

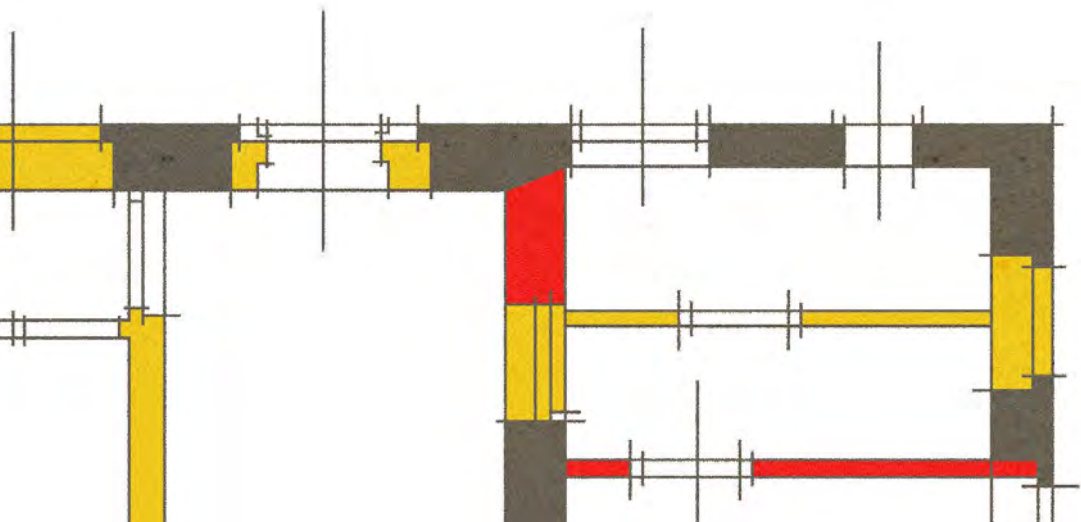
CONSERVATION



DEMOLITION

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Editors





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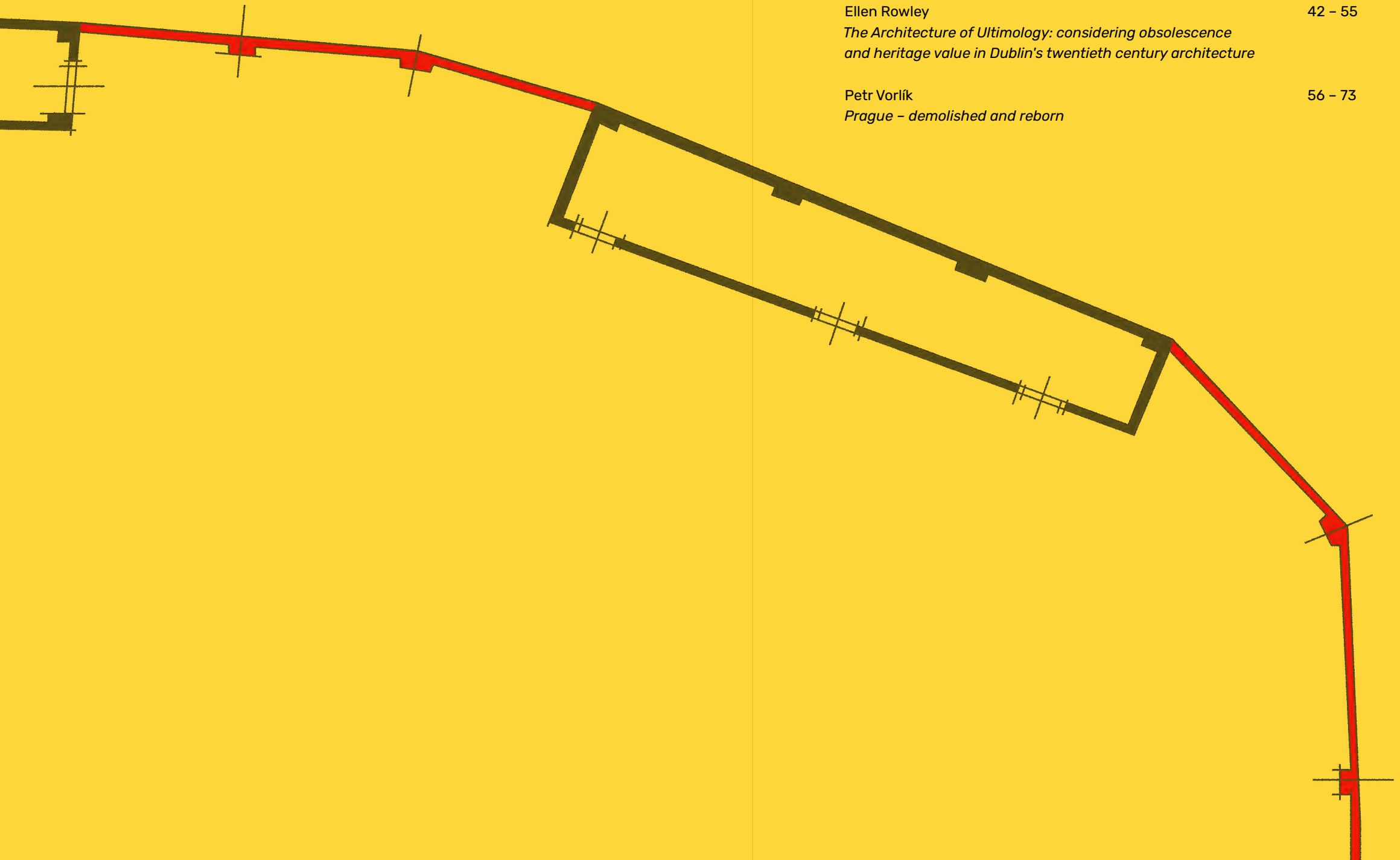
