porfiri, was founded in Milan, and today they operate nationally and internationally. Throughout their career, their use of a disconcerting irreverence highlights heritage and artistic conventionalisms through the lens of popular culture. Anthropologist Ivan Bargna, who has occasionally collaborated with the artists, suggests that for Alterazioni Video art is a medium through which they 'bring out the underlying political logic of the situations considered, putting them in stalemate, and turning them against themselves'.[1] It is precisely this assertion

which allows us to comprehend the most important project ever created by Alterazioni Video: *Incompiuto Siciliano*.[2]

Shocked by the ubiquity of unfinished public works in Italy, in 2007, Alterazioni Video documented around 400 of these infrastructures (roads, bridges, dams, etc.) and social buildings (sport centres, schools, theatres, etc.) throughout the country. This mapping revealed that these constructions are most prevalent in the south and less so in the north (a third of them are located in Sicily alone), it also demonstrated that they are indiscriminately located in urban, rural and remote areas.[3] These works had been publicly funded, and thus were initiated but never accomplished – a phenomenon that mostly took place during the decades following World War II. The reason for this is that within a context of increasing modernisation, local authorities secured funding from higher administrative levels to use construction as a core strategy to stimulate the economic sector; however, due to a lack of communication and coordinated action, public works often turned out to be completely disproportionate and unnecessary. This inconsistent planning required the reformulation of projects, which led to increasing construction costs and ultimately a lack of available funding. Furthermore, the presence of political corruption and mafia networks prompts us to consider that such incompetence is the result of obscure benefit schemes acquiring the funds put aside for public works through systemic backstairs dealing. In this regard, the building process *itself* was the main economic benefit and the actual use and management of public works was simply not contemplated beyond the construction phase. It is a dysfunctional system which works for some only when it fails the rest, demonstrating that unfinished public works are not a mere accident but a successful white-collar crime.[4]

Given this problematic origin, and in line with Alterazioni Video's provocative spirit, the artists decided to label these modern ruins a formal architectural style: the so-called 'Incompiuto Siciliano'. It is worth mentioning that this consideration refers to a *national* reality where any unfinished public work is indeed 'Incompiuto Siciliano' even if it is located in a different Italian region to Sicily.[5] The artists' objective is to generate, by completely neutralising the negative connotation to incompletion, a new and positive paradigm for unfinished public works. Yet, one would have to be very naïve to think that, by leaving explicit criticism entirely to one side, Incompiuto Siciliano is not in any way critical: such an ironic, clandestine gesture is precisely its hook. Hence, Incompiuto Siciliano is both an artistic project and an invented architectural style that covertly

denounces the wasting of funds whilst putting on the agenda a set of problematic spaces that have been neglected for a long time and for which there is no official solution. Alterazioni Video creatively achieve this through a change of mindset from which unfinished works – due to their 'public' character – have the capacity to represent their whole society. In this sense, 'Incompiuto Siciliano' can be a *metonym* designated to unfinished public works in Italy that are now seen as a cultural and heritage product deserving of renewed value.[6]

Aligned with this, I argue elsewhere that what Alterazioni Video actually do is satirically employ the traditionally hegemonic vision of 'authorised heritage' (perceived as old, self-glorifying and beautiful) turned on its head; finding a series of theoretical paradoxes to judge unfinished public works' temporality, memory and aesthetics. Ultimately, I suggest that Incompiuto Siciliano is an original sample of critical heritage whose novelty lies in the constructive use of sarcasm and double meaning, these being essential to connect and involve people in a bottom-up process of heritageisation.[7] As a matter of fact, for the last ten years, Incompiuto Siciliano has been widely celebrated in exhibitions, lectures and workshops for which institutional support has been crucial. Its relevance has fostered critical readings of incompletion in multiple master's and doctoral theses, academic publications and international media.[8] Moreover, a quick search for 'Incompiuto Siciliano' on Google produces approximately 18,900 results; its page on Facebook, where Alterazioni Video regularly post updates of the project and any other information related with unfinished constructions, is followed by almost 20,000 people; and in just six weeks in 2017, a campaign raised more than €27,000 from hundreds of supporters to fund the artists' recently published book entitled *Incompiuto – The Birth of a Style*. For this reason, though it has not been formally designated as 'heritage' by any official body, the growing popularity of Incompiuto Siciliano inevitably poses a set of serious, engaging questions of which one of the most important is: what to do with unfinished public works? It is precisely Incompiuto Siciliano's condition as critical heritage which allows us different possibilities of practical intervention (each of them with its own cultural reading) that would normally fall outside the realm of traditional preservation.

