CPCL SERIES

Elena Dorato
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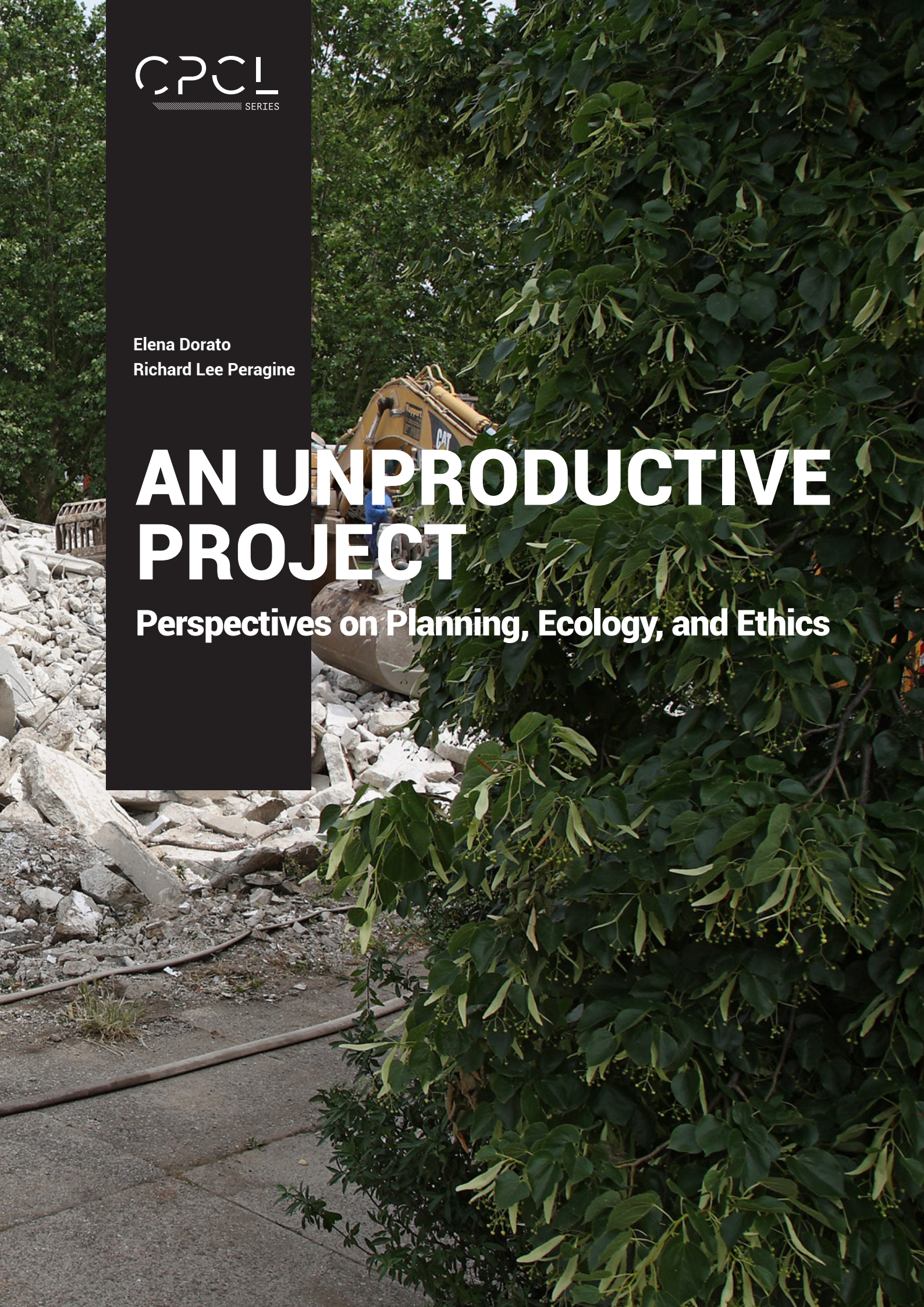
AN UNPRODUCTIVE PROJECT

Perspectives on Planning, Ecology, and Ethics



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and a conversation with Charlotte Malterre-Barthes

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Introduction

Elena Dorato & Richard Lee Peragine

The familiar topic of production is the analytical and conceptual lens of this book. Yet, both the premise and outlook of all three chapters together hopefully determine a prismatic research perspective. Its points of view are quite expansive. Taken together, the three chapters can be read as different but parallel articulations of a shared problem: how to confront the compulsion to build that subtends architectural and planning disciplines. This issue is presented as transversal to design: it is tackled from different "scales." Chapter I posits the notion of *unproduction* as a theoretical and ethical necessity, drawing out a continuity between architecture, urbanism and territorial planning to highlight their common productivist logic. Chapter II suggests *unproductive activity* as a source of spatial and political value in the urban public realm, focusing more on urban design and ecological urbanism. Chapter III, in dialogue with Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, situates the *moratorium* as a practical, pedagogical, and political opening that insists on the feasibility—and the urgency—of stopping construction here and now. This chapter revolves around architecture, or rather around the legal tools that make architecture a matter of politics and therefore bring it closer to the field of planning.

While their focus is similar rather than identical, therefore, the three chapters of this book share a common demand, namely, the need nowadays, amid social and ecological injustices and violence, to *produce less* and thus *build less*. This stance, by no means, wishes to recall the functionalism or minimalism proper to "less is more" arguments. Instead, this book wishes to join calls, originating from many disciplinary fields, to discuss this collective urgency, and thus political tension. Unproduction is the coordinate that stems from and describes this necessity and an unproductive activity is only one among many cautious answers that might be offered. In this sense, production is central to the pages that follow only insofar as it is the object of a critique which, necessarily, extends over to our current economic and political system—capitalism.

We initially discussed some of the aspects contained in the book while teaching an undergraduate design studio in urban planning. But our effort to put that pedagogical experience into practice, first of all, runs on words and ideas, i.e. this book. Such a theoretical stance too, however, is articulated by each chapter differently. The first text moves forward the need to question the rigid opposition between thought and practice in architecture, urbanism and planning. The second gravitates around a more practical core. The third allows Malterre-Barthes to decidedly criticize purely theoretical positions. The intellectual and practical space occupied by the three chapters that follow—its political premises—are therefore contiguous rather than coterminous.

Indeed, "Unproduction. An Ethics of Minimal Intervention within the Productivism of the Green Transition" claims the necessity of an ethical disposition that cannot be reduced to a textbook design intervention but coincides with a strategy of interruption within the Green Transition's productivism. The name for this is *unproduction*. Here, "production" is not approached only as the mere material provision of goods and services, but as a historically specific rationality that saturates design disciplines—architecture, urbanism, and planning—and binds them to the imperatives of endless growth, productivity, efficiency, and progress. The thesis advanced is that within design, production is rendered almost exclusively as construction. Even when confronted with the ostensibly "green" and "just" criteria of the Green Transition—that is, the supposedly transitional period we live in, whose logic of sustainability most often amounts to *more*

infrastructure, *more* housing, *more* resilience—design disciplines remain stubbornly tethered to a productivist focus on building. The critical position of the chapter rests on a fundamental presupposition: production must be grasped not as a transhistorical mode of human action, but as a specifically capitalist organization of "doing." The chapter first underscores how modernity collapsed the classical distinction between *poiesis* (bringing into being, production) and *praxis* (action) into a single, undifferentiated act concerning "concrete productive activity"[1] in opposition to theory. Design disciplines translate this conflation into a practice whose legitimacy is guaranteed only by its capacity to yield tangible and concrete "solutions." The material production of design, above all, results in construction, which in turn is assumed as a solution. This often implies building for building's sake, making way for "the autarky of a 'doing' that has surrendered to its own development."[2] The critique of this identification between doing, producing, and building forms the theoretical fulcrum for the elaboration of *unproduction*.

In this light, production must be understood not only as an economic logic but also as a form of productivism: a compulsion to build, an "energetic tension" that animates modern disciplinary theory and practice. This drive is sedimented in the very language of the field, which continually naturalizes the need for further production through a vocabulary that makes it appear as neutral, necessary, and incontestable. Even when production has been redefined in broader or more expansive terms, the debate has tended to relapse into the affirmation of an "eternal will to improve,"[3] thereby leaving the axiom of production-as-construction intact and untroubled. To situate this dynamic historically, the chapter engages with a fertile debate, with an emphasis on Italian research, that has mobilized architectural and planning critique against the capitalist organization of cities and territories. In doing so, the work reaches out into Continental philosophy, critical social theory and political ecologies. Writing in the 1970s, Manfredo Tafuri famously defined modern architecture as "the programming and planned reorganization of building production and of the city as a productive organism."[4]

1 Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

2 Jean-Luc Nancy. "What is to Be Done?", *Diacritics* 42, vol. 2 (2014): 113.

3 Cristina Bianchetti, "À Rebours", in *Territorio e Produzione*, ed. Cristina Bianchetti (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019), 163. Where published translations are unavailable, all references have been translated by the Author(s).

4 Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976), 100.

In such a formulation, the city becomes the spatial articulation of capitalist production cycles, a site where building production dovetails with the restructuring of productive relations. Although the historical horizon has shifted, this insight remains germane: the Green Transition, for all its discourse on sustainability, does not overturn the logic identified by Tafuri. Rather, it recalibrates design's productivism. The European Union's Urban Agenda, for example, explicitly aims to "maximize the growth potential of cities" and to "stimulate economic growth," thereby laying bare a productivist ideology that risks undermining the very ecological and social justice objectives it claims to advance. By examining post-WWII Italian planning and development, the chapter brings to the fore the nuanced material and discursive transformations of this productivism. While the theory and practice of architecture, urbanism and planning have shifted from the criteria of expansion and quantity to those of regeneration and quality, the unjust, at times violent logic of production as construction is left unscathed. Today's peculiar juxtaposition of sustainable quantity *and* quality is indicative of how building has not stopped taking place but has rather changed its modes of operation. Against this productivism, and as a means to call for a specific degrowth position—that we have called "unproduction"—we claim that the urgency today is to produce less, and therefore to build less. An unproductive doing in design need not amount to a retreat into passivity or resignation. Rather, it attunes to material strategies and ethical dispositions of minimal intervention that resist the compulsion to build at all times, at all costs. To substantiate these claims, the final sections of the chapter investigate the practices of Lacaton and Vassal, Cedric Price, Lucius Burckhardt and Charlotte Malterre-Barthes as an asymptotic movement toward the ethics of unproduction. In fact, unproduction seeks to destabilize disciplinary productivism from within, opening the possibility of forms of doing that do not necessarily culminate in construction and gesturing toward an alternative ethics (and politics) in design practice.

