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Nicola Marzot

The Reclaimed City. Islands of resilience in the urban archipelago. "Temporary Use" and transformation in emergency conditions

Abstract

The crisis resulting from the effects of the pandemic has revealed more than just a financial impact, but also the inability of our cities to react to pressing changes that cannot be postponed. Only a portion of this can be traced back to the structural inertia in modifying a social framework founded on automatisms that involve both action (*praxis*) and production (*poiesis*). The primary cause can be found in the deontic function of the Plan and its regulatory corollaries. In this restrictive context, the need for intervention in emergency conditions in our country required a dangerous dependence on the "state of exception". Some pioneering practices nevertheless demonstrated the existence of effective alternatives to extraordinary measures, legitimising the pre-eminence of the culture of design in urban transformation.

Keywords

Crisis — Resilience — Practices

Preamble

The pandemic emergency generated by the spread of coronavirus, well beyond the dramatic nature of its effects, revealed that we were ill-prepared, in a more general sense, for facing a systemic crisis. In fact, management of the crisis required the declaration of a "state of exception"¹. Invoked every time a grave threat to State institutions occurs, to guarantee rapid and effective implementation of counter measures, it triggers the temporary suspension of current laws governing civil society, and the simultaneous implementation of a "governmental" regime (Agamben 2003). In recent history in the West, this phenomenon occurred in the budding American democracy², with effects that rapidly extended to Europe, stemming from an economy that is more and more globalized and finance-based.

Among the immediate consequences of these decisions, the progressive exponential increase in unused spaces, public and private, was beyond a doubt the most macroscopic and evocative phenomenon, with the relative political, economic, social, and cultural implications, which would soon impact the entire country. With regard to this, it can be affirmed that the list of "vacant" buildings and areas that require reclamation increased in quantity as never before, simultaneously expanding a widely articulated catalogue in terms in quality (Marzot 2013a).

If all of this resulted in rapid interventions of an exceptional nature (especially in the healthcare sector), the immediate domestic residential spaces were charged with responsibilities that, ontologically speaking, were outside of their realm, including work, education and free time activities. The semantic implications that this abandonment phenomenon created have



Fig. 1
Former Ravone railway station, Bologna. The real estate market crisis lends itself to the adoption of an incremental value building process where "temporary use" of unused existing buildings constitutes a brand new starting point.

remained totally unexplored as of yet, despite their magnitude. Through a necessary process based on truth, this essay has the intention of bringing to light the aporias characterising the Government's approach to the transformation of the territory, at all levels of intervention, which significantly inhibited the propensity for change in Italy, affecting the debate as well as the modes, timing and results of the interventions.

On the concept of Property, or the ambiguity of the *munus munus*

The recent crisis deactivated, even though temporarily, all "conventional", typical distinctions between the public and private spheres, on which the foundations of the social framework are built (Ferraris 2012), crushing them while, at the same time, forcing them into an unforeseen, overwhelming and undefined domestic dimension. The home, unexpectedly and unwillingly, became hypertrophic, without – in the majority of cases - this new condition being accompanied by an adequate preparation in terms of spaces, and above all lacking the capacity for handling the unexpected burden, if not in a total condition of emergency. The sudden undistinguished nature of the aforesaid concepts indirectly revealed the rhetorical weight of the concept of "property", both material and immaterial, with rare, and therefore meritorious, exceptions.

With regard to this, it should be mentioned that in the Italian word *patrimonio* (meaning "property") the root of the compound *pater*, evoking the principle of authority, is associated with the termination *munus*, the concept having been the object of extensive and crucial philosophical reflection over the recent years (Agamben 2001; Nancy 2002; Esposito 2006). The ambiguous oscillation of its meaning is understandable only in the light of a continuous prospective revolution in its use and role, for which the crisis is responsible. In fact, its alternating chapters are the cause of the semantic transformation of the term, from its original meaning of "obligation", or "duty" set forth by the rules of civil coexistence for which each generation has the right and the duty to set aside for itself and its contemporaries, to its current meaning of "gift" to the generations to come, in the hopes that