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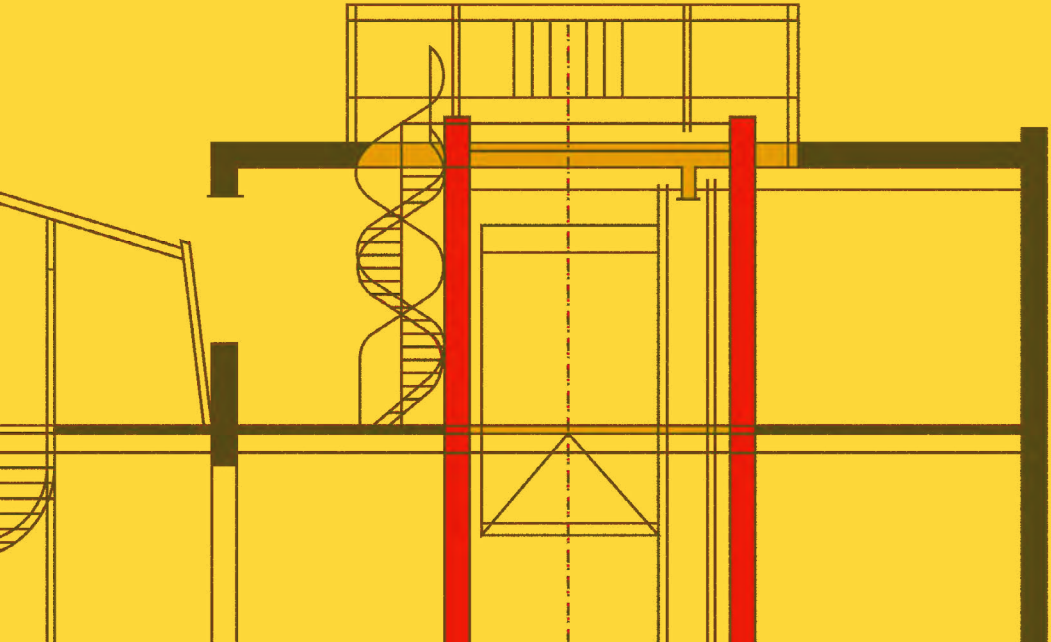
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The false antagonism between matter and memory