Perspectives

In November 2016, Andrea Masu (one of Alterazioni Video members) gave a presentation on the general concerns regarding Incompiuto Siciliano at the event

'TEDxPotenza'. After a decade dealing with unfinished public works in Italy, he suggests that there are four different possibilities to tackle incompletion: to finish the constructions; to demolish them; to leave them as they are; or to find new alternative uses while respecting their unfinished spatiality and materiality. In this regard, Masu concludes by asserting that, for him, there is not a single and ideal solution; rather, the issue of incompletion is so complex that it will inevitably require specific measures for each individual case.[9] Hence, the present article is born from this perspective and, by embracing Incompiuto Siciliano's narrative and framing it under a critical heritage approach, it provides a review of these different possibilities for unfinished public works. Disentangling the theoretical implications of this case is an opportunity to promote a debate which will undoubtedly be one of the key urban themes in the next few years. This is intended to be important not only in Italy but also in those countries affected by unfinished geographies resulting from the 2008 financial crisis, where, though the temporal, political and economic contexts differ from the Italian case, incompletion is increasingly viewed as a new form of ruination[10] – susceptible to being studied from a cultural point of view.

Finishing the constructions (even if their completion involves a change of the originally intended use) follows a logical narrative as common sense dictates that the purpose of a building is to be completed to respond to a necessity; however, this option is not sufficiently critical, and thus, has been deliberately excluded from an extensive analysis in this article. The truth is that no building is ever completed since its actual habitation always makes it change and evolve[11], and even the rich 'spectre of non-completion' during its construction stage resonates once a building has been completed.[12] Nevertheless, in the present case, completion is *literally* regarded as the moment in which a public work is physically fulfilled and can host the single, formal function for which it had been planned. According to Smithson, it can be said that any building in the process of being built is a 'ruin in reverse', whose appealing, multiple trajectories are suppressed in the precise moment it is finished, and consequently is no longer a ruin[13] – or, in other words, 'to finish' is here understood as the turning point at which Incompiuto Siciliano ceases to be Incompiuto Siciliano. This article considers eventual completion as 'that precise moment', an ending road, while incompletion can be studied as a transitional state that offers further enriching alternatives; especially because most unfinished public works in Italy are impossible to complete due to functional obsolescence, design errors and/or

ageing degradation[14]. By focusing on Incompiuto Siciliano's 'unfinishedness' – the quality by which architectural works can 'endure, transform and assume new forms and experiences through their very disintegration'[15] – the aim is to embed this case in the discussion where ruins, more than regular buildings, are dynamic and open to interpretation.[16]

The first section of this article studies the eventual demolition of unfinished public works. As Alterazioni Video present Incompiuto Siciliano as a formal architectural style, in principle, we are implicitly persuaded to see it as 'authorised' heritage where constructions are in need of saving. However, far from considering demolition at odds with conservation, the truly critical component within Incompiuto Siciliano leads us to think that tearing unfinished public works down is, in fact, a non-conventional strategy that can stress their very nature as heritage. The case of Toyo Ito's U-House, built in 1976 to symbolise the grieving of the architect's sister after her husband passed away, resonates here and it has been interestingly reviewed by Cairns and Jacobs. The authors note how, two decades after the house was erected, its demolition was not a sad moment but instead came to represent the family's healed wounds, making clear that demolition may well be seen as a productive, restorative tool.[17] Beyond such a purely domestic heritage, van der Hoorn investigates the fall of the Berlin Wall to illustrate the way to 'exorcise' architectural remains, where festive and participatory destruction is positively interpreted – this ultimately contributes to the building of new layers of history.[18] Furthermore, even tragic destruction is possible as a generator of heritage. Holtorf points out that the void left by the Twin Towers after the 9/11 terrorist attacks functions as a site of cultural significance, demonstrating that 'destruction and loss are not the opposite of heritage but part of its very substance'.[19] Along this line of thought, Harrison uses the destruction of the 'Bamiyan Buddhas' in Afghanistan by Taliban forces in 2001 to coin 'absent heritage'. This term denotes 'the memorialisation of places and objects whose significance relates to their destruction or absence'[20], a process that is often followed by an act of iconoclasm. This is particularly remarkable in the case of Incompiuto Siciliano because, among further critical approaches, we are asked to value a piece of architecture through its deliberate demolition.