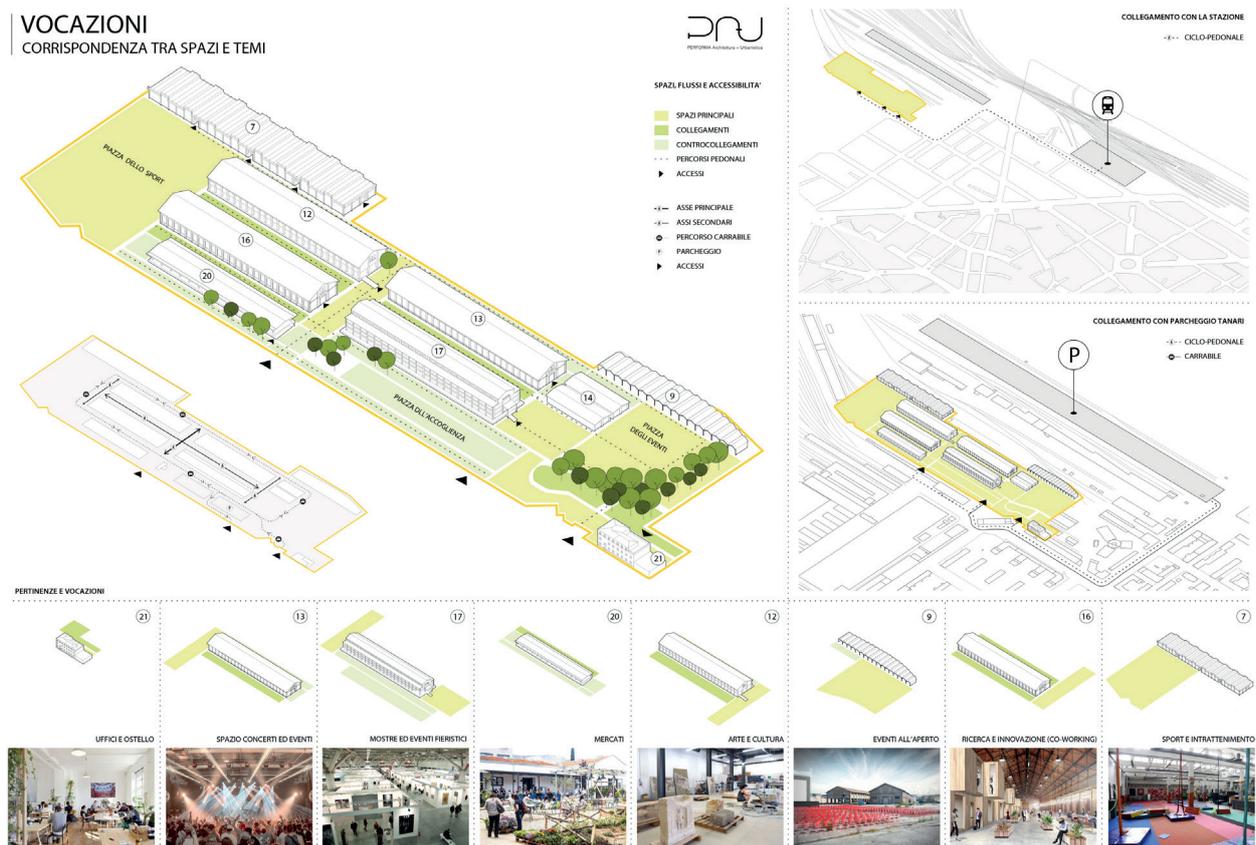


Fig. 2

The "Temporary Use Master Plan" is the new governance tool shared with local Administrations, used to identify "vocations" for the single vacant buildings based on relative intrinsic characteristics. Within the assigned perimeter, the correspondence between closed spaces and external areas guarantees additional degrees of freedom, expanding the possible configurations for facilitating the required changes.