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Introduction

Conservation and demolition are two opposite actions that usually refer to the materiality of architecture. But one could ask whether preserving the matter is always an unshakable guarantee for the sense of places and, vice versa, whether demolition actions are, sometimes, indispensable sacrifices for its transmission. But one could also ask if improper actions can be comparable, in many ways, to real demolition actions, denying the intangible values that each architecture implies. In other words, at a time when the reuse of pre-existing architectures becomes an obligatory step to guarantee their protection, the choice of inappropriate functions, as well as design solutions aimed at making spectacular buildings, are, for example, actions that are not necessarily destructive from a physical point of view, but with deleterious effects due to their intangible values, which are not always temporary.

Essential questions about the intervention on the historical heritage are involved, which theory and practice have been questioning for a long time: what are the values that we recognize today as constituting the architecture that we want to preserve; which of these, although not intrinsic to the “architecture”, represent a necessary condition for its conservation; finally, what effects do the incorrect evaluation of these demands have and how long do they apply.

As emerged during the Prague meeting, precisely in the session dedicated to *Contemporary versus traditional technologies and approaches*, the demolition objectives involve both the tangible sphere – defined both by the “object” (i.e. landscapes, infrastructures, urban fabric, monuments, historical buildings, industrial areas, rural architectures, but also non-places, ...), as well as by the “built matter” (i.e. structures, facades, partitions, decorations, skin, frames, technical installations, ...) – as much as the immaterial sphere, that is the memory values, often compromised by operations of transformation, addition or cancellation.

In fact, as is known, every architecture bears intangible characters: cultural, historical, symbolic meanings that, just like the physical ones, the project should interpret, preserve and enhance. Among other categories, the one including the places of pain seems to be of particular interest, because its memories are strongly linked to intangible elements which, through the stimulation of strong images and sensations, can prevail over the very concreteness of the architectural space. Places that are at the centre of opposing practices, oscillating between adaptive reuses aimed at neutralizing controversial memories and inverse practices of grotesque

exaltation of past traces, both of them dangerous attitudes that trivialize and offend the sense of places.

Starting from these assumptions, we intend to reflect on the large urban buildings created for hosting functions related to the theme of pain, such as prisons, hospitals, asylums, as well as on structures related to production and the mining industry, and to evaluate how to act on them, during the adaptation process, through actions mindful of the original “spirit” of the places.

«Only matter is restored»?

Conservation and design between material and immaterial values

The relationship between material and immaterial components is an issue that has always involved the theory of architecture, gaining a particularly relevant position in the specific reflection on architectural pre-existences.

The history of restoration thought develops with the identification of the values that buildings bear, meant as generic categories of meaning to which the single case can be attributed, whose recognition as a work of art (Brandi 2000: 5)¹ or historical object-context (Fancelli 2010: 44)² is the premise of the restoration itself. These values are by their very nature intangible: social products (Reichlin 2011: 13–15)³, abstractions that can or cannot be attributed to places and architectures, giving them the right to be protected.

But, if it is true that values are, by definition, intangible, it is also true that in architecture their relationship with matter has relevance, and their weight varies according to the reference cultural paradigms.

About this topic, two of the many perspectives can be identified as fundamental and recurrent. On the one hand, with the prevalence of the aesthetic-artistic nature, the matter is seen as a *medium* through which the image of the building is spread, according to a position that goes through the history of restoration thought, from Viollet-Le-Duc to Brandi (Brandi 2000: 6), with different results that justify, depending on the case, the stylistic or the critical substitution, and even the partial and premeditated loss of substance (Marconi 1990).⁴ On the other, the second perspective brings us back to the historical aspect, in which materiality is a concrete testimony handed down from the past to countless current days, as “fragment and accumulation of stratified memories” (Gregotti 2019: 61). If in the first stance, the matter was the ‘medium’, just as an accidental object of preservation care, in the second position it is the ‘goal’ (although not the only one) of conservation, an entity of interest in itself and of itself. This is a position of a prolific trend that moves from the age value of Riegl (Riegl 1990) to pure conservation.