The second section contemplates leaving unfinished public works as they are to explore the suitability of allowing them to decay indefinitely. Again, if we acquiesce to Alterazioni Video's provocation and opt to view Incompiuto Siciliano as traditional

heritage, this second option may seem a contradiction in terms because, at an elementary level, heritage is only manifest if it is officially designated, actively managed, and properly conserved. An unfinished public work could just be an unfinished public work but, now being re-contextualised as 'Incompiuto Siciliano', it acquires a critical heritage status where progressive dereliction can be viewed as an inherent value. For more than a decade, DeSilvey has been working on the concept of 'entropic heritage' to highlight the adequacy of allowing a ruin to exist, a new trope that is crucial to a full appreciation of the authenticity of ruination as a distinctive process.[21] DeSilvey's ideas have been extremely influential; further scholars have noticed how the increasing degradation caused by natural agents[22] and informal human occupations[23] is, indeed, part of the afterlife of a ruin. Today, in a context where abandoned sites are widely celebrated as the liberating counter-part to sanitised neo-liberal landscapes exemplifying progress[24], ruins in their ethos as ruins became more popular than ever. Burström considers entropy the ideal option for an old junkyard with vintage cars in Sweden, and Kobiałka draws from such a case and argument to build a similar discourse for a tram depot in Wrocław. In both scenarios it is asserted that ruination, detached from any preservation practice, is precisely what retains integrity and fascinates visitors[25]. Hence, it is relevant to attest to the thin line between neglect and affection, which Pétursdóttir does in her study of abandoned herring factories in Iceland. There she advocates for an *active but non-intrusive* way of approaching ruins – valuing them not for what they historically represent, but for what they are *here and now*.[26] These critical perspectives can certainly aid us in understanding, just as Alterazioni Video suggests, Incompiuto Siciliano's ruin-*ing* attributes to be a positive paradigm for incompletion.

The third section explains (and furthers) what I have previously called *'active' arrested decay*.[27] This term draws from the traditional conservation strategy known as 'arrested decay', where classical ruins are merely subject to being commodified, and thus, they are treated as formal heritage preserved in its ideally ruined state. More critically, 'active' arrested decay consists of viewing unfinished public works in Italy as uncommon but useful resources, democratically finding new uses that would only require minimal interventions – in order to make them safe – while respecting their unfinished materiality and spatiality. As a matter of fact, in further international contexts, incompletion has already been celebrated for being a sort of *empty container*, susceptible to rich adaptation and transformation, allowing us to imagine infinite practical possibilities.[28] Modern ruins,

more generally, are also regarded as such. In his analysis of the reuse of military bunkers in Scandinavia, Strömberg notes how any intervention must be completely reversible. He recognises that the point of departure is an 'aesthetically-grounded postmodern neo-romanticism which turns rust and concrete into appealing gestures of victory'[29], finding in Duchamp's 'ready-made' a source of inspiration. Similarly, Sandler's 'counterpreservation' of the iconic Haus Schwarzenberg in the city centre of Berlin, accepts ruination with minimal interventions to retain 'a sense of contrivance and intentionality'[30], which allows the building to speak to its own history while generating a new alternative culture. Highlighting the participatory component in these practices, Krivý shows that the transformation of an obsolete industry in Helsinki is being carried out with a 'deliberate minimization of planning interventions and the promotion of the spontaneous, non-planned practices of cultural producers'.[31] Returning to incompletion, Fernández also supports bottom-up decision making, even a 'DIY' approach, in his theoretical essay on the global activation of spaces interrupted by the 2008 crisis. He believes that, as these sites are already in existence, the idea of people using them in a non-expansive manner is completely legitimate.[32] In light of these claims, and considering the case of Incompiuto Siciliano, culmination of an unfinished public structure by leaving it still seemingly unfinished, is a challenge that is worth exploring.

In order to establish the empirical content of the present research, a partly conversational[33], semi-structured Skype interview was conducted with Andrea Masu on March 15th 2017. Opting for an online interview helped me to overcome geographical dispersion and financial constraints, and while this does not replace face to face interaction, the results should be embraced as viable and valuable.[34] Similarly, between March and April 2018, two online questionnaires were answered by Arianna Lodeserto, a researcher, photographer and filmmaker who participated in one of Alterazioni Video's workshops; and Claudia D'Aita, a lawyer involved in local politics and associations who has worked closely with the artists since the beginning of the project. Here, the interaction was established via e-mail, allowing the interviewees to reply at their own convenience in terms of time – something that, contrary to spontaneity, ultimately materialised in deeply reflected answers.[35] Furthermore, with the object of *theorising from practice*[36], I have reviewed different artistic performances and architectural workshops that have been taking place for the last ten years where Incompiuto Siciliano was the subject of study.

