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TRAVELING FROM THE ORIENT TO THE WEST AND  
RETURN. CITIES, ARCHITECTURE AND RESTORATION.  
WRITINGS IN MEMORY OF PAOLO CUNEO

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**Traveling from the Orient to the West and return. Cities, Architecture and Restoration. Writings in memory of Paolo Cuneo**  
**Edited by Simonetta Ciranna and Paolo Girardelli**

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## Between Rome, Naples and Trieste. Corviale and Other Megastructures: New Places of Cultural Exchange and Insubordination in the Contemporary City

Since the second half of the twentieth century, Italy's urban organism, no longer "reducible to the treasure chest of the historic centre, continually opposed to the periphery as absence" (Terranova 1993, 351), has expanded through building episodes juxtaposed and opposed to the historic city, largely represented by public residential complexes inspired by the megastructural movement. Even today they are still true anti-cities, or rather cities within cities, with their own urban and architectural specificities and, over the years, they have undergone functional and spatial transformations, as well as social and cultural contaminations, through which an attempt has been made to adapt the rigid spaces of these complexes to the needs of the inhabitants, in many cases, designed to exclude subjectivity and individual choices for an abstract social and figurative utopia. Thanks to these interventions of socio-cultural contamination and

architectural transformation, the controversial spaces of Italian public residential complexes may become the new venues of cultural exchange and insubordination in the contemporary city.

Keywords:  
Megastructures; Italy; Transformation; Places of Exchange; Contemporary City

## 1. THE MEGASTRUCTURAL MOVEMENT: THE INTERNATIONAL AND THE ITALIAN CONTEXT, UTOPIA AND FAILURE

During the twentieth century and, in particular, in the wake of rationalist urban planning, the concept of order assumed a completely different meaning from that of the historic city, where, in general, it was identified with the level of homogeneity of the whole and, therefore, with the aesthetic principle that regulated the uniformity of the parts with respect to the whole. In the contemporary city, however, order loses its formal character and takes on an eminently functional value, identifying itself, essentially, with zoning, the rationalist principle that organises urban spaces (Belfiore, 2001). It is precisely from the rejection of this principle and the desire to put aside the architectural object on a traditional scale and favour the colossal, technological data and references to new symbols, however, that between the fifties and sixties the megastructural movement was born, offering design scale, intermediate between architectural and urban, as an instrument of control and growth of the contemporary city. Chronologically and socially coinciding with post-war reconstruction and the development of mass culture, industrial production and tertiary activities (De Fusco, 1967), the megastructural movement proposes large “frame structures” enclosing “all the functions of a city or part of it” [1]. Such urban macro-signs, therefore, within which ‘architectural objects’ (residences, offices, public services, etc.) are inserted and, generally, the utopian component is grafted onto the historical one: futuristic projects, in fact, clearly recall the historical precedents of various eras, from the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, an *ante-litteram* megastructure that, according to Banham, with “shops at the edges of the pedestrian street and, above, wonderful accommodation [it is] the purest example that exists in traditional architecture” (Banham, 1976), to the iconic Plan Obus for Algiers, the huge 15-km-long bridge-residence that in 1930 Le Corbusier threw like a grenade into the international urban context. Megastructural poetics travels, therefore, on the

history-utopia binomial, in which the relationship with the past, however, “does not always have national or stylistic specifications: it no longer looks at Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, etc., but at all past production as a common international heritage” (De Fusco, 1967, p. 89). Town design and the search for a new formal expression on an urban scale for the contemporary city, indeed find their first, complete application precisely in the project of the Ludovico Quaroni group for the CEP (Coordination of Popular Building) district in the Barene di San Giuliano at Mestre (1959).

Quaroni is among the protagonists of that “Roman School” of architecture for which, between Rationalism and early Neorealist ideas, the theme of residence had become central in the post-war period, also and above all thanks to the INA-Casa plan. The “frame buildings” proposed by Quaroni in Mestre, however, while drawing from the plan its realistic approach and interpretation of the spatiality of the historic Italian city, go beyond the theme of the neighbourhood on a traditional scale, transforming it into a territorial dimension rooted in the international megastructural context (fig. 1).