Different operative experiences show, however, how these approaches do not always respond to the complexity of the relationship with architectural pre-existences. One can think, for example, of the construction of the World Trade Center Memorial in New York. Although it is hardly comparable to historical architecture, on the eve of the reconstruction, a spontaneous urge to preserve the collective memory quickly emerged, protecting the area from disrespectful functions and property speculation, as though

it was an architectural pre-existence; but in the desolate *tabula rasa* of Ground Zero, deprived of any residual historical materiality except for the background of the city, conservation could only mean preserving the lack of existing matter and commemorating its absence. In such a situation, respect for the memories decided the outcome: instead of freezing the void or realising nostalgic reconstructions, by maintaining volumes – left by the “decimated” towers – and through the power of a public park to bring the city back to life. This involvement recalls the intervention in Hiroshima, destroyed by the atomic bomb, as is well known, through the unusual choice, in the oriental context, of a pure conservation for the building known as “Dome” (Morezzi 2010).

These are extreme examples, but which attest how factors that are not obvious, not absolutely determinable from the physical characteristics of the places, can guide not only the project, but even the identification of what historical matter actually is.

At the same time, preserving the matter does not necessarily mean preserving the values it bears⁵ (Musso 2010: 28), and a building that remains frozen in its physical and formal dimension is far from what could be called architecture, if in that dimension it is not able to accept, through its modification, the dynamic flow of life⁶ (Moneo 1999: 154–155).

Pane, referring to the post-war reconstruction of Warsaw, already had put aside his «although valid theories»⁷ (Pane 1987: 171) on authenticity, to affirm that the re-making of its historic centre – stylistic and in the spirit of *façadisme* – could be understood as a trusted companion of a much more important internal reconstruction⁸ (Pane 1987: 137–138); a prefiguration of that concept of the psychological instance (Giannattasio 2010; Giannattasio 2017) which he further developed later, influenced through exchanges with the exponents of the Jungian school of Naples. Among these, the psychoanalyst and scholar Aldo Carotenuto explains that, according to Jung, the surrounding material is the first place on which the individual projects the psyche (Carotenuto 1978), to the extent that the quality of the environment determines the level of inner well-being of those who live there. For this reason mankind is led to look for vestiges of the past, because, by finding them, it finds itself, and by preserving them, preserving itself.

The matter that Carotenuto mentions perhaps corresponds with the “architect’s materials” defined by Gregotti (Gregotti 2019: 61),⁹ as a tangible and intangible patchwork that indirectly testifies to human presence, rather than with the physical substance per se. And, if the instinctive care that is committed for some buildings overlooks shared characteristics of artistry or objective gatherings of historical information, it is because a particular psychological bond with people prevails.

The in-depth study of the topic elevates the understanding of historical architectures, to protect them and impart their meanings. Furthermore, the lack of awareness of these aspects constitutes a potential risk to the heritage: confused interventions regarding the identification of the values of the building risk weakening the relationship between architecture and users, causing estrangement, disuse and, therefore, abandonment. In any case, it is a project failure, with dispersal of cultural and economic resources.

Critical places: the buildings of pain

These processes, generically mentioned, can acquire different features, depending on the values involved and, in some cases, the structure of the contexts of intervention, in such a way that one can speculatively posit a taxonomy of critical places in relation to the specific character of the intangible parts.

Some architectures become places of a common identity because they are silent witnesses of specific events or a prolonged piece of history of a community. In respect of the age value that they bear, these buildings are asked to always resemble themselves, to maintain a recognisable outline, showing an unchanging identity like that of the groups that recognise themselves in it.