Demolition

In July 2010, for three days, Alterazioni Video in collaboration with local partnerships and with support from public entities at different institutional tiers, organized the *Incompiuto Siciliano Festival* in the town of Giarre – which is popularly known as the 'capital' of Incompiuto Siciliano for having the highest concentration of unfinished public works in Italy (nine structures for a population of 28,000 people). The festival aimed to raise awareness of incompletion amongst locals and included workshops, concerts and performances in which on average around 200 people of different ages and backgrounds were involved. One of these performances, which took place at a children's play park whose construction was interrupted forty years before, consisted of tearing an unfinished column down and everyone was invited to take part. Weighting of one ton, the column was then transported to the Italian pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale that same year, where, as Masu indicates, it stood as 'an invitation to discuss incompletion, an issue that had been ignored for too long' (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

According to Masu, this performance was very controversial because, originally, certain local politicians were embarrassed by the phenomenon of incompletion in Giarre and did not want the name of the town to be associated. However, after tough negotiations and explanatory meetings, the local council unanimously approved the action which, once carried out, demonstrated that the partial destruction of a work can breathe new life and consensus into a community. And yet the column, relocated and put on display, suddenly becomes a relic, an object of admiration even if the site from which it originates had been dismembered. The column, exhibited for the whole summer in one of the most important architectural events in the world, stood as a symbol of incompletion throughout Italy – as a fragment has the potential to represent a whole.[37] The performance similarly illustrates how to exorcise architectural remains when participatory destruction is viewed as a positive operation. Seeing the public, festive atmosphere that occurred in Giarre[38], it can be said the building was divested of its futile aura and, though destruction may well be associated with oblivion, here it is evident that people were participating in the transformation and reinterpretation of the significance of incompletion.

Six years after this performance, in July 2016, Alterazioni Video organised a workshop that pursued the idea of completely demolishing a sports hall that has remained unfinished since the 1990s in the Sicilian town of Comiso. The actual demolition was not carried out, and thus, it must be understood as a potentiality rather than a certainty. Nevertheless, the way in which Alterazioni Video announced the workshop and a subsequent exhibition as part of the *Ragusa Foto Festival 2016* – an event that, since its conception in 2012, receives on average nearly 4,000 visitors during the four weeks it takes place[39] – leaves no room for doubt; the idea was clear: 'What if we blow it up?' (Figure 2). Masu passionately contextualizes the reasons and motivations behind this approach:

> The sports hall in Comiso was set on fire twice in the last few years and the structure is considerably damaged, it is certainly impossible to rebuild its roof. The way it is now, I see it as a beautiful open-air arena to host cultural activities. However, we suggested its demolition because it is located on top of a hill on the town's outskirts. Below its foundations, the hill is hollow, there's some sort of cave. We thought that tearing the building down and generating a vertical hole and then a horizontal tunnel could be a good option to reconnect the town with the hill. The building would then be related to Comiso through its very absence – an original way of mediating the need to put incompletion on the table.

Figure 2.

Masu's words indicate that demolition can function as a wake-up call. The eradication of an Incompiuto Siciliano structure may well serve to give greater value to the rest of the unfinished public works that are still standing or, at least, to keep them in the public eye. In this regard, 'one heritage object gained may compensate for another one lost'.[40] Therefore, the way in which Alterazioni Video view demolition is not a matter of deliberate forgetting, quite the opposite, and whilst the importance of Incompiuto Siciliano increases, it demonstrates extreme care not only to acknowledge incompletion but also to 'build' something new out of it. The demolition of sites becomes then a collective act in which a community reaffirms itself, the polar opposite of the purpose behind the erection of sites.

The participants in the workshop were Andrea Masu and Matteo Erenbourg from Alterazioni Video, architects Veronica Caprino and Alessandro Bonizzoni from the Milan-based studio Fosbury Architecture, photographer Giorgio Barrera, and Arianna Lodeserto. For the latter, small-group dynamics facilitated mutual understanding and

fostered a sense of collective responsibility – also, their small numbers allowed them to engage with locals in a more direct, friendly manner. After four intensive days of reflective tours, photographic and video documentation, and interviews with residents, Lodeserto confirmed that the sports hall plays a frustrating, tragic role in people's memories, something that needs to be reverted:

> The actual problem is to contemplate the building just as a mausoleum of abandonment, as a collateral damage of mafia and ineffective local governance. We must challenge its alleged (and missed) function, imagining and constructing other possibilities. Walter Benjamin refers to how 'destructive characters' *make room*, involving some sort of creation, a visionary path unimaginable before. I cannot help thinking of Chicago's tremendous engineering inventions in the aftermath of the great fire of 1871, a combination of drama and challenge! So yes, I'm convinced that the eventual void in Comiso may well function as a site of cultural significance, a construction that becomes even more relevant when disappearing, offering the opportunity for independent and personal discovery. For how long could this meaningfulness be retained? Well, I guess that would depend on our audaciousness and curiosity.