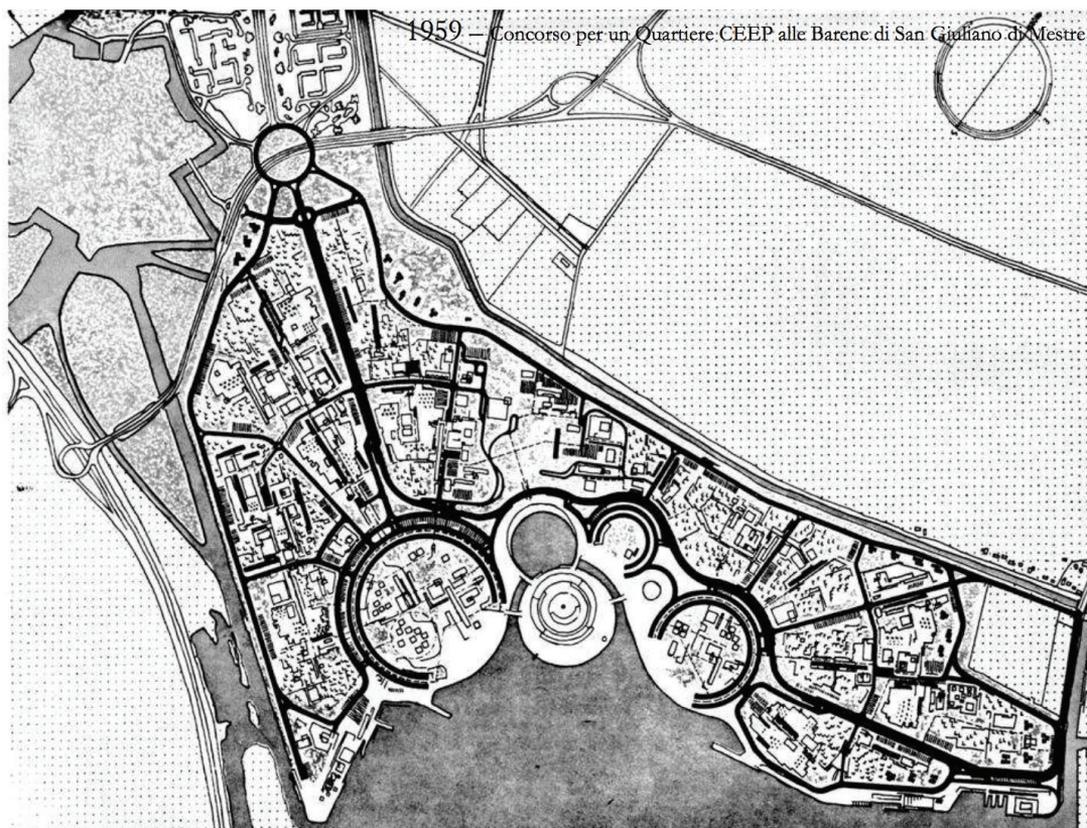


Fig. 1 - The project of the Ludovico Quaroni group for the CEP (Coordination of Popular Building) district in the Barene di San Giuliano at Mestre (1959).

On the other hand, the relationship with history and the Roman territory are also the starting point and premise of the famous one-kilometre megastructure built by the I.A.C.P. in the south-western suburbs of Rome, on a project by the group coordinated by Mario Fiorentino (1918-1982), another illustrious exponent of the Roman School of architecture: Zone Plan No. 61-Corviale, approved in 1972 and commenced in 1975, a piece of 'linear city' for 1,202 residences with services [2]. According to Fiorentino's idea, this "blade extending for one kilometre" (Zevi, 1983) (fig. 2), also firmly standing as an ideal barrier against the uneven and chaotic expansion that was devouring the suburbs and the Roman countryside, concentrates its evocative thrust precisely in its relationship with the landscape, recalling the eighteenth and nineteenth-century portrayals of the Roman area, furrowed by aqueducts and dotted with ruins (fig. 3). At the same time, the legendary mass of the building, which opposes the crushing suburbs, refers, according to Fiorentino himself, to other historical pre-existences of the Eternal City in which he observes, "The scale of the baroque and nineteenth-century city in which from S. Michele (300 ml) to the long sleeve of the Quirinale (250 ml), and more recently the side of Termini (500 ml) etc., referred to an urban structure reduced in size, but full of out-of-scale images" (Fiorentino, 1972).