This intent can result in restorative interventions, as in the well-known stylistic reconstruction of the Campanile di San Marco by Gaetano Moretti, or of pure conservation, as for the regeneration of the Castel Firmiano by Werner Tscholl. These are solutions which are very different from the operational point of view, but comparable in terms of the adhesion to a presumed authenticity with which people seem to be in a positive concert and harmony.

Non-linear dynamics between fruition and project on architectural pre-existence can then be created in places of which memories are in dissonance with the community of users that is particularly engaged with them because they are characterized by aspects perceived as negative. The identity of these contexts – for which the definition of “places of pain” is proposed – is strictly related to painful and traumatic events. These can be sudden and unexpected events, such as, for example, the contexts of conflicts or cataclysms, or at another level, unforeseen collateral discomforts, such as occurs in industrial heritage, or they can be circumstances already written in the fate of those architectures, because they are intrinsically linked to the functions they were called to play, as with hospitals, asylums, prisons, etc.

These latter cases are of exceptional interest for the argument that is presented here: those architectures are the translation into space of the specific forms of life (Ottolini 1993: 3)¹⁰ that were intended to host, as the reification of the desired characters of segregation, concealment, isolation and punishment in urban, typological and technical terms.

These are places born consciously and intentionally to accommodate different forms of deviant behaviour and which have been conceived for this purpose, so that for their efficiency peculiar strategies of urban insertion and typological and technical models have been idealised. In the end, places that have long performed that function within cities and whose toponyms have become, in colloquial language, synonymous with deviance.

Largely abandoned due to specific regulations or simple obsolescence, today these places offer themselves as articulated contexts, disconnected from urban relationships and yet central, encapsulated in the city with their burden of fascination.

The controversial memories concentrated in these areas overturn the usual perspectives on the relationship with the materiality of architecture, leading us to ask how many of the original intentions of use and meaning are now legible in the concreteness

of the building, in the typological elements, in the relationships with the city and, in contrast, how much the conservation of matter has protected the transmission of the intangible values. At the same time, reflecting on the increasingly frequent adaptive reuse tendencies, aimed at enhancing the macabre characters of these places, it is necessary to ask what are the right ways for intangible memories to be transferred into the contemporary city in functional and meaningful terms, through contemporary reworking and still respectful of some of the darkest pages of the collective history.

Asking these questions means looking at the knowledge of the heritage with new eyes, consequently modifying the research agendas that concern it, with the aim of creating effective and conscious tools for the project.

Indeed, if the places of pain have not failed to stimulate scientific investigations and design experimentations, there are few developed research lines: the works of the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche (Luciani et al. 1999) or the most recent Project of Relevant National Interest (PRIN) on mental asylum complexes (PRIN 2008), or the more concise survey of Scarcella and Di Croce on Italian prisons (Scarcella, Di Croce 2001), certainly had the extraordinary value of bringing about recognition of this kind of buildings in Italy, providing an in-depth report of the historical, geographical and taxonomic characteristics. But the limited number of studies, combined with the need to build a cognitive framework that is practically unprecedented, really have inevitably reduced the possibility to dig for the themes of design; for example, there are no studies which critically collect and analyse the reuse practices carried out, nor works investigating the relationship that these practices have forged with the pre-existing intangible values; and if there is an appropriate repertoire of practices and studies on single complexes or limited territorial systems, this constitutes a set of autonomous initiatives, uncoordinated in time and space.

In this scenario, however, it is comforting that some initiatives have tried to critically systematise the topic on the historical hospital type (Cherchi 2016), while others begin to reflect on the renewal of the prison type starting from an updated reading of the historical models.¹¹

Cases of reuse, between matter and memory

Just a few examples can suggest how, without physical demolitions, one can mortify intangible characters and, in contrast, favour the transmission of the meanings of places, while removing historical matter.