Yet the workshop demonstrated how much of a burden the building is, and to overcome this, suggested an act of iconoclasm. Iconoclasm involves the deliberate erasure of cultural elements of the past that are considered threatening and uncomfortable for the consolidation of a new cultural reality. It is neither right nor wrong – it truly depends on the perspective we use to judge it – but, what is indisputable is that iconoclasm implies 'a tacit knowledge of the symbolic power of the image being removed [and certainly,] if the image had no symbolic power, it wouldn't need to be erased'.[41] Meanwhile, since the eventual demolition of the Comiso sports hall is just a proposal, we can only evoke the catharsis of viewing sudden loss. Apart from post-produced photographs and models reimagining the void, another outcome of the workshop was a 6-minute video that was also exhibited in the festival. This included clips of one of the fires that damaged the structure years ago, in which we see how a congregation of people stop and gaze, at a safety distance, to witness the disaster. Destruction can be truly hypnotizing.[42]

Entropy

For Masu, the possibility of letting Incompiuto Siciliano be does exist, and it is a valid one as long as the constructions become elements of note in the landscape. Due to there being hundreds of unfinished buildings and infrastructures erected in the middle of nowhere (Figure 3), it seems that there is not much more to be done than opt for this

somewhat poetic vision. After all, 'if a ruin decays it remains still a ruin'[43], which leads us to how ruin studies have progressively adopted the term 'entropy' from other disciplines. Entropy is the tendency of all systems to reach stability through their maximum degree of disorder, something that grants the space 'a greater range of potential configurations'.[44] According to this law, 'life, that fragile, exceptional and unstable thing that we generally call nature, is, therefore, the most unnatural thing in the world'.[45] Such a chaotic stability is usually understood as the material disintegration of a given construction, in which ruination is precisely the 'return of architecture into nature'.[46] Hence, there is nothing more authentic than a ruin in the process of becoming so; there is nothing more natural than being reclaimed by nature.

Figure 3.

This approach is essential to understanding another action which took place during the *Incompiuto Siciliano Festival*. Alterazioni Video invited the French group of landscapers Coloco, who gave a performance entitled *L'origine del mondo* ('The origin of the world') at a multi-functional hall in Giarre that has remained unfinished since 1987. *L'origine del mondo* was a ninety-minute 'sui generis' opera in which Coloco represented 'the cycle of life, [where] public spaces of culture, whether finished or not, are a common good in the service of society – which has paid off'.[47] One of the acts in this opera consisted of using hand-made catapults to throw hundreds of seeds all around, aiming to create a wild botanic garden that, in a distant future, could swallow the entire building.

As a co-organizer of the festival and local resident in Giarre all her life, Claudia D'Aita found Coloco's performance 'fascinating' because the reclamation of a site through its natural decomposition defied her assumptions. According to D'Aita, before the idea of Incompiuto Siciliano emerged, nobody in Giarre was aware of the hidden presence of these buildings (not even her). Years later, she considers the multi-functional hall to be the town's most beautiful unfinished site, to which she is now emotionally attached as, upon entering, her mind is 'full of memories, sounds, and smells'. Fearing the loss of such an affect, D'Aita would not like to see this place excessively changed, though she admits that the building belongs not only to her – indeed, it can be said that the building belongs primarily to time. And thus, though hard to measure Coloco's success because the site

had already started to be colonised by wild plants prior to the performance, today, nature (spontaneous or not) keeps destroying and creating. Vegetation is then a characterising factor within ruination, part of a process though which a building is no longer the same.[48]

Not only do natural agents intervene in entropy, humans also do their part. After a space is abandoned it becomes 'uncanny'[49], a magnet for temporary activities that can seem reprehensible and deviant for the mainstream. In the case of unfinished public works, 'teenagers gather to secretly smoke, get stoned or make love'[50], and during my explorations, I have myself witnessed glass bottles, traces of bonfires and graffiti on the walls. D'Aita condemns people leaving behind garbage, but on the other hand, she encourages the informal repurposing of these places, particularly when an artistic motivation contributes to strengthening personal memories and stories. In her opinion, people are entitled to re-appropriate *their* spaces and do so conspicuously, because every manifestation in this direction is always generative and positive. This vision, where the 'death of some heritage means here quite literally the birth of another heritage'[51], can be subjected to heavy criticism and scepticism.[52] However, beyond value judgements, what stands out clearly is the potential role of people in entropically contributing to incompletion's afterlife through a broad variety of expressions.

