



# Building on the Build. Unfinished Architecture and Confiscated Property as New Palimpsesto for the Contemporary Architecture

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## Abstract

*The co-presence of multiple temporalities opens a narrative space that includes the biography of each object, the context of its reuse, the intentions of those who wanted it and its reception. The materiality of objects, with the traces they bear of their events, welds these aspects together more and better than the eloquence of a text or the impact of a museum exhibition». Over time, the designer has taken on the role of 'defuser' of bad practices that have changed the appearance of places through dynamics that have escaped the action of even the most attentive scholars of social and urban practices. The need emerged to ask we how to change course with respect to the multitude of anonymous, abandoned and unfinished spaces precisely because of the intrinsic potential of what has emerged as a residue, but which contains within itself all the potential of the repertoire. As George Simmel wrote in his essay dedicated to Auguste Rodin when speaking of what appears unfinished, «If there were some truth in the theory according to which the user must repeat the creative process within himself, this could not happen more energetically than when the imagination of spectator must complete what is unfinished, transferring into him the productive movement between the work as it appears and what should be its final effect». In fact, precisely in what is crystallized in time, the potential of the possible is present, the vision of a future that can come true in the eyes of the beholder. Pre-existence presents itself as Mary Shelley's Frankenstein where «you can give shape to dark and amorphous substances, but you cannot give birth to the substance itself». This research aims to analyse the methods of good practices of designing with pre-existence, useful tools for imagining a new and poetic way of "building on the built".*

**Keywords:** unfinished; reuse; waste; recovery

## 1. Introduction

The history of the contemporary panorama offers us an infinite series of unfinished elements, remains of corrupted “maison domi-ino”, equally distributed throughout the world. Considered as a symbol of a failure of the modern building system, they are nothing but new typologies of spontaneous architecture that have lost their poetics. When the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) was formed in 2009, the aim of the research was the stratigraphic analysis of the soil as a condition for discovering human action on the earth. The group also gave a start date to the Anthropocene era, a phase that corresponds to the day of the nuclear test on Hiroshima ([1] Perasso, 2015), July 16, 1945. The study brought to light a new terminology that became “popular” with Nobel Prize winner Paul J. Crutzen who spoke of the true end of the Holocene era ([2] Crutzen, Stoermer, 2000) and the determination of a condition in which human action had become central to the composition of the soil itself. In the architectural field, the Maison Dom-ino, matrix of the contemporary, has delivered to the landscape a quantity of waste and demolition materials that remains one of the critical issues of the contemporary. If on the one hand the human fabric on which the present is based is determined by ruins of the past that crystallize our origins, on the other hand the “modern” has presented new typologies of remains that have defined the “[...] rupture of the historical congruence between trace and fabric, in favor of an incoherent and unregulated distribution of buildings in competition with each other ([3] Cannata, 2020)”. Having said all this, it is necessary to reflect on these architectures that seem to derive from actions that we can define as primary, the result of the need for living. However, if we think of the spontaneous architectures so loved by Bernard Rudofsky that appeared to derive only from necessity, we realize that by analyzing that very “naturalness” theories emerge that came precisely from the characteristics of the place, from the social and cultural system. It is therefore not at all true that what we consider spontaneous is only the result of uncodified actions. In reality, the opposite is true. The much-derided architectures of the distracted city are nothing other than the result of a precise theory of the need for living that, with its actions, has inevitably corrupted a system and invaded the contemporary panorama of wrecks that declare an error in understanding the housing system. For this reason the project needs a new theory of reuse that unmask the error and stages a new intervention on the pre-existences of the present.



Fig. 1. Empire of dust, digital collage, Concetta Tavoletta, 2024

## 2. Methods

The practice of reuse is, in fact, a millenary practice, it has allowed a consumption of raw materials that seemed manageable and, we can say, even sustainable but the real leap in scale, what has contributed significantly to the loss of management of the phenomenon, has been the demographic growth. Millions of people have migrated to every part of the world and each geography has managed to respond differently to this phenomenon. What has resulted is a real intoxication of the housing heritage that has delivered into our hands infinite toxins in the built territory. If the Modern has given us the possibility of rapidly building new housing also with an interesting economic response, the ruin of the Modern itself has produced many concrete works that inevitably lead to energy and environmental problems. This work tries to tell of the happy ways of reusing the unfinished trying to give a second life to architectures that had lost all hope. The examples put into the system allow a reading as a phenomenon that is not limited to a cataloging of possibilities, but to a proactive approach that, aiming for zero demolition, tries, however, to read what really contains the possibility of being reread as a space with a new possibility.