The reuse of asylums in Italy offers multiple causes for reflection: the continuity of sanitary use until the time of disposal¹² has favoured, in many cases, the constant maintenance of the complexes, protecting them from damaging forms of degradation. However, it built a mendacious continuity of meaning that subtly distorted the sense of places. Even the nineteenth-century Provincial Neuropsychiatric Hospital of Bergamo, among the many, was assigned to two local health companies after the disposal, and its spaces were fragmented into medical laboratories, clinics, residential structures for palliative care, executive and administrative offices: all different uses that require different spatial structures but all hosted in what were once the twin pavilions for in-

ternment. (Fig. 1) The insertion of functions that are not appropriate with the typological and organisational characteristics is a threat not only when it requires destructive adaptation interventions but, in general, when it also constitutes an alteration of the correct spatial interpretation, using settlement forms in contrast with the configuration of the architecture. The solution is an adaptive strategy determined by contingencies rather than a weighted design vision, and where it is not accompanied even by a deliberate “denial” of the characteristics of urban isolation, so that the complex does not seem to redeem itself, either in the mending with the city.

The reuse of the former Charles Street prison in Boston, now transformed into the luxury Liberty hotel,¹³ (Fig. 2) is representative, in its way. The prison, built-in 1851 based on the project by Gridley James Fox Bryant, operated for over a century, up to its disposal and acquisition by the Massachusetts General Hospital, which was in favour of a collaboration between the appointed designers and the experts from the local preservation bodies. At a first sight, the choices perhaps have the proper look of a respectful conservation, with the re-proposal of nineteenth-century solutions proposed by Bryant, some few demolitions and even the exaltation of the characteristics of the prison space (doors, bars, balconies). Everything had, moreover, the approval of the bodies in charge of heritage protection. But for those who frequent the Liberty hotel today, it appears as a product wrapped up in a bow to offer an exciting and glossy taste of detention to hotel guests. This condition does not fail to create discomfort in some people and in general, trivialises and mortifies the prison stories of suffragettes, civil rights leaders, more or less common criminals who in those places have consumed a piece of their lives.

The case of the former military prison of Metelkova in Ljubljana is quite different. (Fig. 3) Built during the administration of the Habsburg empire and then famous for the incarcerations of Tito's opponents, after the disposal, it was disputed between several entities, in particular a committee that arose for its enhancement and a part of the population that wanted to ‘cathartically’ demolish it, as a symbol of the dictatorship. The one that prevailed was the committee which, supported by local artists, promoted a bottom-up intervention, resulting in a multifunctional space with a hostel, a multi-cultural centre and some clubs. The current Youth Hostel Celica has twenty cells on the first floor, which are all different thanks to the involvement of eighty artists, and additional multiple rooms obtained from the building's attic. The historical matter has been partly sacrificed to adapt it to the accommodating functions, while the external facades and many interiors are completely altered by the presence of graffiti and other details. Yet, one can have the impression that this sacrifice gives back something precious in exchange: if in Bergamo, by avoiding the transformation, we also avoided any choice between acceptance and denial of the sense of place, in Ljubljana the choice to operate actively generates a meeting space that does not humiliate the prison history, but rather absorbs it in contemporary terms.

The Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford has been reused with less dramatic meanings and more careful design choices. The eighteenth-century main building, the first nucleus of a larger hospital complex active until 2006, was transformed in 2012 into the



Fig. 1) Building of the former padiglione dei Tranquilli, now headquarter of the socio-educational centre, the Local Health Company rehabilitation centre and the dialysis assistance centre of the Ospedali riuniti, seen from inside the courtyard. Bergamo, Italy. (Archivio fotografico ASST Papa Giovanni XXIII, 2021)



Fig. 2) Breakfast room in the Liberty Hotel in Boston, USA. (photo Caterina Giannattasio 2015)