Without a formal past of inhabitation, the unfinished condition is what characterises these spaces, making them appealing as evidenced in several reviews written by people after visiting the sites.[53] In this sense, any attempt to revert incompletion seems a contradiction, since the buildings' authenticity derives from a lack of preservation that, paradoxically, preserves them as always-ruined ruins. These buildings have been decaying from the very moment in which their construction was cancelled – such is their singularity. Today, with thousands of people now aware of Incompiuto Siciliano, it would not be unreasonable to imagine that controversy may be courted should the sites' 'unfinishedness' be put into question. Authorities' inaction over the last few decades has contributed to the creation of a whole set of unfinished public works that have been creatively renamed an architectural style. This innovative gesture contemplates both appreciation and gradual loss, forcing society to take note of ruins whilst finding 'a way between *care* and *carelessness*'.[54] D'Aita's words exemplify the prospects and challenges in this approach:

> These buildings are continuously decaying but, far from being a tragedy, I think this is part of the essence of any architecture, and this applies not only to unfinished architecture! Places evolve and become something else, what ultimately contributes to the stratification of their charm. For me, it would

be quite frustrating to see unfinished works restored or destroyed, because there are many ways to deal with memory. Indeed, I am convinced that, with punctual repairs over time, Giarre could become a symbol, the place to study and interpret unfinished buildings as a national phenomenon. Yet a localised, strategic project is probably enough to explain the running history of incompletion in Italy – which is no mean feat. However, to reach this goal, the truth is that we have not entirely succeeded in encompassing all the necessary institutional bodies yet. We still have to communicate Incompiuto Siciliano better, especially to the technicians within the involved sectors, and for this, it is also true that many more resources are required.

The above statement is remarkable for two reasons. On one hand, a subtle, sensible architectural conservation is imagined within a specific context; on the other, the idea is that such conservation may well speak for other unfinished buildings, numbering in the hundreds, which would in principle continue the process of ruining. Those 'punctual repairs over time' to which D'Aita refers are nothing less than the opposite of an integral, standard restoration, attempting therein to control and manage a major concern around ruins' reuse: that of safety. Its curation (i.e. the necessity 'to ensure comfort and dignity'[55]), alongside the functional and creative responses offered by incompletion are largely discussed in the next section. Hence, the inference here is that the seeming impossibility of rescuing every single unfinished construction is not a failure but a conscious, humble heritage position. The understanding of 'ruin' shifts then from a fixed noun to a continuous verb[56], accepting that Incompiuto Siciliano does not need to be materially saved to retain its meaning.

'Active' arrested decay

Arrested decay is a conservation strategy in which, following the premise of *conserve as found* with minimum intervention, a ruined site is frozen in time, rejecting both integral rehabilitations and increasing degradation. With classical ruins, this is certainly the principle maintenance policy that is applied and, in curatorial terms, it conveys the material sacralisation of a structure. In this sense, arrested decay restricts the role of a ruin, limiting it to a glass-cased monument where the possibility of evolving as something else is constrained. Knowing this, when Masu asserts that Incompiuto Siciliano may well be repurposed provided that its unfinished shape and materiality are respected, he is implicitly advocating for an 'active' arrested decay in which an unfinished work could go beyond becoming a touristic attraction. In this approach, minimal interventions would guarantee safety and, at the same time, the eventual alternative uses sought would be

helpful to reconnect and reconcile society with incompletion because, as Masu recognises, 'life must go on'. Thus, the challenge is to fill these spaces with activity while not losing their unfinished character.

With this in mind, it is possible to comprehend the aspirations behind a series of workshops conducted since 2009. These have been co-organized by Alterazioni Video and several architecture schools from all over Italy, reaching their common goal of providing incompletion with higher visibility and academic relevance. In his own words, Masu explains the general results:

> Our artistic discourse may not be conventional, but it's consistent. We propose to open unfinished buildings and work on the potential that we think they have. It's not always easy to deliver this message to architecture students, indeed, at the beginning I usually find that they feel the need to come up with formal designs immediately – I mean, they see a problem and they offer you a solution. But we've always wanted to go beyond, stressing the imaginative level in all this and, in the end, every workshop is quite successful. If I had to summarize the outcome, and just to put it simple, I consider that the famous 'unfinished' social houses in Chile, built by Pritzker-award winning architect Alejandro Aravena, are the perfect comparison. These houses were given to their owners in a very basic estate, made from concrete and so on, but far from restricting eventual interventions, the owners were free to transform and complete their houses with their own resources. It's an architecture that acquires its form over time! Years later, the houses have definitely changed but there's a level of 'completed incompletion' that fascinates me. I like to see the proposals made by the students as a variant of this. Not as projects, but as evolutions.

Taking a closer look at these 'evolutions', Masu's intention becomes clearer. In collaboration with the artists, for three days in February 2009, the University of Suor Orsola Benincasa hosted a workshop in Naples in which a dozen photographers, researchers, and architecture students participated. The activity focused on the reuse of five constructions in the city – a social housing complex, a sports centre, and three different overpasses that have remained unfinished for over thirty years – the resulting proposals were then exhibited for a month at the *Palazzo delle Arti Napoli* ('Palace of Arts Naples').[57] For one of these overpasses – the so-called 'Ponte dei Capri' – students imagined playgrounds, an open-air cinema, a shelter for street vendors or a belvedere within a park (Figure 4). Importantly, none of these eventual uses is exclusionary and they all envision leaving the original structure nearly as is, or, in Masu's terms working 'on the potential'. Yet the 'soft' character of the additional elements symbiotically coexist with concrete's hardness and durability, resulting in a more sustainable approach and giving the new space a distinctive attribute.