Fig. 2. The former IPAM sugar factory, 2023, ph. Luigi Arcopinto

The paradigm of the function of architecture is changing and the project must be placed in a dialoguing manner with respect to the possibility of an architecture to be many more things than what it was imagined for. We find ourselves faced with numerous layers of time to be reworked, to which to give a new meaning, just as Gio Ponti had us imagine by describing the architectural skeleton as a hypothesis of a possible beauty, a puzzle to be reconstructed and reinterpreted through numerous actions that will depend on the sensitivity of the author and on how the author himself is inclined to a utopian look. All this does not place the architect as a dreamer but as someone who can deliver a changeable vision that does not find its identity only in authorship but in making the work itself variable, just as the past has taught us. Digging into the pre-existence, appropriating parts, rising above it, enveloping it are actions of renewal that can save what appears to be an emergency, give it new life and gently accompany the remains and parts towards a new history. It is important to consider that the changes in our society will not stop today, over time new needs will arise and an elastic architecture, ready to be reworked with small actions is a possibility that architecture cannot decide to lose. "Here and now" is no longer an expression of our time but "it is already tomorrow" is what architecture must aim for, being something else at the very moment in which it is imagined, seeking a new form of eternity that we do not find in "firmitas" understood with the traditional exception of the term but in the evolution of form and function itself, without fear.

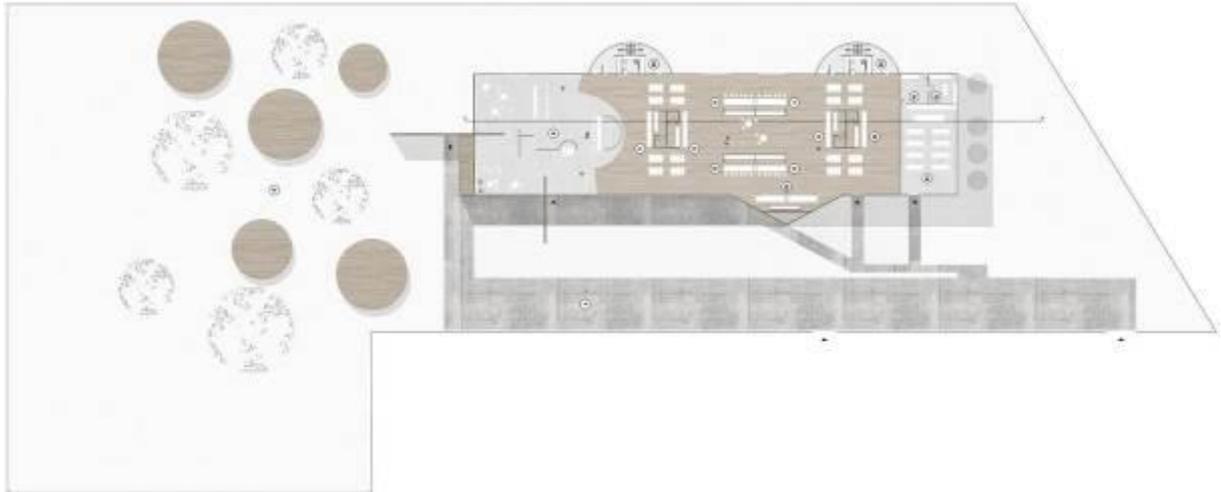


Fig. 3. Plan of the project hypothesis, 2023, by Giovanni Loffredo, Sabato Malangone and Mariapia Verde