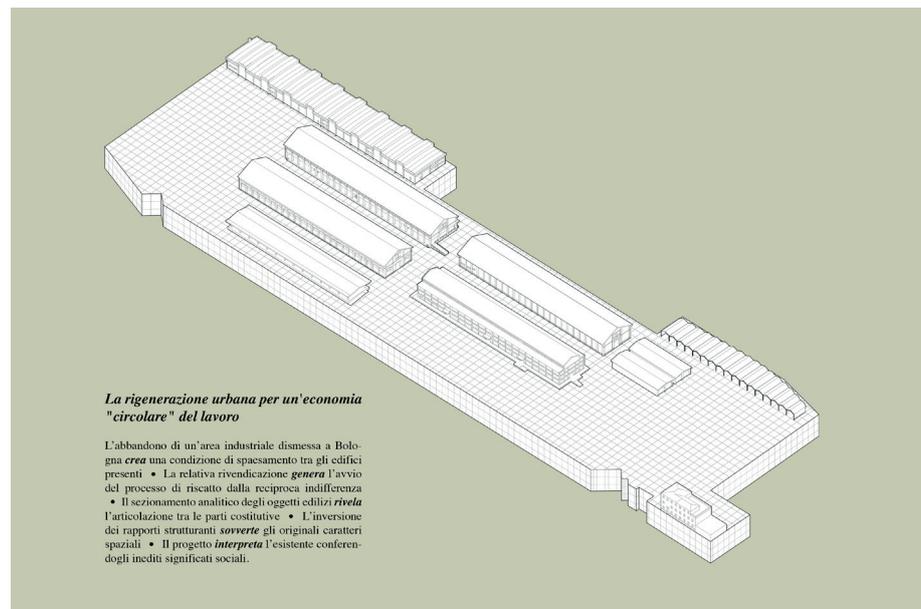
they are dutiful heirs, multiplying its value (Marzot 2019; Rispoli 2019).

Urban planning as *katéchon*, or the power that restrains

And yet, the *munus*-gift offered as a sacrifice to posterity after the crisis is not, in the actual reality of Modernity, immediately available, as anyone who aspires to it knows well. Paraphrasing a masterful essay by Massimo Cacciari (2013), what unexpectedly holds back the potential (for regeneration), delaying the manifestation of any real benefits, is indeed a system of rules, as invisible as they are pervasive and wide-ranging, for which the declared *katéchon*-esque function inhibits the possible transformation of the *status quo* (Marzot, 2016). In this sense, the so-called "transitional measures" are to the Plan as the "state of exception" is to the State institutions, guaranteeing conservation in eternity. Therefore, not only is the possibility to responsibly claim these properties denied, but also - and above all -, the right to take possession of them through a necessary process of reassignment. Finally, the urban planning framework reserves the right to restrain the *kairos*, or opportune time, without which the wait for renovation is destined to continue indefinitely.

Duration, or the impossibility of abandonment in Italy

The subsequent paradox is that especially in our country, outside of a "state of exception" (Agamben 2003), it seems that nothing can be properly abandoned. We are hostage to a *status quo* where the liberation of creative energies contained in every social-historic framework, through the use and processing of the same, seems to be basically unthinkable, like a simple ontological category, rendering change almost impossible, in its multiple and unforeseeable varieties (Marzot 2018). Above all, this induces a sense of resignation in the younger generations, who see every legitimate attempt to claim a sense of belonging thwarted, taking into consideration emerging autonomist movements, seeking responsible transformation of a space that, although unused and often degraded, cannot be altered.

**Fig. 3**

The conceptual axonometry of the section dedicated to the exploration of new solutions, to be tested and possibly inserted in the implementation phase of the Urban Implementation Plan (PUA), expresses the sense of estrangement of vacant buildings in respect to the anonymity of the surrounding Plan.

The pioneering role of reclamation practices in the spaces expelled by the city

Faced with the aforementioned obstacles, based on the many exemplary success stories demonstrated in recent publicity, over the course of the last decade procedures for reclaiming abandoned and/or under-used spaces have progressively constituted a new phenomenon in scale and in their methodological implications. Primarily thanks to the pioneering role played by cultural associations (Albertazzi 2019), and the contributions of designers who are more open to ideas coming from the international scene (Marzot 2019), a transversal opinion has emerged that supports the proclamation of the first Regional Urban Planning Law⁴ which acknowledges “resilience” as the foundational principle of a new concept of city, built on the responsible transformation of what already exists. In particular, starting from the first experiences in Bologna⁵ and Ravenna in “Temporary uses” (Bonetti, Marzot and Roversi Monaco 2016), art. 16 of the text introduces the principle of transitory suspension of the stringency of urban use regulations, on which the classification of the Plan bases its deontic logic - establishing a moratorium for all properties that, once they reach the end of their life span, are made available for experimental, renewed uses. The importance of this decision, which has no precedents in the history of Italian urban planning, does not only pertain to the willingness to rehabilitate a proactive role for subjectivity in the construction of urban space, as demonstrated to a greater and lesser degree in contemporary politics (especially sensitive to the idea of rehabilitating its public image to respond to the evident at all levels of representation), but also, and above all, in the implicit acknowledgement of architecture as an exploratory tool, to research innovative responses to the issues emerging in the present.