The second chapter, "Unproductive-yet-Active. Design Perspectives on Use and Activity," following another approach to this ethical stance but acknowledging its irreducibility, more resolutely examines a number of projects which arguably help us visualize how such an ethics has been taken up in planning and urban design practice. That is, how unproduction might not equate with a retreat from activity, but with a recalibration of the conditions for design interven-

tion. This recalibration is pursued by directing the analytical gaze toward the public dimension of the urban realm—a domain that, compared to architectural discourse, has so far received relatively less theoretical attention. The chapter thus asks what kinds of spatial, social, and political forms might emerge when the capitalist logic of production is resisted not through passivity or withdrawal, but through *an alternative ethics of action*. The answer, it argues, lies not in inaction, but in a deliberate and intentional practice of doing less in order to do otherwise: an ethics that may take multiple forms—whether articulated as *minimal*, weak, *lo-fi*, or *modest* practices that disrupt the compulsion to produce and build without abandoning the possibility of action. Within this framework, the chapter introduces the notion of "radical publicness," conceived not as a stylistic model but as a normative and operational principle that grounds design in commitments which can neither be negotiated nor diluted. The attempt is not to coin a new definition, but to take critical distance from the prevailing regimes of contemporary urban public-space production. Radical publicness demands that the expansion of the urban fabric cease, refusing further land consumption; it affirms the primacy of the public over the productive, privileging presence, access, and collective use above logics of profit and branding; it insists on reversibility and care, requiring that interventions remain open to revision or even de-construction when they undermine public life or ecological conditions; and it advocates for a form of "institutional modesty," in which governance recognizes its limits and resists the exceptional procedures that so often enable private accumulation. Operatively, radical publicness is a suite of spatial, legal, and managerial conditions that secure access, affordability of presence, the primacy of ordinary use over extraction, and transparent governance—re-centering public space as commons rather than an instrument of place-marketing and real-estate valorization.

The different sections of this chapter explore how an unproductive-yet-active ethos has been articulated in practice mainly through the critical reading of a selection of projects. The redesign of Place de la République in Paris, for example, exemplifies a minimal intervention that maximizes public use and presence, in stark contrast to the much-debated project for the redevelopment of Piazzale Loreto in Milan, where space is subordinated to commercial logics and productivist imperatives. The urban policies of Barcelona during its democratic transition are reconsidered in a similar fashion: the city

once invested in dispersed, small-scale, and low-cost interventions aimed at improving neighborhood quality, only later to pivot toward a neoliberal paradigm of urban development oriented around large events and spectacular projects—aligned with the trajectories of other major European cities during the 1990s and the early 2000s. Two further examples, operating at different scales, home in on the stakes of this approach. In São Paulo, Paulo Mendes da Rocha's *SESC 24 de Maio* converts a former department store into a stratified vertical public space, rejecting demolition and the extractive cycle in favor of adaptive reuse and unconditional accessibility. Here architecture ceases to be a mere container of predetermined functions and instead becomes an enabler of public life, operating as what Andrea Branzi once described as a "field of weak forces."[5] In Dessau, by contrast, the *Landschaftszug* project addresses the reality of the shrinking city not by proposing new development schemes, but through selective demolition and the creation of landscape corridors. In this context, design is reconceived as an open, ongoing process of "strategic navigation," drawing on and paraphrasing Foucault's notion of *pilotage*,[6] in which form emerges incrementally through care and maintenance—i.e., *design by maintenance*—rather than through the fixity of a master plan. The chapter ultimately reconnects with the methodological legacy of William Whyte's *Street Life Project*. Whyte's empirical insistence on observing the everyday use of urban space is reread as a mode of resistance to productivist urbanism and to the extraction of property-market value masked as commons. His methodological inversion—placing the act of observation and the practices of use above the imposition of design—illuminates the possibility of an urbanism that is "unproductive-yet-active," privileging use over form, care over control, and the contingent vitality of collective life over the certainties of productive growth. Observation here is not a prelude to delivery, but an ethic of governance—*learning-by-doing-less*—that aligns de-planning, radical publicness, and maintenance as mutually reinforcing practices.

The third and last chapter, "Practical, Pedagogical and Political "Openings" of a Moratorium on New Construction," makes room for Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, a scholar, activist and privileged interlocutor of this book, with whom we have been able to delve into the

5 Andrea Branzi, *Modernità debole e diffusa. Il mondo del progetto all'inizio del XXI secolo* (Milan: Skira editore, 2006).

6 Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

question of stopping construction, as well as its (legal) feasibility, in the current historical conjuncture. Malterre-Barthes is arguably one of the scholars who has most engaged with the question of stopping and reducing construction. Trading on Charlotte's research and publications, and above all on her most recent book[7]—which also informs the title of the chapter—the discussion of a *moratorium* is not confined to its technical or juridical dimensions, but expands into the broader practical, pedagogical, and political openings that such a proposal may generate. The moratorium is presented as a means to expose and contest the structural complicities between architectural production and capital accumulation, while also acknowledging the risks of its co-optation by conservative or exclusionary agendas.

Thus, through a three-way conversation, the moratorium is interrogated not only as a legal instrument—a device at times mobilized to suspend development—but also as a discursive and material provocation that unsettles the naturalized association between architecture and building. This perspective highlights the extent to which law, far from being neutral, operates as a contested terrain that may both reinforce and disrupt the productivist logics that orient the construction industry. By situating the moratorium at this threshold, the chapter foregrounds its potential as an instrument of delay and refusal, a tactical interruption that forces a reconsideration of what it means to build, and for whom. In doing so, the conversation expands into questions of practice and pedagogy. Malterre-Barthes insists that architectural work must be understood *beyond* the conventional boundaries of design-as-construction, emphasizing instead its organizational, narrative, and persuasive capacities. The moratorium thus becomes a pedagogical device through which students and practitioners alike are compelled to imagine alternative forms of architectural labor—forms oriented toward maintenance, repair, reuse, and even forms of "not-building" that nonetheless remain deeply active. After all, the point is stopping *new* construction. This pedagogical orientation clearly resonates (without quite coinciding) with the arguments of chapter I regarding the ethical demand for a material strategy of unproduction, and chapter II, where an "unproductive-yet-active" ethos is explored through material, spatial projects.

7 Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, *A Moratorium on New Construction* (London: Sternberg Press, 2025).

As it is the result of a collaboration, the reasons that triggered this book are multiple, different in nature and do not always align with one another. A concern for the political dimension of architecture, urbanism and planning is perhaps the binding agent that draws our multifarious positions and concerns together. But these preoccupations and interests regarding design thought and practice—planning in particular—are tackled from an ecological standpoint. In this sense, the book is animated by a politics attuned to ecological questions. Indeed, once taken for its intersectionality, that is, for its capacity to call up resistance against economic injustices, environmental destruction, social and political violence, ecology might arguably be understood as the most pressing matter design needs to address today.

Ecology constitutes the actual limit to the endless accumulation of capital, and thus the prime site of political conflict. The current acceleration of a global war economy may be altering the priority afforded by national and international authorities to the Green Transition, but it does not upend the relevance of addressing the tools with which our society is facing the Earth's ecological limit. Rather, the current arms race highlights sustainability's inherent contradictions, as well as its intersections with political and economic arrangements of power. We need, in other words, to extend the critique of sustainability in design to how it is ramified throughout other societal domains. After all, ecological struggles are central to the reproduction of life within the context of capital. The recognition that design disciplines and, more precisely, *the project*, contribute to human and nonhuman reproduction, but also that they are traversed by the structural injustices and harm that characterize capitalism—and thus bring us closer to the Earth's ecological limit—is the presupposition to argue that another form of "doing" is urgently needed today.

Unproduction

An Ethics of Minimal Intervention within the Productivism of the Green Transition

Richard Lee Peragine

"Production must grow, productivity must grow, consumption must grow, consumers, that is humans, must grow, only by doing so can capital grow. There is something monstrous in this idea of growth, by now universally accepted, something cancerous, as if the human being were nothing but a cell that grows indiscriminately, beyond all control, occupying everything, consuming everything. As if the world were infinite, while it is far from infinite."

Vitaliano Trevisan, *Il Ponte* (Turin: Einaudi, 2007), 58.

The Productivism of Disciplinary "Doing"

A focus on production is far from a trailblazing line of inquiry in design disciplines.[1] This recognition, as well as the research this work trades on, hopefully clears all doubt regarding any claim to novelty. The discipline's emphasis on production is perhaps due to the very historical conditions architecture, urbanism and planning are immersed in: contemporary capitalist production is anything but secondary to its thought and practice. However, the wager is that, of necessity, such a disciplinary debate has been mostly directed at understanding production as the material provision of goods and services, rather than its *logic*.[2] With the "productivist lineages"[3] of today's Green Transition calling for *more* infrastructure, *more* housing, *more* "resilience," it is safe to say architecture, urbanism and planning—both in thought and practice—in spite of "new" concerns and approaches, is "exclusively focused on construction."[4] This productivism is intimately tied with construction and constitutive of a

1 In focusing on production, however we should stress the interrelation and differentiation of the other moments within the capitalist process: "The conclusion we reach is not that production, distribution, exchange and consumption are identical, but that they all form the members of a totality, distinctions within a unity. Production predominates not only over itself, in the antithetical definition of production, but over the other moments as well. The process always returns to production to begin anew." Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (Rough Draft) (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), 99. See Marcello Musto, ed., *Karl Marx's Grundrisse Foundations of the critique of political economy 150 years later* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 14-15.