Fig. 3) Interior of one of the rooms of the Youth Hostel Celica, created in the cells of the former prison. Ljubljana, Slovenia. (<[flickr.com/photos/46703063@N00/5313837616/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/46703063@N00/5313837616/)>, photo Mario T 2010)



Fig. 4) Main front of the Radcliffe Infirmary after the adaptation work. Oxford, UK. (<[flickr.com/photos/189660849@N06/50205003517/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/189660849@N06/50205003517/)>, photo Samuel Anon 2020)

new Radcliffe Humanities building, a university facility that now houses the faculty of philosophy, offices and a library. (Fig. 4) In over two centuries of nosocomial activity, the original architecture has been transfigured by juxtapositions and extensions. The project makes a radical selection of the elements worthy of conservation, choosing to bring out the eighteenth-century element in its rational purity, at the expense of almost all subsequent stratifications, the only exception being the chapel built-in 1865. Not only incongruous surfaces were demolished, but also additions which, although after the first configuration, had become part of the architectural palimpsest, and so becoming in turn, historical matter. Eliminating them was a bold choice, in many ways controversial, but with a clear spatial intent: to return the hospital architecture as originally conceived to fully restore its original sense. Such a radical approach was however accompanied by minimal modifications to the interiors, with the demolition of incongruous partitions, the re-organisation and the re-composition of the connections between the parts. In this way, the elimination of historical matter has favoured the recognition of the eighteenth-century hospital, paradoxically hindered by the interventions that took place over the centuries to improve its functions.

Concerning industrial buildings, the cases of reuse, as is known, are numerous, and follow practices substantially related to adaptive reuse. Concerning this typology, the studies carried out in the Czech context appear to be particularly significant (Fragner, B., Valchářová, V. 2014). Among these, it is interesting to recall the case of the Vnitroblok Multifunctional Space in Prague, object of a reuse project, following a minimal approach. Destined to be demolished, new uses have been provided in the factory, focused on art, culture and sociality. (Fig. 5) Definitely, it is an operation through which it has been possible to return the factory to the city, but at the same time not to lose track of its story, preserving all the layers and signs that time has left on it.

Annotations for a compresence of memory and matter

In the albeit solid tradition relating to the sense of historical matter, there are still partially unexplored tendencies, the contents of which are not without consequences on design.

The ability of historical architecture to become living matter in the contemporary world is not only a specific challenge, but it is also the very condition of their survival, both as a physical and formal substance, and as a deposit of social, cultural and ethical meanings.

The complexity of these contexts is a constant source of questions, which requires the review and verification, continuously and courageously, of the theoretical principles on which the disciplines of Architecture have been based.

The case of the buildings of pain emerges with particular evidence for different reasons: the load of fascination they bring interacts with the materiality of the places and the people who use them giving unexpected outcomes, in a mix of attraction and repulsion that is even more acute given the presence that these systems assume according to their position and size within the cities.

They need an unconventional reading, which does not derive from regulatory instructions that do not take into account the identity of places, nor fall under the allure of dark tourism and the commodification of pain, but that looks instead at these architectures with a view to their civil re-signification.

If physical demolition is an extreme ratio, it can perhaps be understood when it allows one to highlight appropriation practices by communities, for which architecture is born but which too often is a marginal player in reuse processes.

Notes

1 «Any behaviour towards the work of art, including the restoration project, depends on whether or not the work of art has been recognized as a work of art.»

2 «In short, the restoration itself means handing down to the future what, positive or negative - in its values or negative values - is considered significant from the past. At the same time, such an intervention represents the methodological moment of the potential, vivid recognition, *in mediam rem*, of the historical and possibly aesthetic object-context.»

3 The contribution proposes reflections on heritage and value attribution, through the work of the sociologist Nathalie Heinich.

4 Indeed, Paolo Marconi recognises that architecture has, in itself, the loss of a part of historical matter for its survival, that are the so-called sacrifice surfaces - such as mortars, plasters, paintings - which, due to periodic consumption and therefore renovation or replacement, protect the structural material by allowing it to be transmitted.