Hybridisation and regenerative processes

It follows that regeneration of unused property, both material and immaterial, significantly impacts the human dimension and the urban dimension within a mutual relationship, the effects of which one cannot produce unless by way of the other, and vice-versa. The *de facto* primacy of a phenomenological-existential approach to “doing”, therefore placed *ex lege*

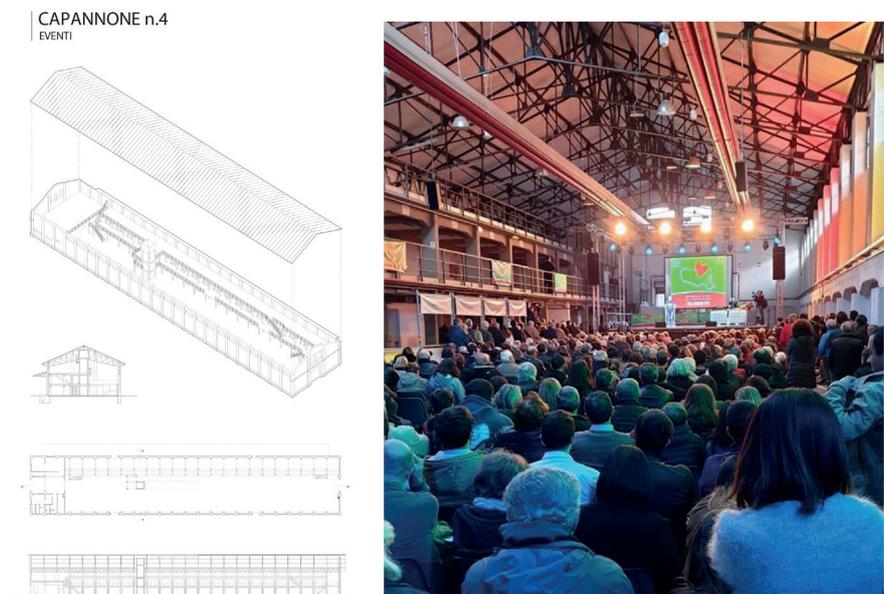


Fig. 4

Warehouse no. 4, with its single hall plan, has an assembly structure that lends itself well to the presentation of a new political roster for the regional elections (obtaining the Vice President's Office of Emilia-Romagna).

at the foundation of the necessary reinvention of “know-how”, requires a heuristic method, to be found and reinvented by trial and error, through the architectural practice (Marzot 2017). But all of this implies acknowledging the hybrid nature of the latter, assuming the programmatic de-containment and contamination (between nature and artifice, subject and object, instruments and results, research and theory) as its own ontological condition. In this way, the prejudice of classic Apollonian standard, resulting from the tensions of the 1960s and 1970s, is finally unmasked and faced with its Dionysian (and erotic) *alter ego* (Marzot 2013b). In fact, rational thought does not contemplate the confusion of codes, and even less so the ambiguity of meaning, “tragically” denying its spurious and paradoxical original archetype.

The reconstruction of a sense of Community

The ongoing experimental practices demonstrate that a renewed sense of *cum-munus*, or the voluntary, shared choice of a *super partes* entity to belong to (De La Boétie 2013), can neither emerge from the tired rhetoric of discursive practices, where the noesis of participation is evident, nor from preconceived consolidated practices, already assuming what the community must jointly find to be able to define itself autonomously. On the contrary, it requires the direct and responsible involvement of all those who, in various roles and based on the willingness and different abilities expressed, aspire to be *engaged* players in the same regenerative processes. Above all, this implies that the reassignment of meaning to buildings that are vacant and unused, and available for new purposes, results as a conditional factor for the possibility of innovating behaviours, which, symmetrically, direct their results. “The community to come”, paraphrasing Agamben (2001), is in fact the changing result of mutual implications between “subjectivity”, which vindicates the natural right to be the protagonist of change, and spatialized “objectivity”, in the search for possible new frameworks. In this perspective, design has the priority to create a plurality of interests within a general overview, which can exceed and integrate the same interests based on a higher pursued objective.