2 Which is not to say that there has been no opposition to the injustice and violence of production. On the contrary: "urbanism is, in other words, proposed as a guarantee that common interest will prevail, as will the contract […] over both artistic and symbolic content of an individual building intervention." Carlo Olmo, *Urbanistica e Società Civile* (Rome-Ivrea: Edizioni di Comunità, 2018), 98. Or, "It seems to me that the activity of urbanism has historically configured itself, at least in most of its manifestations and beyond the actual results it has achieved, as an attempt to impose the values of the social group that history, the market, the previous administration, policies of other fields and domains have privileged the least; that is, as an attempt to impose exchanges opposite to the prevalent direction." Bernardo Secchi, *Il Racconto Urbanistico. La Politica della Casa e del Territorio in Italia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1984), 37.

3 Jeremy Green highlights the productivist lineages of several radical Green New Deal strategies, marked by the paradigms of full employment, high consumption, economic expansion, and rising national income proper to Roosevelt's New Deal. Through these assumptions, Green argues, contemporary GNDs overlook today's ecological specificity (namely, a planetary threat to existence that exceeds a merely economic problem) and the profound difference between economic conditions today (overconsumption) and those of the New Deal (underconsumption). In his questioning of the staples of contemporary GNDs, Green suggests the need for a "decelerated political economy" that jettisons the logic of endless growth. Jeremy Green, "Greening Keynes? Productivist Lineages of the Green New Deal," *Anthropocene Review* 9, no. 3 (2022): 324-43. See also Peragine, "Gyratory Planning. The Green Transition's productivism and Wind Power around Foggia," *Contesti, Città, Territorio, Progetti*.

4 Marlo Wang and Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, "Food for Thought and Justice," *Arts of the Working Class* 120 (2020): 55.

specific ideology.[5] Thus, even when it has aligned with "*a very broad meaning of the term production,*" discussion has fallen back into the trap of affirming "an eternal will to improve," revealing "the conviction that one can move from worse to better" and aiming at "the ways in which a specific territory can become *more* fertile, fruitful, rich, creative."[6] This work will not oppose the need of changing the material conditions of society nor of providing essential material services to people and territories who are not deemed worthy of having them—as advocated, to a certain extent, by the Green Transition. But it will contest the logic of production, efficiency and growth that undergirds modern-liberal narratives, such as that of progress. Beyond doubt, "in the times we live in, we have experienced a lot the regression of progress."[7] Framing change through the meters and arguments of fertility, progress and creativity is part and parcel of the tendency to change it all so that things stay as they are,[8] and thus, ultimately, of leaving uncontested the notion and logic of production as construction. Indeed, in design disciplines, *production as construction* must be examined as more than the capitalist function of material production; but such a goal should not muddle our ability to question the economic dimensions of spatial development, *along with* its extra-economic mechanisms.

Still, consideration of the economic imperatives driving architecture, urbanism and planning—or, as preferred here, the organization of space[9]—does not mean throwing out their extra-economic implications. Bernardo Secchi's seminal work on the discourse of urban and territorial plans and policies—as "stories" that direct urban planning along historically and geographically located "guid-

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5 In light of the above, this productivism is closely connected to overconsumption. See Diana Stuart, Ryan Gunderson, and Brian Petersen, "Overconsumption as Ideology Implications for Addressing Global Climate Change," *Nature and Culture* 15, no. 2 (2020): 199–223.

6 Cristina Bianchetti, "À Rebours," in *Territorio e Produzione*, ed. Cristina Bianchetti (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019), 163. Emphasis changed.

7 Mario Tronti, "Il Legno Storto dell'Umanità," in *L'uomo non è buono. Per la critica del progresso*, ed. Veronica Marchio (Rome: MachinaLibro, 2024), 116.

8 This expression is common in Italian and originates in literature: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *The Leopard* (New York: Signet Books, 1961), 35. A line of interpretation of Tomasi di Lampedusa's famous *Il Gattopardo* retrieves the political stakes of the oeuvre from the identitarian conservativism it is often associated with. See Matteo di Gesù, "Una nazione di Gattopardi? Storia e società italiana nel romanzo di Tomasi di Lampedusa," in *Il Carattere della Nazione*, ed. Michela Nacci (Perugia: Perugia Stranieri University Press, 2018), 115-130.

9 Benoît Goetz, *La Dislocation. Architecture et Philosophie* (Paris: Éditions Verdier, 2018). Organizing space, or "*la compartimentation*," may be the fundamental trait of architecture among the arts: as opposed to more "objectual" arts, it arranges a certain "spatiality". In fact, Goetz argues that the specificity of architecture is construction, by way of the construction of walls: "The singularity of architecture at the same time may be determined according to its particular mode of developing buildings: construction." (Ibid., 32). Rather than building, construction is conceived of as an arrangement or division of space. (Ibid., 25-35).

ing-ideas"[10]—is instructive in this sense. With and beyond Secchi, in fact, this chapter will also point to the mechanism of appropriation that makes language a prime site of politics for design thought and practice.[11] "In this sense the activity of urbanism is 'political'"[12] but often part of a liberal politics whose ecumenical statements legitimate and engender further production—more construction—through the familiarity of a cemented architectural and planning discourse. One which we will be considering in the next pages.

The presupposition of this work is that production needs to be framed as a specificity of human "doing," one with a historically specific social organization, which is, today, capitalist. "Doing," Giorgio Agamben insists, "is understood, in our time, as praxis […] manifestation of a will that produces a concrete effect."[13] But things, as the etymology of production itself (*poiesis*) suggests, were not always like this: modernity, Agamben continues, has revoked the possibility of distinguishing between *poiesis* and *praxis*, pro-duction and action, to the extent that "doing," as "an activity producing a real effect,"[14] has come to be associated with an efficacy whose value is measured "with respect to the will that is expressed in it, that is, with respect to its freedom and creativity."[15] Design disciplines best express the creative will of an authorial Subject whose practice *produces* tangible, useful impact. Put differently, human doing is interpreted as praxis, or a "concrete productive activity (in opposition to theory, understood as a synonym of thought and abstract meditation), and praxis is conceived in turn as starting from work, that is, from the production of material life that corresponds to life's biological cycle."[16] This material production of life in the *work*[17] of architecture, urbanism and planning most often, as we will see, comes in the form of "solutions."

10 Secchi, *Il Racconto Urbanistico*.

11 Richard Lee Peragine and J. Igor Fardin, "From Keywords to Use: The New European Bauhaus, Language, and Ethics in Architecture," *Architectural Theory Review* 29, no. 1 (2025): 133-149.

12 Secchi, *Il Racconto Urbanistico*, 37.

13 Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 68.

14 Ibid., 70.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 "Work" is used somewhat at face value in this text to indicate the presence of both a mental and physical effort behind the organization of space, thereby stressing the importance of understanding architecture, urbanism and planning as both theory and practice. At the same time, the term implies the presupposition of a task. Both aspects, as hopefully will be clearer, are relevant to this chapter's argument. Still, the notion of "work" would deserve ample attention, more so in light of the somewhat distant frameworks of this text—particularly, the juxtaposition of Marxian and what might be called, with some reserve, "Left Heideggerian" references. For a critique of the former to the latter, see e.g., Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *The Politics of Operations. Excavating Contemporary Capitalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019), 5; 245-247.

The identity between design and solution is essentially the theoretical core against which this chapter mobilizes the quirky notion of *unproduction* and does so, of course, in a totally different direction than that taken up by a philosophical exploration.[18] Not to deny that the downplaying of theory and the reduction of doing to the production of material solutions inherent to design disciplines is highly problematic. But to focus on the very fact that, since design practice *is* conceived as praxis in the sense afforded to the word by Agamben—as a concrete productive activity—we are left with the urgency of a *material* strategy that, in times of planetary social and ecological harm produced by the logic of capitalist endless growth, accumulation and its histories of racialization, environmental destruction, social struggle and war,[19] might arrest this compulsion to do, produce and, specifically, *build*. This compulsion is arguably the specific trait of architecture, urbanism and planning, but on the contrary, put bluntly, we need to build less.

This concise argument is of course not the point, which is rather that of highlighting a *fact* that tends to be side-lined or intentionally glossed over in most disciplinary readings, especially since the rich season of urban and architectural critique from the late 60s to the mid-80s. This chapter, in fact, explicitly builds on some of that period's Italian proponents, while trying to re-equip some of its findings and (pro)positions *vis-à-vis* the question of production. In doing so, it wishes to recuperate the project "as a critical tool that wanted to transform reality, as a tension toward what exists, as a judgement about the city other than the image of the market metropolis."[20] Such an understanding, in fact, seems to have characterized that political and intellectual season more than what disciplinary discourse sets out to do today—or, more problematically, more than what it *can* do nowadays.

This chapter's agreement with critiques of the existing political economy is not a simple vindication of the presumed lack of Marxian analytics.[21] Neither does this text shrug off ample deconstruction of

18 Surprisingly, among the very few existing uses of the term unproduction: Pierre Caye, "Architecture, Dilation, Unproduction," *Rivista di Estetica*, 58 (2015): 21-30. See section 4 of this chapter.

19 This is what the Capitalocene thesis expresses, at its core, see in particular James W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso Books, 2015) and Françoise Vergès, "Racial Capitalocene: is the Anthropocene Racial?," in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, eds. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (London and New York: Verso, 2017), 72–82.

20 Massimo Ilardi, *Le Due Periferie. Il Territorio e l'Immaginario* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2022), 47.

21 Bianchetti, "À Rebours," 163.

Marxism's inability to see life beyond the prism of "production"[22] nor does it deny the metaphysics at work, through the category of production, in Marx's anthropology.[23] Rather, production is posited as a conceptual and analytical register to explore contemporary issues in architecture, urbanism and planning with the aim of edging closer to the goal of this chapter, that is, to upend the productivism of the Green Transition's "sustainable development," while contesting design's will to produce—its "energetic tension"[24] toward construction. Contesting this disciplinary productivism in the Anthropocene[25] is not only a matter of "redrawing" cities or a question of new architectural spaces and technology. Instead, the unproductive disposition brought to the fore in the pages that follow examines the so-called Green Transition not as a pacifying political project, but as a field of conflict, while directing attention to the existing political economy in order to probe into its material and social "sustainability."