Figure 4.

Another example is the workshop entitled *Incompiuto Siciliano – The Florence Step*, which was organized by the University of Florence, and took place during a series of meetings held in Florence between February and April 2009. A dozen architecture students collaborated with Alterazioni Video with the objective of devising a set of interventions for unfinished works in Giarre, and the results were shown for three months at the exhibition Green Platform – curated by the *Strozzina* (Centre for Contemporary Culture at Palazzo Strozzi, Florence).[58] The unfinished children's play park is transformed into a site for displaying projections; a swimming-pool finally has water but now to host a botanic garden; and the multi-functional hall mentioned in the previous section becomes an open-air theatre (Figure 5). As Masu notes, so far political authorities have not made any move to tackle the phenomenon of incompletion, and thus, these workshops function as artistic, grassroots initiatives. The fresh perspectives seen here are the result of the students' freedom and the flexibility they found in incompletion; and ultimately, it can be said that this vision exemplifies how low-profile interventions may well be valid to eventually generate value.

Figure 5.

It is particularly enriching to review one of Incompiuto Siciliano's workshops – the so-called *Architettura Instantanea* ('Instant Architecture') – that had the unique distinction of having gone beyond imagination. Curated by Alterazioni Video and Prof. Marco Navarra from the University of Catania, twenty people participated, from which half were students from different architecture schools in Italy. The workshop took place in Giarre, for one week in December 2011, and focused on the unfinished Athletics Stadium and Polo Field in the town. At a staggering cost of €9 million, the stadium was expected to host 20,000 spectators, two thirds of the population in Giarre – which has never had a polo playing tradition. More than thirty years after its non-completion, this building is one of the most iconic representations of Incompiuto Siciliano for being a clear sample of megalomania, absurd and wasted investment, design errors, and uncommon beauty.[59]

After holding several meetings with people and sport associations that have been informally using this space for years, the workshop's goal was to reach a consensual, self-built *instant* intervention that, as Masu describes, could provide users with 'furniture for their activities, meaningful multi-use elements capable of being re-arranged according to their needs – from a bar to locker rooms'. None of these structures built with plastic fruit crates remain today (Figure 6)[60], however, it is worth mentioning that 'in participative projects, the process is somehow more important than the result'.[61] 'Process' is indeed a keyword in the community reactivation of ruins, where a certain sense of belonging emerges to strengthen the heritage status of a site.[62]

Figure 6.

In other types of ruins that had long been inhabited, the ruin connects to its past; similarly, unfinished works carry the history of incompletion. This is a past of which to be aware, but from Incompiuto Siciliano's perspective, the past cannot be a burden. These buildings have always been devoid of any function, meaning that, as 'blank canvasses', new functions can be imagined more freely. The proposals reviewed in this section, amongst further proposals[63], are characterized by regarding unfinished materiality no longer as a failure but as a celebrated cultural asset. By placing the aesthetic value at the fore, the memories from the past are not dismissed by the needs of the evolving present.

Conclusion

Acknowledging the increasing number of literature, cultural geography is proving to be one of the fields of study from which the most innovative enquiries regarding modern ruins are carried out. In recent years, researchers have addressed these spaces using a broad variety of experimental approaches – including walking, creative writing, and audio media[64] – while such an interdisciplinary character is perceived as an asset to go *beyond ruinenlust*.[65] In this sense, this article contributes to push the boundaries of cultural geographical analysis by presenting a creative response to unfinished ruins that uses art and heritage as non-conventional, proactive frameworks to deal with such a harsh spatial reality. Thus, Incompiuto Siciliano is surely not the only eventual solution and would require further institutional support, however, its originality has the potential to confront

the on-going paralysis. It may be possible to ignore an individual unfinished building, but learning from this case, it seems very difficult to ignore them as an ensemble, as a true phenomenon.

Finishing and formally using the constructions will not always be truly practical, physically feasible, and economically viable; but if it were, in certain situations this might be the most legitimate action to take to benefit the population. However, the problem would only persist if the same corrupted agents and dysfunctional actions that once halted the works are employed again. That said, completion makes sense when it fulfills a clear rational goal, all the while avoiding the issue of construction being the economic engine of the society.