On the other hand, from the north to the south of Italy, many public residential megastructures diversify the reference to architecture and the historic city with its different peculiarities.

Even the so-called 'Vele' (Sails), i.e. the seven buildings with sloping profile designed and built between 1962 and 1974 by the group coordinated by the architect Francesco (Franz) Di Salvo (Fusco 2003) at Scampia, in the northern suburbs of Naples (fig. 4), refer to Le Corbusier's housing

Fig. 2 - View of the Zone Plan n. 61-Corviale, the famous one-kilometer building built in Rome on a project by the group coordinated by Mario Fiorentino.

Fig. 3 - Adolfo Tommasi (1877). Tourists in the Roman countryside (Visit to the aqueduct).





Fig. 4 - Aerial view of Vele di Scampia, the seven buildings with a sloping profile designed and built between 1962 and 1974 by the group coordinated by the architect Francesco (Franz) Di Salvo.

Fig. 5 - The internal walkways of the Vele (above): in the intention of the designer, they are inspired by the historic center of Naples and, in particular, to its alleys (down).

unit and to the 'trestle' structures proposed by Kenzo Tange, but, in the designer's intention, they are also inspired by the historic centre of the Neapolitan town, characterised by lights and shadows and the particular relationship of its alleyways (fig. 5).

The evocation of the urban form of the founded towns, with square layout and the intersecting roads that cross the interior, on the other hand, is the historical-figurative reference of the Rozzoli Melara complex at Trieste (fig. 6), built between 1969 and 1982 commissioned by the IACP and designed by the group of architects led by Carlo Celli. Designed to accommodate 2,500 inhabitants, the Trieste 'quadrilateral' is, in fact, composed of two L-shaped bodies, one double the height of the other, crossed by a suspended *cardo* and *decumanus*, for connectivity and utilities, aimed at transcending the single building to become a small contemporary founded town. On the other hand, the coincidence of architectural and urban dimensions is made explicit by Celli himself,

who highlights how "the simultaneous presence of the public dimension and the private, the population density, the concentration of utilities, the presence of typically urban spaces (the square, the pedestrian street), the articulation of intended uses, the multi-functionality, the variety of internal and external spatial situations are some of the fundamental criteria that have made it possible to structure Rozzoli Melara as part of the city, thus finally rejecting the role of degraded periphery which has so often been assigned to popular interventions in Italy" (Celli, 1980).

The utopian intent of designers to produce self-sufficient city areas has, however, in many cases clashed with construction and management problems, transforming these complexes into new ghettos to be redeveloped.

The attempt to make Corviale a symbolic and figurative response to building speculation and to the 'sack of Rome', for example, was wrecked together with the construction company, which went bankrupt in 1982 leaving completed only the





Fig. 6 - Rozzol Melara complex in Trieste, built between 1969 and 1982 on commission of the IACP and designed by the group of architects led by Carlo Celli: an evocation of the urban form of the founded towns, with square layout and the intersecting roads that cross the interior.

residential part, object of the first assignments and squatters, which continued until the 1990s. After years of stagnation, finally in 2009 the controversial 'kilometre of cement' was the object of a first redevelopment project which, in addition to completing the part for public utilities, also saw the addition of structures for commercial activities and municipal offices and, from 2015, of proposals for transformation and a competition for projects (Montuori, 2018).