As a result, we will be outlining an ethics which neither seeks to suggest an alternative first principle as the normative ground for action nor to put forward a guideline regarding what must be done in order to achieve a historical goal (whether of restoration, reform or revolution) through the transformation of the city and territories.[26] Such a move would double the social-moralistic duty, or even the metaphysics, proper to the intellectual and political project of modern design disciplines. Instead, if we distinguish between a body of values, principles and ends dispensed by a transcendent *moral* authority or will, and an *ethical demand*—that is, an interrogation that sets the condi-

22 Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production* (St. Louis: Telos Books, 1975). Baudrillard's famous position regarding Marxian productivist ideology in favor of an economy of the sign is that: "labor and production constitute an abstraction, a reduction, and an extraordinary rationalization in relation to the richness of symbolic exchange" (Ibid., 45).

23 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis and Oxford: Minnesota University Press, 1991); Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, 188-127.

24 Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, 85.

25 This chapter uses the term Anthropocene, rather than Capitalocene, in order to stress the importance of addressing the ontological relation between humans and nature which the latter term risks leaving unaddressed. At the same time, the notion of Anthropocene needs to take into account a radical outside that exceeds its anthropocentric outlook. See Paolo Missiroli, *Il Posto del Negativo. Filosofia e Questione dell'Umano alla Luce dell'Antropocene* (Milan: Meltemi, 2023) and Frédéric Neyrat, *La Condition Planétaire* (Paris: Les Liens qui Libèrent, 2025).

26 Peragine and Fardin, "From Keywords to Use," 142-146; Richard Lee Peragine, "Not a Project at All. A plural project of urban space in Bosnia and Herzegovina", *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability* (2025): 12-15. See also J.Igor Fardin and Richard Lee Peragine, "(In)activity and Architecture: 'doing nothing apart from…'," *Journal of Architecture*, forthcoming; Cristina Bianchetti, *Le Mura di Troia. Lo Spazio Ricompone i Corpi* (Rome: Donzelli Editore, 2023), 59.

tion without which no moral standpoint or action is possible[27]—we might argue the chapter aims at the definition of an extra-moral ethics.[28] Borrowing on Jean-Luc Nancy, we can outline an ethical disposition of the project of space that, unlike the call for "concreteness" of disciplinary productivism, cannot but stem from the recognition that the "essential action is thinking,"[29] as the acting out of a "conduct" whose end or value is the withdrawal itself, within "the general dissolution of sense,"[30] of any stable foundation. It is thus not a moral. But neither an ethics which leads to a contemplative or merely intellectual position, insofar as it requires us to "make-sense" at all times of the legitimacy of our own "doing": where "making" stands not for the production or appropriation of a higher-sense but precisely the acting of such a conduct itself.[31]

We will ascribe this ethics to the unproductive dispositions of Lacaton and Vassal, Cedric Price, Charlotte Malterre-Barthes and Lucius Burckhardt, bearing in mind their approaches depart (admittedly very differently) from the crises and complexity inherent to the forces and relations of production—from the "consequences" of the project of capitalism, rather than from principles[32]—without assuming we might "build *to* hide, *to* remove, *to* homogenize" such contradictions as if they did not exist.[33] Architecture, urbanism and planning can provide no material solution to such a condition, without reckoning with the sense and legitimacy of their practice today. The ethical disposition of minimal intervention we are setting out to outline, in this sense, "will depend on a thought that is able to bring research back into the game and to use the weapons of theory, not so as to change the world but at least to critique it."[34] The chapter, put differ-

27 Jean-Luc Nancy, "Heidegger's 'Originary Ethics'," in *Heidegger and Practical Philosophy*, eds. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (New York: State University of New York Press), 65-85. See also Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Insufficiency of 'Values' and the Necessity of 'Sense'," *Journal for Cultural Research* 9, vol. 4 (2005). A thought of ethics, via his materialist ontology of being-with, runs through Nancy's entire oeuvre. Nancy's ethics, in particular, tries to retrieve the analytics of *Dasein* from its "linguistic" derive and bring it up to the challenge of the spacing, partition or sharing of singular plural existence. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2000); for an exploration of this thought of being-with, and community, in relation to urbanism: Peragine, "Not a Project at All."

28 Although possibly not of the kind that Marco Biraghi imputes to Rem Koolhaas's Nietzschean architectural work. Marco Biraghi, *Rem Koolhaas. L'Architettura Al di Là del Bene e del Male* (Turin: Einaudi, 2025). Might I refer to my review, Richard Lee Peragine, "The Nietzschean Architect," *Khorein: Journal for Architecture and Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (forthcoming).

29 Nancy, "Heidegger's 'Originary Ethics'," 67.

30 Ibid. 71. The dissolution which corresponds to nihilism; see section 5 of the present chapter.

31 Ibid., 65-85. For Nancy, neither *poiesis* nor *praxis*, but *praxipoiesis*. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 100, cited in, Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield "Immanent Surface: Art and the Demand for Signification", in *Nancy and the Political*, ed. Sanja Dejanović (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 164-191.

32 Cristina Bianchetti, *Spazi che Contano. Il Progetto in Epoca Neo-liberale* (Rome: Donzelli Editore, 2016), 108.

33 Biraghi, *Rem Koolhaas,* 152.

34 Ilardi, *Le Due Periferie*, 53.

ently, wishes to highlight how unproduction differs from an inactive retreat, that is, how one might one think in terms of an *unproductive project*.

What follows will thus consist of a three-part exploration on the work of architecture, urbanism and planning within the context of the Green Transition. The next section will frame the politics of the Green Transition in relation to capitalist organization of space—which, as suggested by the late 20th century-shift from general plan to urban-architectural project, transcends the scales of strictly large-scale design and taps into architectural theory and practice—as a way to expose its underlying productivism. To substantiate this claim, the third section will discuss post-WWII Italian planning tools, so as to bring this productivism to the attention of the human/nature divide and, thus, to the discourse on sustainability. Post-WWII Italy constitutes a privileged historical and geographical context in which to do so, since the speed and intensity of its urbanization made the question of growth, both in economic and "cultural" terms, arguably the prime concern of urbanists and planners.[35] Once such a form of productivism is put into question in light of the environmental and social harm it arguably cannot avoid within capitalism, the fourth section will expand on the concept of unproduction, while considering a number of projects or, indeed dispositions that recall its underlying ethics. The final section brings to the fore the eminent practicality of such a disposition, while clearing all doubt regarding its presumed "indolence" by endorsing its nihilism.

35 Carlo Olmo, *Urbanistica e Società Civile*, 11-12.

The Green Transition, Production and the Organization of Space

> "Climate change and environmental degradation are an existential threat to the European Union and to the world. To overcome these challenges, the European Green Deal is Europe›s new growth strategy, which will transform the Union into a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy. The European Green Deal aims to make Europe climate neutral by 2050, boost the economy through green technology, create sustainable industry and transport, and cut pollution. Turning climate and environmental challenges into opportunities will make the transition just and inclusive for all."

The EU's definition of the Green Transition mobilizes a standard jargon. Rather than for its stability and accuracy within contemporary political discourse, the familiarity of this definition is ostensibly due to its green, sustainable, inclusive keywords[1]. But this chapter is concerned with the paradigm it offers and extends—that of production. As the green shift to sustainable modes of production undoubtedly unfolds within the increasing precariousness of productive work and reproductive conditions for life, it arguably has not altered design's productivism—its compulsion to produce and, thus, build. The goal of this first chapter is precisely to put into question the idea of production, and thus growth, which underlies the EU's definition of the Green Transition, and how such an idea plays out in the organization of space. More importantly, the point of this chapter is that the Green Transition does not upset the presuppositions of the work of architecture, urbanism and planning *as* production. Indeed, this new growth strategy of the Green Transition is still predicated on the assumption that such disciplines must produce, and thus build, at all times, at all costs; and this productivism—often even in its more sustainable modes and relations—still engenders inequalities and environmental harm.

Put differently, the definition of the Green Transition above overlooks one fundamental necessity, which is moreover the political

1 Peragine and Fardin, "From Keywords to Use."

and economic premise this text agrees with: the need, today, to produce *less*. The slowing down of production—if not its interruption, as will be argued—amounts to a specific degrowth strategy in terms of construction, which thus has an impact on the operativity of urbanism and planning.[2] The term *unproduction* is used to indicate this strategy, or disposition, in architecture, urban design and planning, forcing us not to distinguish these scales of intervention from one another, as this heuristic concept sets out to shake up the compulsion toward construction itself, as the specific productive activity of this disciplinary and professional field.

But what does production point to; or, rather, what does it amount to today? The word comes from the Greek *poiesis, poiein*, literally "bring-forth" (and from the Latin *pro* + *ducere*). The term thus indicates that which is pro-duced, "brought into being," "brought into existence"; above, we recalled the conflation between *poiesis*, praxis and work into a concrete productive activity, as located by Agamben. Since the Renaissance the word "production" has been used to refer to different activities: theatre, botany and zoology, more generally the arts. But, since the advent of the Industrial Revolution, it has necessarily been tied to our political economy, in light of a shift from the premodern simulation of originary, archetypal models from the natural world to "the technical mechanization of doing, whereby an interrogation on the nature of such an origin becomes meaningless."[3] Production thus refers to a new technological paradigm within the capitalist regime of general equivalence: to produce means to bring into existence a product, a commodity which will be exchanged on the global market through the mediation of the general equivalent,

2 Indeed, some of this importation in urban studies is victim of "the fascination with a naturalist neo-communitarianism that toys with the concepts of happiness, peacefulness, sustainability," see Bianchetti, *Il Novecento è Davvero Finito* (Rome: Donzelli Editore), 44. At the same time, the abundance and richness of the many different theories and practices of degrowth deserves close attention. For an overview: Giacomo D'Alisa, Federico Demaria and Giorgos Kallis, eds., *Degrowth. A vocabulary for a new era* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015). Architecture, urbanism and planning have partially taken up these multifarious positions, see Cédric Durand, Elena Hofferberth and Matthias Schmelzer, "Planning beyond growth: The case for economic democracy within ecological limits," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 437, no. 15 (2024): 1-9; Marcello Faletra and Serge Latouche, *Hyperpolis. Architettura e Capitale* (Milan: Meltemi, 2019); Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, *A Moratorium on New Construction* (London: Sternberg Press, 2025); Federico Savini, "Strategic planning for degrowth: What, who, how," *Planning Theory*, *24*, vol. 2 (2024): 141-62; Sasha Plotnikova, "Designing for Degrowth: Architecture Against Climate Apartheid," *AIA/ACSA Intersections Symposium* (2020): 26-33. On the prospect of a convergence between the contemporary debate on Marxism and degrowth, see Mauro Bonaiuti *et al.,* "Decrescita e marxismo dialogo possibile e necessario," *Quaderni della decrescita* 1, no. 3 (2024): 116-131.