From “the city in the city” to the archipelago of resilient islands

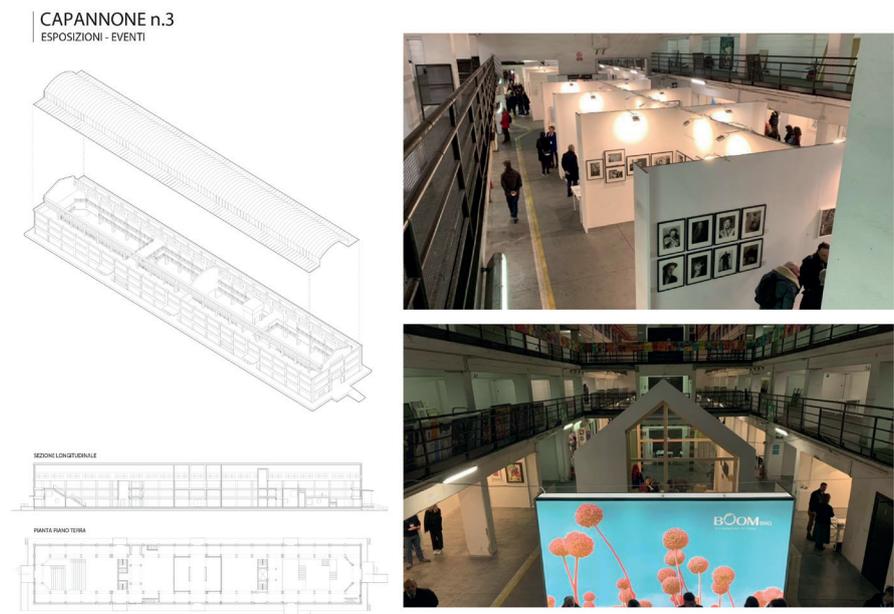


Fig. 5

Warehouse no. 3, with a basilica structure, was temporarily transformed into an exhibition space dedicated to hosting events from the last edition of the International Art First / Art Fair.

The 1980s were animated by pervasive collective transgression, intended as cathartic *ludus*, through violent conflict between classes, confrontations between autonomist movements and resistance to institutions, in the present and recent past, inexorably falling into an aesthetic beyond (Menna 1983). In its most abysmal depths, the point of view of “structuralism”, up to that point dominating in all fields of knowledge, dissolved joyously into a kaleidoscopic variety of poetics. From the ensuing fragmentation of the disciplinary *corpora*, “the city in the city” became the unifying retroactive manifesto, where Ungers and his best disciples imagined the forced abandonment of entire parts of the city, due to crisis, as sudden as it was unstoppable, implicating the haemorrhage of its human capital, a harbinger of more imminent and biblical collapse, in which Berlin is the case study and predestined emblem (Hertweck and Marot 2013). The progressive dissolution of the urban framework into an advanced state of ruin, with an explicit neo-romantic flavour, progressively leaving space for a brand new re-naturalised landscape, which the narration evokes as a mere, endless field of indetermination, to be crossed by new inter-modal flows and corresponding nomadic-evenemential lifestyles. From its infinite extension, distant fragments on urban landscape emerged, reciprocally estranged from the loss of contextual references, further removed of meaning and collective recognition after surviving demolition. In this way, the prophecy of the modern city coined by Abbé Laugier in his *Essay on Architecture* (1753) was renewed, where the revolutionary *Esprit* becomes the surprising actor of an *ante litteram* deurbanization through the “*tumulte de l'ensemble*”. While this model, brought forth by its most zealous interpreter, Rem Koolhaas, to the hypertrophic scalability of *Bigness* (Koolhaas 1995), seems to undeniably wither following an unprecedented financial crisis in the western world, of which the pandemic is an unexpected epilogue, a new urban horizon is slowly and timidly raising its head. Here, nevertheless, the compositional mechanism adopted in the theoretical project by Ungers and his collaborators, a scholarly revisiting of the archetype of the *tabula rasa*, sees a radical inversion in polarity. Upon the emergence of urban fragments (intended as full/positive) of “liquidity” in contextual relationships, which distinguishes the evoked Manifesto, the prompt combustion of the structure of the Plan generated by the “removal”