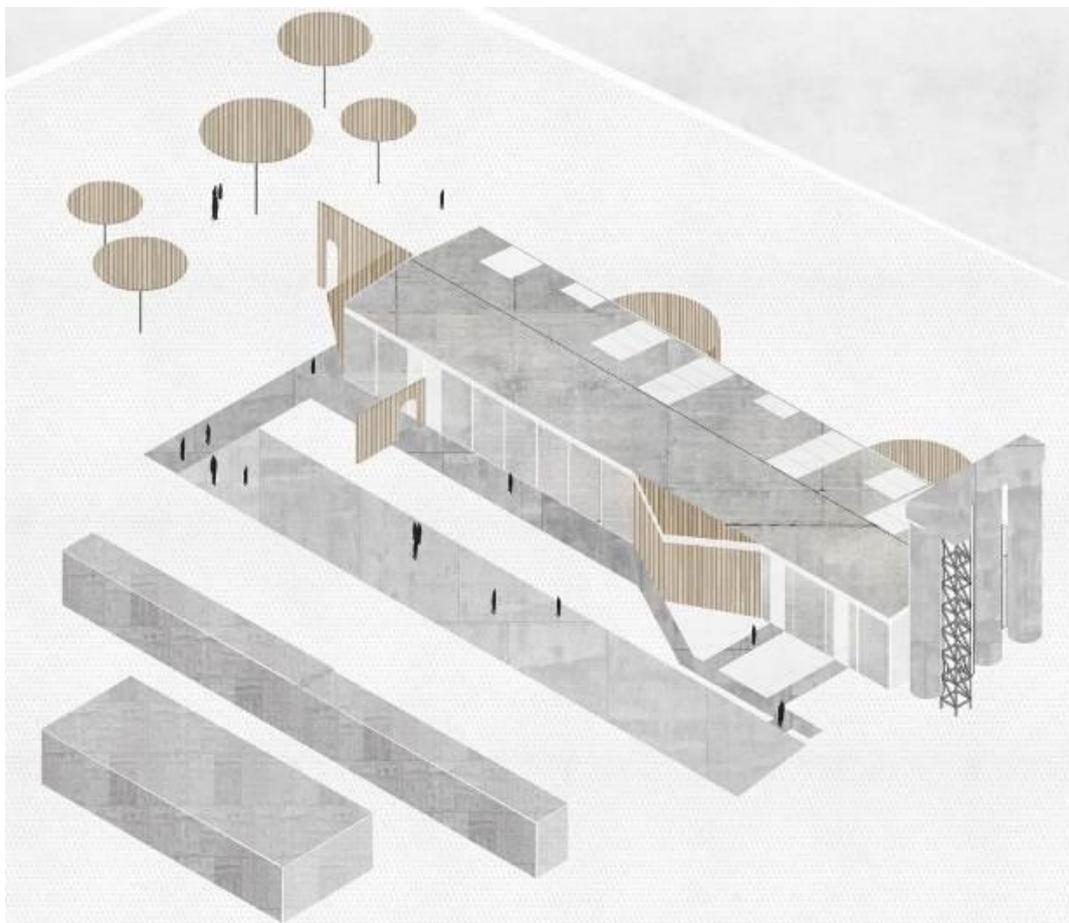


Fig. 4. Axonometric view of the project hypothesis, 2023, by Giovanni Loffredo, Sabato Malangone and Mariapia Verde

### 3. Conclusion

The research group SHArch – Second Hand for confiscated property has set itself the goal of investigating the aspects of a complex but fascinating theme that summarizes a series of issues to which architecture and academic research are necessarily obliged to provide answers today. If unfinished architectures, through new good practices, find some space in the contemporary architectural debate, the theme of confiscated architectures continues to be a red flag of the critical issues strongly present especially in Italy, with a strong predominance of the phenomenon in Southern Italy. For this reason, the choice to address a controversial theme driven by multiple critical issues has allowed us to have the broad vision necessary to investigate one of the hottest contemporary topics without preconceptions. In the Anthropocene era, confiscated architectures can be the space for architecture's revenge, the Manifesto of new compositional and social strategies that renew the idea of the remainder as a find, a precious and transformable material. The choice to use confiscated architectures led the research group to question not only the possible function that the waiting space could have acquired, but the goal was to be able to translate the device into an architecture that could avoid further land consumption - in addition to that already used - and that could maintain a minimal impact on the demolition of the pre-existing structure. What makes the design experience applied to a confiscated asset unique is the awareness of handling a device that, in this redevelopment action, acts as a Manifesto of the possibilities of redemption for a place and a community. The case study chosen by the SHArch research group fits into this complex plot and contains all the characteristics of an element that has now become a symbol of a corrupt condition. The area of intervention is in the municipality of Villa Literno in Campania, in southern Italy and inside the former IPAM sugar factory is the element that was chosen as a symbol of the redevelopment so desired by the local community. The design choices tend to make existing architecture the starting point for a second life without demolishing but enhancing the pre-existence. «The coexistence of heterogeneous temporalities [...] demonstrates that the experience of time is determined not only by individual inclinations, but even more by cultural variables» ([4]Settis, 2022) and, starting from the idea that the relationship between what exists and what can be transformed is the true meaning of the project of the present time, this research work aimed to underline the strength of the sign as a revolutionary element especially for the symbols of social and environmental degradation.

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