3 Damiano Cantone and Luca Taddio, *L'Affermazione dell'Architettura. Una Riflessione Introduttiva* (Milan-Udine: Mimesis Edizioni, 2012), 77.

namely, money.[4] This includes architecture: architecture is a product and a commodity; no architecture is not inscribed in the capitalist social system of general equivalence. Not only does architecture *as* production mean that it is bought and sold as a product but also that its construction process generates value.

Indeed, referring to the 1920s and 1930s, Manfredo Tafuri could write that the utopia of design, architecture and urban planning was "a utopia serving the objectives of the reorganization of production."[5] Modernism saw much of its architectural design being turned into the design of the production process—that is, for instance, how the Bauhaus' functionalism might be understood, namely as: "a theoretical diagram regarding the organization of the cycle of production (such as the series of living modules), circulation (with the discovery of urban plans at the territorial scale) and consumption (by mediating forms of life)."[6]

The city is the site in which such production, circulation and consumption are most pronounced. In this sense, for Tafuri: "starting from the particular sector of building production [*produzione edilizia*], architecture discovered that the preestablished objectives could be reached only by relating that sector to the reorganization of the city."[7] In other words, once architecture amounts to the production of buildings (or, of *edilizia*—an eloquent Italian term, whose relation to production lies within its very meaning), the city becomes the place in which architecture becomes (un)able to respond to its utopian tension toward the transformation of the existing world into another, necessarily-better world.[8] The origin and goal of architecture and urban planning in industrialized societies thus moves outside itself and its own field into the realm of production and its "planned coordination."[9] Modern architecture—thereby, we might add, also today's architecture—is condemned, for Tafuri, to mediate (through the construction of buildings) realism, the concrete con-

4 Karl Marx, *Capital*. Vol. 1. (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 161-162; see Moishe Postone, *Time, labor, and social domination. A reinterpretation of Marx's critical theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 168: "The value dimension of all commodities becomes externalized in the form of one commodity-money-which acts as a universal equivalent among all other commodities: it appears as the universal mediation."

5 Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976), 98.

6 Marco Assennato, *Progetto e Metropoli. Saggio su Operaismo e Architettura* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019), 26. This argument could be expanded to functionalism overall; on this see Bianchetti, *Spazi che Contano*.

7 Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, 100.

8 Further on the rationalization and subsumption of the project of architecture's utopian goals under capitalism, see Felice Mometti, "Ideologia come architettura. Manfredo Tafuri e la storia critica," *Scienza & Politica* 25, no. 47 (2012): 107-133.

9 Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, 100.

ditions of society, and utopia. In this sense, Tafuri can define architecture as "the programing and planned reorganization of building production and of the city as a productive organism."[10] Put differently, architecture coincides with the organized production of buildings and cities; and, therefore, also with a scale bigger than that of the singled-out built object. The work of urbanism is thus entangled in a web of economic and political conditions from which it cannot escape; much more so than the intervention within the city fabric through the design of architectural objects—i.e., urban design—suggests.

Yet, while not losing their saliency, Tafuri's words refer to an architectural and urban project within a specific time and place. On the contrary, the historical and geographical specificities under scrutiny in this chapter are those of the Green Transition.[11] In other words, if the EUropean city's productivism is geared towards "Europe's new growth strategy,"[12] the Green Transition *is* the economic and political condition of the work of urbanism today. Moreover, if architecture and urban planning are part of a broader plan that aims at reorganizing production, the contemporary plan or political project *is* that of the so-called Green Transition[13]—or rather, *could be*, in light of recent developments in the current "war regime."[14]

Production in the Green Transition however, unlike previous plans, concedes the recognition of a limit that has been pointed at for decades: what boils down to, depending on the context, "climate crisis," "climate change," "climate emergency." While previous plans with a historical goal—the development or overcoming of capitalist production and ideology—did not reckon with an ecological limit to production, or did so marginally, nowadays society openly faces the challenge of thinking of another way to keep its economic and political structures in place in the face of an existential threat to life

10 Ibid.

11 While suggesting a focus on the EUropean world, the exigencies of the Green Transition arguably involve extra-EU countries. Among many, see Sanja Bogojević, "The European Green Deal, the rush for critical raw materials, and colonialism," *Transnational Legal Theory* 15, no.4 (2024): 600–615.

12 The chapter uses the term to indicate a disarticulation between the European Union's political project of design, trading on Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Europe's Border Crisis Biopolitical Security and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), where the emphasis is used to highlight the "related […] but not coterminous" limits of geographical and legal Europe. (Ibid., 14).

13 Bianchetti, *Le Mura di Troia*, 107-126. See Paola Viganò, *Il Giardino Biopolitico. Spazi, Vite e Transizione* (Rome: Donzelli Editore, 2023).

14 Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *The Rest and the West: Capital and Power in a Multipolar World* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2024), 128-132. Indeed, the European Union's plans to rearm Europe with Readiness 2030 are increasingly poised to divest economic and political efforts away from climate-neutral objectives.

on Earth. Greening capitalism through sustainable means is part and parcel of this "new growth strategy" within this geo-climatic limit. As the quote in the opening of this section reads, in fact, the Green Transition aims for a "modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy," "boosted" through "sustainable industry and transport." Such an achievement cannot but be planned and take place—at a symbolic and material level—through architectural and urban projects. Yet, the problem of decoupling architecture and urban design from its highly polluting extractive activities remains. The buildings and construction sector is in fact by far the largest emitter of greenhouse gases, consuming 32% of global energy and accounting for 34% of global CO2 emissions[15]; the production and use of materials such as cement, steel, and aluminium have a significant carbon footprint; while construction sites and demolitions, not to mention all the other activities connected to them, can be damaging and violent activities. It is finally up to the technological fixes deemed to overcome such a challenge to make production sustainable.[16]

In this sense, discourse on sustainability, today in the spotlight of disciplinary debate and practice, is grounded on the promise of a sustainable relationship between humans and nature, which, among other operations, takes place through the mediating work of architecture and urban planning. In this sense, sustainability is the latest expression of architecture's attempt to articulate the human/nature divide. From Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier to Buckminster Fuller and Richard Rogers, Western architecture's articulation of such an ecological relation is telling of 20th century technological advancements and historical contingencies.[17] Yet, the damage inflicted on human and nonhuman life by the logic of production, along with the productivist framework of architecture and urbanism revealed by Tafuri, among others, begs the question of what exactly is designated with the term "sustainability."

The English word comes from the Latin verb "*sustinere*," from "sub-," under or up-from-below, and "*tenere*," to hold. In this sense, sustain-

15 UNEP, *Global Status Report for Buildings and Construction 2024/2025*. Available at: https://www.unep.org/resources/report/global-status-report-buildings-and-construction-20242025

16 A salvific faith in technology is often also the underlying presupposition of approaches centred around "repair," as a key concept mobilized to contain the damage inflicted to environments and populations through the organization of space.

17 This and the following paragraph trade on J. Igor Fardin and Richard Lee Peragine, "The Promise(s) of Sustainability," in *e(time)ologies or the changing meaning of architectural words*, Delft 10-11 October (critic|all PRESS + Departamento de Proyectos Arquitectónicos, 2023), 154-162.

ability would indicate something that provides, supports and assists, as much as something which bears, suffers and endures.[18] On the contrary, Allan Stoekl suggests the dominant understanding of sustainability "literally means the sustaining of an economy at a certain, appropriate level" through a specific morality of scarcity and renunciation, while preserving existing structures of regulation and domination, against the spectre of decline.[19] Critical readings of the 1980s emergence of the discourse on "sustainable development" and "sustainability," in this sense, point toward the (green) "neoliberal project of a world order that reconciles ecology and economics," currently being morphed by the discourse on the Anthropocene.[20] Sustainability would thus indicate another form of "managing" the environment, while integrating Nature—with a capital N—within anthropocentric sovereignty and the logic of capital.[21] But what then are we supporting or enduring through such a work of architecture, urbanism and planning—or: what are we sustaining? Certainly, ecology today is and must be a central dimension in any design project, but "only if it questions the presumed neutrality and generalized consensus enjoyed by the rhetoric(s) of sustainability, while re-politicizing the stringent connection of ecological issues with the need to reposition powers and fight against injustices and inequalities."[22] On the contrary, the discourse on sustainability renews a sense of ambiguity at every turn in contemporary plans to green building production: does it aim at an economic sustainability or an ecological sustainability, or the unlikely combination of the two?[23]

Many architectural and urban design projects render this contradiction evident. The vicissitudes of the construction of the new "Scuola Quattrofoglie,"[24] in place of the "Scuole Besta" middle school in Bologna (in the region of Emilia-Romagna, Italy), aptly describe the ambiguous relation entertained by the work of architecture, and thus

18 Ibid., 159-160.

19 Allan Stoekl, *Bataille's Peak, Energy, Religion and Postsustainability.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 119-120.

20 Federico Luisetti, "Geopower: On the states of nature of late capitalism," *European Journal of Social Theory* 22, no. 3 (2018): 342-363.

21 On the techno-capitalist management and stewardship of Nature, see Mick Smith, *Against Ecological Sovereignty. Ethics, Biopolitics and Saving the Natural World* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2011); Frédéric Neyrat, *The Unconstructable Earth. An Ecology of Separation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

22 Gabriele Pasqui, "Le Condizioni Materiali del Progetto Urbanistico," in *Fare Urbanistica Oggi. Le Culture del Progetto,* eds. Laura Montedoro and Michelangelo Russo (Rome: Donzelli Editore, 2022), 46. See also Romeo Farinella, *Le Fragole di Londa. Attraverso le Città Disuguali* (Milan-Udine: Mimesis, 2024), 102-133.