A position that stands in an explicit contrast with the approaches of «idealistic historical legacy» which want the acceptance of the work as consigned by the ageing, and which rather respects the «philosophy of the construction and maintenance of the buildings, from the ancient times to the present day», with the ultimate purpose of restoring the formal profile of the architecture, given that the upkeep of these surfaces preserves its «aesthetic configuration», its «charge of artistic significance» (Marconi 1990: XVI).

5 As suggested for example in Musso 2010: «Every conscious project is born from the knowledge of its object and, if it wants to "preserve", with the material, also the values that the architectural artefact holds, it must first of all be able to recognize, inventory and spread the data that describe its consistency and current conditions».

6 Moneo says: «Sometimes one can insist on the rigorous conservation of a building, but this, in a certain sense, means that the building is dead, that its life, perhaps because of right and recognizable reasons, has been violently stopped. I agree with the considerations that Ruskin makes in the Lamp of Memory, when he explains his ideas on restoration and the problems that derive from it. He says that a lifeless building ceases to be a building and turns into another type of object. ... The life of the buildings is based on their architecture, on the permanence of their most characteristic formal features, and although it may seem like a paradox, it is this permanence that allows one to appreciate its changes. Respect for the architectural identity of a building is what makes its change possible, what protects its life».

7 «... for reasons that went beyond our valid theories, it happened that the face of the ancient centre of Warsaw was recreated as it was before the Nazi destruction since the meaning it had for the Polish nation could not be replaced and compensated by what modern architecture would have been able to offer».

8 «... the passionate care that the Polish restorers, supported by the unanimous popular sentiment, have placed and are still putting in giving to the ruins of Warsaw, Poznań and Gdansk the look of the past, finds its full justification as a denial of the same infamous reasons for which the destruction had been meticulously perpetrated; and if anyone will object that these reasons are extraneous to those inherent in our work, I will answer him that he is wrong, and indeed I will say something more: that our current crisis of orientation arises precisely from passive obedience to exclusively economic and functional programs, that we, architects and scholars, have not contributed to determining ...».

9 «The whole materiality of the existing world, its items, beliefs, notions, ideologies, considered for human living as "being of mankind on earth"».

10 About this relationship, read in particular what retraced by Ottolini regarding form and meaning in architecture: «Architecture is the harmonious construction of the place where human life takes place and where human life, thanks to a particular translation in its material forms, becomes present. From this definition it is deduced that architecture is not a simple construction, a technical work guided by dominant functionality needs, which are indifferent, or contradictory, compared to its beauty; on the other hand, being a construction, it cannot even be seen as a metaphor for construction. Indeed, it does have a metaphorical content incorporated in its materials, as it is proper to every artistic product (also "conceptual" as we will see), but it concerns human life, its actions and emotions, and this alone makes it significant».

11 An interesting experience, in this sense, is the Carcerrario website (<https://carcerrario.wixsite.com>) that collects the results of Agati, Fiorentino, Olcuire 2013.

12 The fate of disused asylums in Italy was defined by the law of 13 May 1978, n. 180, rule of "voluntary and compulsory health checks and treatments", the so-called "Legge Basaglia Law", which established the demobilisation of the original uses and the subsequent transfer of the assets to the Local Health Units (USL) which would shortly be established; the USLs should have primarily assigned them to substitute forms of psychiatric assistance, even if not as a location, at least to obtain the necessary economies for the health service. Almost automatically the "second life" of the mental asylum complexes was thus determined, as a matter of fact, today they have become, for the most part, USLs' offices.

13 For the reuse of historical prisons, an interesting repertoire is available in Musanti 2018.

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Fig. 5) Vnitroblock Multifunctional Space in Holešovice district after the reuse project. Prague, Czech Republic. (photo Caterina Giannattasio 2019)