The 'Vele' case was even more unsuccessful, because the original planimetric distribution and functional freedom was distorted by the contractor, substituting the trestle structure designed by Riccardo Morandi with a traditional trilithic structure, in order to reduce costs. The livability of the buildings was also reduced by changes to the architectural project, including the transformation of the parabolic profile of the buildings into a sort of ziggurat and the closure of the façades towards the suspended distributor road, again effected for greater cost-effectiveness. Livability was then made drastically worse after allocation of housing to displaced persons from the 1980 earthquake, squatting and, above all, the dramatic presence in the neighbourhood of organised crime. In an attempt to "exorcise an evil as obscure as it is unknown, to be eradicated at another time and place" (Sicignano, 1998), between 1997 and 2003 Vele F, G and H were consequently pulled down and new residential buildings built to house the inhabitants of the demolished structures, which had only recently been completed (Santoro, 2018). As part of the 2016 suburb tender, the "Restart Scampia" programme was presented and approved, which, as a completion of the Vele-Scampia Urban Redevelopment Programme, approved in the mid-1990s, envisages the demolishing of Vele A, C and D, to be replaced by structures for public functions, services, sports facilities, and the redevelopment of Sail B, temporarily used for residence purposes and later for collective functions.

On the other hand, housing conditions, albeit less dramatic than the Neapolitan case, are also still problematic in the Rozzol Melara complex where,

of the 485 apartments, only 70% are actually inhabited, owing to the low technological level and comfort of the residential units. Furthermore, the central courtyard, far from becoming the ideal town square crossed by suspended pathways as conceived by Celli, risked becoming an abandoned and uncontrollable space, ideal for flourishing criminal activities, used by the inhabitants only for crossing, and without attractions for external users, owing also to the failure to open neighbourhood shops. Despite the inevitable problems of liveability and space management, today, however, Rozzol Melara hosts a fairly harmonious community. In fact, initiatives have started both to recover the outdoor spaces, by providing facilities and green to render the concrete urban square less hostile, and to promote the well-being and social cohesion of the inhabitants. The Habitat Microaree project, for example, was adopted in 1998 with an agreement between the Municipality, the Local Health Authority (ASL) and Ater (ex IACP), to improve housing conditions and also encourage communication and solidarity among the inhabitants.

On the other hand, despite the troubled construction incidents and unresolved problems of the neighbourhood, even the rigid spaces of Corviale, which exclude subjectivity and individual choices, have been transformed by the inhabitants and by various associations to adapt them to their needs and "(...) to pour new functions into the cavities of the building, selected to create that 'positive conflict' which is the authentic meaning of every true city" (Purini, 2001).

### 1. REQUALIFYING AND CONTAMINATING CONCRETE 'MONSTERS' WITH CULTURAL INSUBORDINATION

Paradoxically, therefore, especially in the new millennium, some of these complexes, controversial but 'significant', that mark the peripheries of many Italian cities, have become the stage of interesting experiments, contaminations and cultural insubordinations, often more difficult to operate in central urban areas. Examples of significant cultural contamination

attempts are the projects "Corviale Urban Lab" and "Albergo delle Piante", both hosted by the 'concrete kilometre' that ploughs through the Roman countryside.



The first one, a festival of music, theatre, dance, cinema, and art, was created precisely to respond to the lack of cultural provision for young people and the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, proposing artistic-cultural events involving them directly; the precise aim is to favour integration between different cultures, thanks to the contamination of different artistic languages. The eighth edition, organised in July 2019 was, in fact, focused primarily on the theme of migrants and all those excluded from social and cultural life, expressed by artistic works and cultural events hosted in the so-called "Mitreo di Corviale", a contemporary art centre set up in one of the unused public spaces.

Fig. 7 - The "Albergo delle Piante", a spontaneous plant nursery set up in 2015 as an event of street art in the Cavea di Corviale, or market square, by the artists Mimmo Rubino and Angelo Sabatiello with inmates from the local Psychiatric Residential Structure and members of the youth aggregation centre "Luogo Comune".

Fig. 8 - Evocative sketch of the "Albergo delle Piante" project.