23 Many have pointed toward the unlikeliness of this prospect. See Green, *Greening Keynes*.

24 See https://www.comune.bologna.it/myportal/C_A944/api/content/download?id=651aa750efa10f0097b8d537

city-making, with the sustainability of the Green Transition. The intensity of the discursive shift operated by local authorities in recent years makes Bologna one of the most suitable examples to gauge the spatial politics of the Green Transition.[25]

Bologna is currently living through the potential and contradictions of intense urban development in terms of mobility, tourism, and housing. The Scuole Besta were built in the early '80s according to a design project which aligned with the prescription of more generous urban standards and an insistence on pedagogical concerns. Ostensibly, construction has stood the test of time also in terms of building materials and utilities.[26] The *Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza* (PNRR) [National Recovery and Resilience Plan]—the large Italian investment plan funded by the Next Generation EU programme—allocates funds for the improvement, in terms of sustainability, of existing built environments and landscapes.[27] In this context, in 2023, the local municipality of Bologna put into force a 100 million investment plan for existing school buildings, tapping into its own resources, the PNRR and private financing.[28] The new design for the Scuole Besta comprises the *ex-novo* construction of the new Scuola Quattrofoglie and the demolition of the existing building. Trees in place around the latter will be cut down to make way for the new building, due to construction site works, the building's design and position on the plot.

The project was met by residents and local activism with intense resistance, above all due to the unsound and unnecessary cost of the project, as well as the felling of existing trees and their replacement with "new" ones. Resistance was grounded in evidence that refurbishing the existing building would have been significantly cheaper and less invasive than the planned construction, thereby also exposing the contradiction that belies the fundamental argument in favor of felling operations. What is more, the Scuole Besta, as the local mobilization put it, would suffice the pedagogical needs and architec-

25 For a thorough account of contemporary urban planning in Bologna, see Valentina Orioli, "Pianificazione Urbanistica nella Città che Cambia," in *Praticare l'Urbanistica. Traiettorie tra Innovazione Sociale e Pianificazione*, eds. Valentina Orioli and Martina Massari (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2023), 77-111.

26 Fioretta Gualdi describes the logic and development of her design for the school in "Perché Sostituire le Scuole Besta?," *Cantiere Bologna*, 13 Marzo, 2024. Avaiable at: https://cantierebologna.com/2024/03/13/perche-sostituire-le-scuole-besta/

27 According to its mission "M1C3 – Investimento 2.2 "Tutela e valorizzazione dell'architettura e del paesaggio rurale." The PNRR is a matter of fraught debate in Italy. On the PNRR's environmental policies: Maura Benegiamo and Emanuele Leonardi, "Per una critica ecologico-politica al PNRR," *Il Ponte*, 78, vol. 1 (2022): 49-57.

28 See https://www.comune.bologna.it/novita/notizie/edilizia-scolastica-100-milioni-euro

tural standards described by State directives on education. The plan was eventually brought to a stop.[29]

Rather than the specificities of the local struggle and power dynamics at work in the implementation of such a project—a kind of research that other PNRR-funded projects also invoke—our interrogation will rest on understanding which articulation of the human/nature divide, and which sustainability, is disclosed by such a project. Within the politics of sustainability espoused by the project for Scuola Quattrofoglie, Nature is still presupposed as an appropriable emptiness and externality; the so-called "green space" of architecture, urbanism and planning which can be made and remade at will, following the kind of "constructivism" that philosopher Frédéric Neyrat argues is at work in environmental governance, as well as in most strands of contemporary ecological thought.[30] Undoubtedly, the notion of sustainability alters the discourse proper to the accumulation of "fossil capital"[31]; but the point is it often cloaks the appropriation of Cheap Nature in its green robe. In this sense, the stewarding and management of Nature implied by the discourse on sustainability preserve lines of continuity with the reductionist approach of modern-functionalist planning,[32] in that they do not give up on a form of "management" which subordinates natural features and environments to building production. Along these lines, the sustainability pursued in Bologna is arguably more attuned to an economic register rather than environmental, ecological concerns; or further, Bologna provides insight into the ways in which an ecological goal overlaps with an economic register, promoting the insertion of Nature into an evaluative framework based on predominantly economic criteria.[33]

But aside from reckoning with the familiar paradigm of profit-oriented urban development, the project and struggles of the Scuola Besta allows us to broach the vexed question regarding the possibility of resisting architecture and urban planning's compulsion to do, produce and thus build. In short, to question the fact that projects

29 "La ricostruzione molto criticata delle scuole "Besta" di Bologna non si farà," *Il Post*, July 29 (2024). Available at: https://www.ilpost.it/2024/07/29/bologna-bloccato-progetto-contestato-ricostruzione-scuola-besta/

30 Neyrat, *The Unconstructable* Earth.

31 Andreas Malm, *The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2016). "Fossil capital […] is self-expanding value passing through the metamorphosis of fossil fuels into CO. [and] an endless flow of successive valorisations of value, at every stage claiming a larger body of fossil energy to burn" (Ibid., 90).

32 On the reductions proper to modern functionalism, see Bianchetti, *Spazi che Contano,* 7-14.

33 Orioli, "Pianificazione Urbanistica nella Città che Cambia," 92-111.

that do less are ruled out at the outset because they are not economically profitable, and thus not sustainable. Production *qua* construction, in such a context, is *still* what makes architecture, urbanism and planning sustainable. This perhaps amounts to nothing more than bringing Tafuri's critique of "building production" up to speed with the sustainable reorganization of capitalist modes of production.

Updating this realization invites paying more attention to the notion of "sustainable urban development," an even-more familiar term which is, in fact, one of the key areas of the EU's regional policy in the Green Transition.[34] The fundamentally unmanageable concentration of capital, energy and populations within limited urban areas make cities, as the EU's official statements tell us, "the engines of the European economy" but also "places where persistent problems, such as unemployment, segregation and poverty, are at their most severe."[35] Like so much urban research, the EU thus rightly locates the two-fold characteristic of cities: both the most productive and the most conflictual space of modern society. Within the Green Transition's call to deal with climate change, and thus to be more sustainable—in whatever way we understand this word—the European Urban Initiative (EUI)'s *Urban Agenda* tackles this urban challenge and suggests an integrated approach to urbanized areas that deals holistically with economic, social and environmental problems. Yet, as for the Green Transition, the Urban Agenda also reveals an underlying productivist or even *growthist* logic. Two short excerpts gesture towards this rationality:

> "The Urban Agenda is a new working method that aims to:
> - ensure maximum utilization of the growth potential of cities;
> - successfully tackle social challenges;
> - promote cooperation between Member States, Cities, the European Commission and other stakeholders;
> - stimulate growth, livability and innovation in the cities of Europe."[36]

Elsewhere, the Urban Agenda is set to provide "easy access to the latest knowledge and practical resources from diverse partners supporting EU Cohesion Policy for just, green and productive cities."[37] According to the EU's Urban Agenda, sustainable urban development

34 Luisetti, *Geopower*, 6.

35 See https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/themes/urban-development_en

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

must ensure and stimulate growth, and therefore, create productive cities. Economic growth needs production as it already is, or more, and so at the highest level it can possibly be. Indeed, we *do* need non-infrastructural and infrastructural projects to face contemporary socio-environmental issues, and urban planning is at the forefront in taking action against these urgencies. But what is the efficacy of such projects, and development, if the Green Transition understands sustainability through productivist metrics and criteria, as the call to ensure the "maximum utilization of the growth potential of cities" or "stimulating growth" in European cities seems to suggest? The contradiction, under current conditions, between making cities more just, greener and *yet* more productive is arguably understated in the most fundamental of intentions in European policy. On the contrary, we might acknowledge the fact that more production warrants more exploitation of productive labor and more appropriation of unpaid natural energy/work[38]; and that (sustainable) technological fixes will not do away with this fundamental structure of capitalist modes of production.[39] In this sense, as pointed out by economist Jeremy Green, the Green New Deal—one of the economic and political cornerstones of the green transitional agenda—preserves the same economic productivism of the New Deal, when ecological questions were far from prime concerns in economic policies of the State. The ambition for full employment, high consumption, economic expansion and rising national income in the 1920s and 30s, in this reading, is not justified by today's problem with overproduction; nor can the New Deal's militarized and exclusionary operations it unavoidably recalls be shrugged off for being a (degenerate) thing of the past.[40] Finally, the New Deal did not consider the concrete threat to existence on Earth, which evidently exceeds an economic problem.

One might therefore be wary of the use of language put in place by this new growth strategy. What might this political and economic position lead us to in considering the organization of space in the Green Transition? Growth (and its cyclical return to decline) has historically taken on "the meaning of a spatial ordering aimed at the expansion of the urban"[41] and we must query whether such a mean-

38 This is "value in the web of life" according to Jason Moore's ecological reequipment of Marxian theory of value. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, 51-87.

39 On this, Hickel Jason and Kallis Giorgos, "Is Green Growth Possible?," *New Political Economy* 25, no. 4 (2020): 469–86.

40 Peragine and Fardin, "From Keywords to Use", 15-16. See Green, "Greening Keynes?"

41 Michelangelo Russo, "Un'Urbanistica Senza Crescita?," in *Urbanistica per una Diversa Crescita. Progettare il Territorio Contemporaneo,* ed. Michelangelo Russo (Rome: Donzelli Editore, 2014), xv; xvii.

ing has preserved its significance. So far, in fact, our intention here has been to argue a banal yet glossed over fact: capitalist productivism also concerns architecture, urbanism and planning, whose building production is *still* determined by a logic external to them, i.e. economic production. Sustainable urban development of the Green Transition too—despite the existential threat to life on Earth—struggles to question the logic and scale of production. In doing so, it encounters a contradiction, attempting to put out a fire with petrol: it seeks to face ecological challenges but does not exit the modes of production that have fostered their emergence. This fundamental argument partly informs the intention of this chapter to reckon with the fact that architecture, urbanism and planning are subtended by a practice, a form of doing, that, even within the stewarding guise of sustainability, are oriented by one goal: production *qua* building. We might call this a *productivist* logic or *productivism*, to highlight the importance producing *as* construction has to architecture and urban planning today.

The next two sections of this chapter will try to formulate a disposition or orientation for thought and practice that figures canonically associated to the construction industry—as architects, urbanists, planners—might consider, or at least dwell on, in light of contemporary challenges. Can we think of an architecture and urbanism that does *not* produce, or more precisely, that resists production—without the illusion of an irenic outside to its logic? Before attempting to outline a tentative answer to this question, however, the next paragraphs will explore, more concretely, the historical roots of the productivist work of architecture, urbanism and planning in the Green Transition.