The outright demolition of every single unfinished work in Italy itself proves problematic, as it would also require a considerable amount of funds. Nevertheless, in scenarios where demolition presents a series of advantages at a local level, erasure could be reinterpreted as a new way of appreciating incompletion. It is hard to miss the great love that Alterazioni Video feel for these buildings, but the artists would not hesitate in materially destroying one in particular if its absence were to be more significant than its presence. A benevolent sacrifice is its own form of love.

Though it may seem that allowing unfinished constructions to decay indefinitely does not correct the situation, the concept is in fact innovative as it does not view the 'problem' as a problem. For cases lacking any potential to be reintegrated into certain urban dynamics, the acceptance of their condition as ruins offers the least costly option: a change of mentality. Nothing that lasts for so long avoids having connotations, and perhaps yet, referring to an unfinished public work as 'Incompiuto Siciliano' is the first step, the necessary gesture to value entropy as one of ruination's characterizing attributes.

'Active' arrested decay refers to how incompletion can be used without compromising its material integrity; and though retaining modern ruin's aesthetics is not entirely new, this approach advances the way in which unfinished spaces can be freely regenerated. Spontaneous and ephemeral, the materialisation of these eventual uses would possibly emerge from real democratisation that would require an ambitious, complex participatory culture. It is never too late for those buildings that may still stand a chance – most of all, because being functional whilst visually remaining ruins would not require huge investments; something that has been nothing can become anything.

This article is a modest anticipation of the possible futures within reimagination, where the different ways of interacting with incompletion cannot be judged as 'better or worse'. Going further, it is likely of more value to interpret these strategies as complementary – beneficial when occurring simultaneously – and consequently, to consider unfinished architectures in Italy as a laboratory in which to experiment and learn; trial-and-error with no fear of failure. There is, after all, no need to rush; they have been standing there for quite some time.

Notes

1. I.Bargna, 'Between Hollywood and Bandjoun: Art Activism and Anthropological Ethnography into the Mediascape', *Journal des Anthropologues*, 130, 2012, p. 104.
2. The conception and subsequent activities related to *Incompiuto Siciliano* have been carried out with the assistance of Enrico Sgarbi and Claudia D'Aita. Throughout this article, and for operational reasons, referring to Alterazioni Video implicitly involves the participation of these two external collaborators.
3. A schematic map is available in the following document: <http://www.alterazionivideo.com/incompiuto-abitare_oct08.pdf>. For the last ten years, the complete survey has been accessible online and it contained the precise information (typology, scale, distribution, date) of each construction. However, this link is no longer accessible because Alterazioni Video have recently released a book documenting up to 750 cases. More information about this publication is available at <http://incompiutosiciliano.org/index>
4. P.Arboleda, '"Ruins of Modernity": The Critical Implications of Unfinished Public Works in Italy', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 41, 2017, pp. 804–20.
5. Beyond the prevalence of incompletion in Sicily, Alterazioni Video opted for the term 'Siciliano' to symbolise the entire Italy after film director Pietro Germi's words expressed in this interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dazYf2mGp8>
6. P.Arboleda, 'Beyond the Aestheticization of Modern Ruins: The Case of Incompiuto Siciliano', *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology*, 3, 2016, pp. 21–44.
7. P.Arboleda, 'The Paradox of "Incompiuto Siciliano Archaeological Park" or how to Mock Heritage to Make Heritage', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 23, 2017, pp. 299–316.
8. A complete list of such a public impact is available at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B_4tPt3jJkYWbVdFaFMtTjMwNHc/view>
9. The entire talk is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWmEBk_vwQw&t=1062s>. The eventual future of unfinished public works is specifically discussed from min. 17:30 onwards.
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13. R.Smithson, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey', in J.Flam (ed.) *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 68–74.
14. A.Bonizzoni, B.Cairoli and V.Caprino, 'WHITE ELEPHANTS: Wasting Away the Unfinished Public Buildings' (Unpublished Master's Thesis, School of Architecture Urban Planning and Construction Engineering, Polytechnic University of Milan, Italy, 2014).
15. M.Bille and T.F.Sørensen, 'Architecture Becoming New Spaces', in M.Bille and T.F.Sørensen (eds.), *Elements of Architecture: Assembling Archaeology, Atmosphere and the Performance of Building Spaces* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 344.
16. Among many scholars claiming this, see, for example: B.Garrett, 'Assaying History: Creating Temporal Junctions through Urban Exploration', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*,

29, 2011, 1048–67; T.Edensor, 'Incipient Ruination: Materiality, Destructive Agencies and Repair', in M.Bille and T.F.Sørensen (eds.) *Elements of Architecture: Assembling Archaeology, Atmosphere and the Performance of Building Spaces* (London: Routledge, 2016).

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19. C.Holtorf, 'Can Less Be More? Heritage in the Age of Terrorism', *Public Archaeology*, 5, 2006, p. 101.

20. R.Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (London: Routledge), p. 169.

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