of unused areas and abandoned buildings takes precedence (read as empty/negative). The re-naturalized areas, intentionally taken from the system of rules that the “conforming city” exemplifies, become islands of resilience on the outskirts of the new urban archipelago. Returned to experimentation without the limits of the architectural project, these are the idle testimony of a “vindicated city” through well-aimed actions, challenging the stringency of the Plan in the background, *de facto* stripped of any value. Nevertheless, these are not “Indian reservations”, dedicated to managing social conflict, in the name of *post-modern* pluralism, through the variety of the cultural offering. On the contrary, they are innovative Living Labs for exploring new forms of urban life, potentially able to cultivate existing forms, destabilising internal limits. Oases of resilience in the contemporary urban desert, sterilised by the permanence of rules that are impermeable to any unplanned changes; areas for transformation made ideal through the preventive liberation from any form of social-historical conditioning, offered up to the exploration of new forms of living, to take root well beyond the *ex-lege* limits of the present.

Towards a new *habitus*

If the building type is the promise, and the preface, for the city to come, the meaningful reclamation of abandoned areas (that coronavirus multiplied, bringing the culture of excess of globalisation to its maximum expression) is the prototype, necessary for the preventive building of consent around the possibilities and opportunities of the former. It is only in the remote exile from any possible conventional form of *civitas* and *urbs*, finally, that the debate on the Autonomy Project (Avidar, Geerts, Grafe and Schoonderbeek 2003; Aureli 2016), from a human and disciplinary perspective, can find its fullest expression of original meaning, returning its limitless wealth of radicality, beyond any tiresome discursive and disciplinary rhetoric.

Notes

¹ The declaration was anticipated by the Prime Minister's Decree on 8 March 2020, which extended the preventive measures that were first applied only to the "red zones", the first outbreak sites, to all of Italy. The relative validity of the declaration will expire on 31 July 2020 unless an extension is ordered.

² This also refers to the restrictions imposed following the Twin Towers terrorist attack in New York, as well as to the measures introduced following the sub-prime mortgage scandal, with the goal of preventing the risk of a national default. With particular reference to the latter, it should be reiterated that the outgoing President George Bush, as well as Obama, both introduced and confirmed State aid packages to support the financial system, amounting to 800 billion dollars, surpassing the constitutional principle that excludes the intervention of Administrations in issues involving the financial markets.

³ In various ways this was the result of regional regulations that reformulated the spaces dedicated to housing, including terraces, balconies, porticoes, solarium and porches (considered as accessory spaces), as part of the comprehensive viable spaces in new buildings, not rendering them remunerative for the investor, considered equal to useful spaces in an urban sense.

⁴ Based on Law no. 24 of 2017 of the Emilia-Romagna Region.

⁵ In this sense, the renovation of the former railway station Ravone is a pilot project, on a national scale, where the Urban implementation Plan (PUA) - currently being drafted by the PERFORMA ARCHITETTURA+URBANISTICA studio - becomes an incremental process, where the temporary activation of the existing dismissed buildings is the foundational strategy for the implementation phase. The Plan, officially activated in May 2019 with the assignment of a supervisor, today constitutes an occasion for exploring, in advance, solutions that the PUA could implement, if considered to be successful and capable of building consent around the general process of enhancing value in the area. The prototype nature of the project is already confirmed by the decision taken by the Administration to modify the system of regulations to align the process for "temporary use", as defined in the new Urban Planning Regulations (RUE), enacted on 15 September 2020..

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Nicola Marzot (Imola, 1965), architect, graduated with honors from the Faculty of Architecture of Firenze with Mario Zaffagnini. He is a PhD in Building and Territorial Engineering at the DAPT, Faculty of Engineering of Bologna, obtaining the title in 2001 and PhD in Architectural Composition at the Department of Architecture, TU Delft, obtaining the title in 2014. He is currently Associate Professor in Architectural and Urban Composition at the Department of Architecture of the University of Ferrara and Assistant Professor at the Department of Architecture, Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, TU Delft. Among his publications: Nicola Marzot (curated by), Caniggia Gianfranco, Maffei Gian Luigi, *Interpreting Basic Buildings* (Florence, 2017); Tommaso Bonetti, Nicola Marzot, Micol Roversi Monaco, *Frammenti per un codice del riciclo urbano* (Rome, 2016); Franco Purini, Nicola Marzot and Livio Sacchi (edited by), *La città nuova. Italia-y-2026. Invito a Vema* (Bologna, 2006).