Expansion to Regeneration; Quantity and Quality; Production as Construction.

The key takeaway so far is thus that the Green Transition does not upset the productivist work of organizing space within contemporary capitalism, because it thinks design, in such a context, as a multi-scalar practice that needs to produce, and thus build, at all times and at all costs. But how does Tafuri's definition of architecture as the planned building production of the city unfold today in Italy, and what are some of the most evident transformations since the season of urban development Tafuri wrote about? Such a question more clearly brings up the disciplinary field of urbanism, or rather an exploration of the intersection, if not conflation, between architectural practice and urban design. The detailed reconstruction of these 20th century spatial transformations is beyond the scope of this text. Rather, this section will consider the main planning operations during the Italian post-war period up until today, as developments that have organized and set the orientation for production at the urban and territorial scales. The specific organization of space demanded by production also entails that urban and territorial planning tools articulate the human/nature divide in particular ways, based on the constructivist presupposition of the Anthropocene mentioned previously.

In attempting to break down such transformations, the next paragraphs will present a linear account of Italy's post-WWII planning history—an emphasis that will, hopefully, resonate with other Western geographies and histories. But the order of this analysis does not imply that such transformations are not made of negotiations, hiccups, and accelerations which trouble a linear periodization. This section will rather tap into rupturing events that have oriented Italian post-war planning: from the 1942 Fundamental Law of Urbanism to the 1967/1968 laws on urban planning standards, from the regionalization of State power and planning authority to recent laws on land consumption. The section will detect a shift from a logic of expansion *to* that of regeneration, trying to dialogue with similar readings

of this historical arc in Italy while suggesting a somewhat different interpretation. However, it will also insist on locating a co-existence between the criteria of quantity *and* quality in planning—rather than their succession—as well as a continuity of the logic of production *as* construction.

Looking into the Italian context, we note that the productivism of urbanism calls into question the discipline's relation to State institutions, and thus, to the specific importance accorded to planning, understood as a modern discipline that manages the future of a national community by organizing capitalist (re)production[1]. In this sense, we find Francesco Indovina's words from 1976 have preserved their relevance:

> "[…] no doubt the "plan," in any of its forms, needs to measure itself against institutional structures: from them the process of territorial programming acquires its capacity to be implemented […] This obvious consideration, however, must reckon with the "crisis" of institutions and particularly certain institutions; when we speak of the "crisis of institutions," we are not referring to a possible "perverse" use one can make of them, but to a deeper crisis, connected to the development of the productive forces."[2]

In other words, the relationship between planning and institutions is intimately tied to the transformations of economic powers. The crisis of *the Public* is thus not a contingent, situated phenomenon[3]—the Italian case being a particularly infamous one—but, we might add, a structural mechanism that has problematically tied the State

1 This view resonates with the definition of planning in Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons. A Radical History of Urban Planning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022).

2 Francesco Indovina, "Base materiale e schema interpretativo per la modificazione dell'organizzazione del territorio," in *Potere e Piani Urbanistici. Ideologia e Tecnica dell'Organizzazione Razionale del Territorio,* ed. Paolo Ceccarelli (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1976), 107-108.

3 The notion of "the public" is central to urbanism. At times, this centrality is not justified by precision. It is in fact most often the name for the power, and thus capacity, of State institutions to represent, protect and answer collectivity. Such a reading takes for granted the potential, but unavoidable conflicts and disarticulations there might be between collectivity (*la collettività*), the common (*il comune*) and the public power of the State. Moreover, it at times also fails to acknowledge the radical restructuring of State sovereignty since the brief stint of the Western welfare State. Perhaps, the public edges closer to Cristina Bianchetti's recognition that "the public is not simply the physical sediment of the habermasian scene as it were in modernity," since maybe, "the reason for its existence […] is to be found in desire." Bianchetti, *Il Novecento è Davvero Finito,* 105. Perhaps, in times of "disaster nationalism" and amid the faltering of liberal democratic values, this invites a deeper interrogation on the presumed monolithic, unitary nature of the Public—an ideological unity the capital P wishes to highlight—in relation to urbanism; see Richard Seymour, *Disaster Nationalism. The Downfall of Liberal Civilization* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2024).

to its mode of production since the incipient stages of capitalism.[4] Against theories regarding the primacy afforded by planning to the "general interest," Indovina suggests the insistence of an identity between economy and territory:

> "The organization of territory, precisely because it is not 'something other' than socio-economic processes, is the result of prevalent interest; such a 'prevalence' depends both on the real economic process and on political mechanisms at work. The process of territorial planning intervenes directly and instrumentally in determining this 'prevalence' […]"[5]

For Indovina, the organization of space is not far removed from that of production and planning determines the interest of a specific political power. Such an equation may need to be softened so as to allow a certain intractability of territory, in a way that recalls Secchi's rejection of a pure Base-Superstructure reflection.[6] Yet, one cannot entirely abandon the recognition that production, and its interests, have determined the territorial and urban configurations of contemporary Italy.

Indeed, in his *Prima Lezione di Urbanistica*, Secchi describes urbanism as "a practice that produces concrete outcomes: houses, roads, squares, gardens and spaces of different nature and configuration."[7] Further into the book, urbanism, considering its specific epistemological domain, is for Secchi about: "knowledge, rather than science; knowledge about the modes of construction, continuous modification and improvement of living space and the city in particular."[8]

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4 And, thus, welfare to the inequalities and violence inherent to capitalist modes of production, to the extent that we might speak of "welfare capitalism", borrowing on Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The three worlds of welfare capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), or "warfare-welfare capitalism." Maurizio Lazzarato, *Guerra o Rivoluzione? Perché la Pace non è un'Alternativa* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2022), 42; 75. Lazzarato takes this argument further by arguing that, in the current conjuncture, "it is useless to oppose capital (with its totally relative power) and the State (with its ever-more authoritarian sovereignty) because they work together" (Ibid., 47). The two constitute a two-headed machine, an integration that never becomes identity: "The hegemony of one over the other changes depending on the conjuncture, but in such a way that it is impossible to make two powers or one out of them" (Ibid., 136).

5 Indovina, "Base Materiale e Schema Interpretativo," 103.

6 Or, as put by Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture. Selected Essays* (London: Verso Books, 1980), 32: "the simplest notion of a superstructure, which is still by no means entirely abandoned, had been the reflection, the imitation or the reproduction of the reality of the base in the superstructure in a more or less direct way." Andrea Cavalletti, "Responsabilità dell'urbanistica," in *Bernardo Secchi. Libri e Piani*, eds. Cristina Renzoni and Maria Chiara Tosi (Venezia: Officina Edizioni, 2017) mentions this characteristic of Secchi's stance, according to which "any structural transformation of the economy has expressed itself historically as a new urban question", an apparently vulgar-Marxist (or Engelsian) position "had Secchi not added to this, as a corrective, a refusal of the "reflective" version. Territory, he tells us, is not a pure reflection of the economy (Ibid., 263). Indeed, for Secchi, space: "is neither infinitely malleable, nor infinitely available to the changes of the economy, institutions and politics." See Bernardo Secchi, *La Città dei Ricchi, la Città dei Poveri* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2013), 13.

7 Bernardo Secchi, *Prima Lezione di Urbanistica* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2000), 7.

8 Ibid., 31.

In these terms, urbanism is thus not a hard science but rather a patchwork practice that combines theory and practice, analytical research and imagination, to the point that urbanism is defined by Secchi as a form of design, that is, "the technical description of a possible future or of one of its aspects in particular, along with the strategies that are needed for its construction"[9]: a technical and strategic practice, or project, that articulates a relation between the here and now and its future(s). As put by Secchi in the very first lines of the same book, the theory of urbanism therefore revolves around "the project of the future."[10]

Recalling several of Secchi's definitions of urbanism serves the purpose of highlighting how design is conjured up as both a work of material production and one of utopian imagination regarding the future. Secchi's utopia stands for an "extreme effort in imagination"[11]: a fundamental, irreducible element that, recalling Tafuri, animates the project of urbanism. In this sense, Secchi's urbanism evidently does not fall into the productivist argument. But setting aside the initial statement in his preface, Secchi first inscribes urbanism within the productive practice it is most often condemned to. It is most interesting to note how Secchi's claims oscillate—perhaps more generously than Tafuri's reading—between the two poles of an unresolved, and indeed insoluble, tension that places production in relation to imagination, and vice versa. One cannot do away with production. But as opposed to the architectural object, this tension at the urban and territorial scale is exacerbated by the proliferation and dispersion of powers, institutions, interests, urgencies which make up the fraught arena of the social as a complex set of forces and relations of production.[12] The point, in other words, is that the programmes, plans and projects this section touches on express and organize the relation politics entertains with built and unbuilt environments at many scales, in a specific historical context. From this vantage point

9 Ibid., 37.

10 Ibid., x.

11 Ibid., 63.

12 Although, we should stress that for Secchi society is rather a complex system of signs and symbols, according to a semiotic framework that the Italian urbanist imports from Roland Barthes, or, alternatively, a Foucauldian field of power relations.

on the relation between power and space,[13] we will move from the political economy of architecture, urbanism and planning in the 20th century to an interrogation of the politics and environments proposed by the Green Transition.

Italian urbanism is notably founded on a 1942 law of the Italian Fascist government: Law 1150, or Fundamental Law of Urbanism [*Legge Urbanistica Fondamentale*]. This law is based on progressive European models of planning: a functionalist plan that followed the rationalist style of the day—and is still, following substantial revisions, the law which regulates urban planning in Italy.[14] Changes to Law 1150/1942 mean that, while such an instrument is still Italian planning's main reference, no unitary legislative apparatus coordinates comprehensively urban and territorial planning in the country today. The logic of functionalist planning is fundamentally productive: the city, Tafuri *docet*, must be efficient, rational and productive. According to its commas, the Law (comma 1) disciplines "the structure and increase of building production in settlements as well as urban development overall."[15]

The functionalist model of Law 1150/1942 articulated a specific human/nature divide. A short non-technical excerpt of the Law gives an idea of the important role afforded to Nature within the Fascist regime's political discourse. The Ministry of Public Works, as it was called then: "oversees activities also with the goal, within the renewal and expansion of cities' built environments, of preserving traditional features, favoring de-urbanization and slowing down urbanization."[16] This anti-urban goal was in line with the Fascist government's intention to promote a form of ruralist productivism: a form of production based around the material and symbolic register of agriculture, whereby mostly-rural populations across Italy would be relocated so as to reclaim abandoned, quasi-virgin land—indeed,

13 Paul Hirst, *Space and Power. Politics, War and Architecture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005). Overall, this work "is concerned with the various ways in which space is configured by power and in which space becomes a resource for power," although "space is more than a malleable set of coordinates in the service of power [but] ha[s] characteristics that affect the conditions in which power can be exercised, conflicts pursued and social control attempted" (Ibid., 3). A point similar to that made by Secchi, *La Città dei Ricchi, la Città dei Poveri*, 13.