Events ranged from screenings of the short film "Frontiera" by Alessandro Di Gregorio, winner of the David di Donatello, and those of MigrArti, to the theatrical performances of Radio Ghetto and Lampedusa Beach; from the exhibition of Stefano Maria Girardi's paintings to readings of poems by the "Movement for the Emancipation of Poetry". The "Albergo delle Piante", on the other hand, is a spontaneous plant nursery set up in 2015 as an event of street art in the Cavea di Corviale, or market square, by the artists Mimmo Rubino and Angelo Sabatiello with inmates from the local Psychiatric Residential Structure and members of the youth aggregation centre "Luogo Comune", an interesting initiative aimed at actively involving normally gifted young people and inhabitants of the neighbourhood, but also people with psychiatric problems, with the aim of total integration of diversity of any kind (figs. 7-8).

With the same laudable requalification objectives, pursued not only through architectural interventions but also by means of artistic and cultural initiatives, the Melart association, founded in 2006 as an artistic collective within the Rozzol Melara, has promoted and created street art works, for the purpose of helping the inhabitants, especially young people, to identify with the place, making it more livable and transforming its aesthetics. Since 2010, therefore, thanks to the R.A.S.C. (Artistic Redevelopment of Built Space) for urban decoration in the province of Trieste, young artists have also revived the large grey corridors of the Ater complex, enlivening it with colourful murals covering around 1,000 square metres (fig.9). The project, fully shared by the inhabitants, who asked the association to decorate any new degraded spaces, is another interesting operation of cultural insubordination, which has strengthened the inhabitants' sense of identity and belonging, also aiming to bring into the complex and into the suburbs of Trieste an alternative artistic tourism. For this purpose, in fact, the association has mapped not only the murals of the ATER complex but also those present in other areas of the city, to create a real circuit which, as in other European cities, could be complementary to classic tourist routes (Masè, 2020).



Fig. 9 - One of the murals made in the Rozzol Melara complex by the Melart association with the purpose of helping the inhabitants, especially young people, to identify with the place, making it more liveable and transforming its aesthetics.

The successful artistic redevelopment of the Trieste complex recalls the equally interesting one recently carried out between the centre and suburbs of Naples, from the historic Forcella district to that of Ponticelli up to the gates of the Scampia itself (fig.10), in which street art was chosen to start regeneration processes that are not only urban, but also and above all social, transforming degraded public spaces into real 'cultural garrisons' in which to promote alternative tourism (Palermo, 2017). This socio-cultural requalification strategy, rather than being physical, differs completely from the one that saw the almost total demolition of the Vele which, beyond any

effectiveness, yet to be verified, could also be a negative signal, especially in a Region like Campania, where there is a high percentage of illegal construction.

Even today many of these public residential complexes are still, of course, frontier areas, suspended between light and shadow and with myriad problems. However, the positive outcome of some of these spontaneous or institutional social and artistic 'contamination' interventions show how, subjected to "cautious urban renewal" (Pfothenauer, 2002), thanks also to their recognisability, they could become valuable places of cultural exchange and insubordination in the chaotic and anonymous contemporary suburbs.



Fig. 10 - Murals depicting Pier Paolo Pasolini and Angela Davis made by the Neapolitan street artist of Dutch origins Agor Jorit at the exit of the Piscinola metro station, towards Scampia.

NOTE

[1] Definition substantially emerging from the contribution of Banham (Banham, 1976), but in turn inspired by that of Fumihiko Maki (Maki 1964) and the more articulated one by Ralph Wilcoxon (Wilcoxon, 1968).

[2] "(...) a single building complex that develops continuously for the length of about 1 km and that, although it can be considered from

a merely physical point of view, as just one gigantic building, in reality contains and expresses also in its architecture the complexity and richness of relationships proper to the city (...). It is therefore not only "longer" than a traditional house, it is a one-kilometre system, 200 meters wide, with highly integrated services and residences, distinct vehicular and pedestrian paths, designed with deliberate tendentiousness" (Fiorentino, 1972)

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