14 "If it is still in force that is not only thanks to how it was drawn up, but due to the republican legislator's incapacity to deal with its renewal." Vezio De Lucia, *L'Italia era Bellissima. Città e Paesaggio nell'Italia Repubblicana* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2022), 100.

15 Cited in Edoardo Salzano, *Fondamenti di Urbanistica. La Storia e la Norma* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2003): 75.

16 Available at: https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:1942-08-17;1150.

to "regenerate" Nature[17]—building on post-unitary rural development plans. The presuppositions of this political project were order, productivity, population.[18] South to North, such a politics was pursued by way of a project of design: urban structures of towns and cities like Carbonia, Foggia, Latina, Tresigallo are telling.

However, while the Fundamental Law of Urbanism arguably constituted the first act of modern Italian planning, it became operational years after it came into force, out of the material devastation Italy would then experience shortly after, during World War II. Cities, in that period, were rebuilt through the 1945 Plans of Reconstruction. Part of the literature on this inversion has it that while reconstruction in many countries constituted an opportunity to give a new rational base for urban and territorial (re)development, "in Italy, vice versa, [reconstruction] was used to lay down the tools that were already at planning's disposal," through "agile and emergency dispositives,"[19] so as to "avoid planning regulations."[20] According to Tafuri, the years of post-war reconstruction and intense urbanization were characterized by a bifurcation between politics and urbanism—one which arguably persists to this day. Architects and planners sided with a holistic intervention but did not dwell on what kind of technical-institutional structures would have been able to carry it out.[21] At the same time, the period of reconstruction constituted the intellectual and political test bed for post-regime Italian urbanism and its multifaceted relation with State institutions, "a State presumed to be the natural site for the 'coordination' of intervention and the foundation of urbanism's legitimacy as a science."[22]

Aside from the role of the State, the debate among architects and urbanists revolved around specific planning experiences North

17 Marco Armiero, Roberta Biasillo, and Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, *Mussolini's Nature*. An *Environmental History of Italian Fascism* (London and Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2022), 1: "the fascist regime had its own vision of nature and a clear project for the transformation of the Italian environment. To be more precise, the fascist project resembled regeneration more than a generic plan of transformation. […] grounded on the belief that nature had to undergo a deep transformation process in order to return to its original condition. Land reclamation was the key word in the fascist discourse and practices of nature, and it was a concept closely linked to that of regeneration. By modifying the land, the regime intended to regenerate Italians […]."

18 Maria Rosa Protasi and Eugenio Sonnino, "Politiche di popolamento: colonizzazione interna e colonizzazione demografica nell'Italia liberale e fascista," *SIDeS, Popolazione e Storia*, vol. 1 (2003): 91-138.

19 These plans had to be defined within 3 months and were supposedly planned in coordination with pre-existing PRGs (if they actually existed). These special laws applied only for portions of the municipality. See Vezio De Lucia, *Se Questa è Una Città* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1992), 24.

20 Salzano, *Fondamenti*, 110.

21 Manfredo Tafuri, *History of Italian Architecture 1944-1985* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1989), 5.

22 Olmo, *Urbanistica e Società Civile*, 78-79.

to South of the peninsula, ground rent as a "metaphysics of evil in urbanism," the questions of monumental heritage and the rural landscape. The latter was essentially "anthropomorphic, built from human Labour," a physiocratic inclination that viewed "land as the origin of wealth and assumed the countryside as a matrix of morality."[23] Nature, in this sense, was viewed as a material and ideological ruse for the end of economic and cultural development of the new Republican State. The Italian government's programme, in fact, initially focused on agricultural production and promoted the rational restructuring of rural Italy, which urbanism interpreted by distributing the national population and fostering tourism as an undeniable economic resource. The industrial core in the North (Milano-Torino-Genova), heavily damaged by WWII, drove this national policy and contributed to large-scale South to North, rural to urban movements of populations to support the shift from agricultural to industrial relations and modes of production.[24]

In 20 years, the housing stock grew four times faster than the population.[25] This sprawl was and is made of sizable residential expansion with high floor area ratio, large-scale industrial linear settlements and mobility infrastructures. Reconstruction marked an irredeemable split between architecture and urbanism, that most pronouncedly appeared in the conflictual relation between the autonomous design of housing projects and the tension toward globality inherent to town plans. Ten years into the process, as Olmo notes, reconstruction would be understood as a transitional period with "eschatological" hues portraying redemption and new foundations for urbanism at its end. This narrative would contribute to the legitimation of planning in the first stretch of the post-WWII period.[26]

In 1949, INA-Casa—the post-war Italian public housing programme which came into force under the then Minister of Work Amintore Fanfani—was planned by the new government as a means to build housing for workers by employing a mass of unskilled labor.[27] Production to accelerate production. Tafuri suggests that the produc-

23 Ibid., 93.

24 Vezio De Lucia, *L'Italia era Bellissima,* 20.

25 Salzano, *Fondamenti*, 111; 114-116. See also *Storie di Case. Abitare l'Italia del Boom*, eds. Filippo de Pieri *et al.* (Rome: Donzelli Editore, 2013).

26 Olmo, *Urbanistica e Società Civile*, 99-108.

27 This goal is explictly contained in the name of Law 43/1949, called "*Progetto di legge per incrementare l'occupazione operaia, agevolando la costruzione di case per i lavoratori*" [Government bill to increase workers' occupation by facilitating the construction of houses for workers].

tion of the built environment, in this sense, was posited as a conjunctural means to contain unemployment, preserve and manage a structural-technical lack of the Italian construction industry to support heavy production, help small-scale private companies through public investment and prevent the massification of working-class struggles. Building production was also organized by financial capital and property speculation: urbanism *as* construction was a way to give jobs but also to generate ground rent.[28] In this context, Italy witnessed the emergence of what Tafuri calls "the speculative city"[29] to name how the production of the built environment, at that time, gravitated around the plan to bend city-making to the imperative of capitalist accumulation. INA-Casa neighbourhoods and their new infrastructure were built in cheap peripheral areas with the goal of seizing on the gap in real estate value that urban sprawl would create from then on. In other words, INA-Casa answered the economic demands of Italy in post-war Europe's industrial panorama, by acting as a driver for the State's productive capacity: creating new jobs, to the detriment of the environment and poorer classes which were gradually excluded from the housing market. Indeed, in Western Europe, until the late 1960s, the construction of service buildings, housing and infrastructure was mostly under the supervision of centralized public authorities, following a historically specific economic and political plan: a production plan, or a plan of production carried out by the State and its ramifications through an admixture of macroeconomic planning, incomes policy and welfare provision—what revolutionary politics censoriously called the "planning-State."[30]

Post-war reconstruction was thus evidently productive. As put by Tafuri "the plan was to develop the efficiency and competitive capacity of the productive system."[31] Within this period building production in post-war Italy was significantly transformed by the so-called *Legge Ponte* of 1967, which acted on Law 1150/1942. Firstly, in terms of expansion, because the transitional period it put into force (the infamous "year of moratorium") encouraged the issue of 8 million building

28 Tafuri, *History of Italian Architecture*, 15-16.

29 Ibid., 46

30 Or, in Italian, "*Stato-piano*." See Toni Negri, *I Libri del Rogo* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2024), 19-72. Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Great Recoil. Politics after Populism and Pandemic* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2021) aptly speaks of the emergence of a new planning-State.

31 Tafuri, *History of Italian Architecture*, 41.

permits and thus urbanization.[32] But also, decades later than other countries in Europe, because the Legge Ponte refined the zoning of cities, road distances and put in place urban planning standards: every plan, would there on need to take into account a minimum amount of "utilities and public space" and, according to an integration from 1968 (D.M. 1444), each citizen would be entitled to have access to 18 sqm of public utilities and space.

Of interest to us, however, is to ask what kind of human/nature divide emerges from this welfarist approach to urbanism. The wager is the contradictions of this law—insufficient standards, failure to enforce them, zoning as design criteria[33]—were allowed not due to the supposed (and racialized) "cultural backwardness" of Italians, but in the name of a form of productivity that is best expressed by the quantitative approach to planning in the first stretch of the post-war period. A productivity that in effect, through political mismanagement, allowed for the preservation of certain configurations of power and capital. The "public green" of urban planning standards, in Italian, *verde pubblico*—an eloquent term used by D.M. 1444/1968 which indicates the existence of an abstract Nature as an element of State-welfare provision—referred specifically to quantitative measures, rather than its qualities or characteristics. As put by Secchi in regard to housing policies and territorial planning, this was a feature of the Italian welfare state: a quantitative, distributive or compensatory measure that went hand in hand with the expansion of production and employment.[34] In fact, to tackle the causal nexus located by post-war inquiries into the "scarcity, poverty and injustices" of the peninsula, Italian planning aimed at breaking with "all social relations, typically monopoly and rent, that impeded the expansion of production."[35]

The quantitative relation of reconstruction plans and building production to natural elements, also at work in the provision of public green, falls under urbanists' attention toward "the new, that which must be built,"[36], and thus toward "the city of expansion [*la città di*

32 Salzano, *Fondamenti*, 127.128. Federico Ferrari, "Due complessi residenziali per la Toro," in *Storie di Case,* eds. Filippo de Pieri *et al*., 200. This law also sanctioned direct intervention by the State against municipalities which did not put into force this law, and thus also a town plan, while also acting against private illegal construction.

33 Salzano, *Fondamenti*, 140-141.

34 Secchi, *Il Racconto Urbanistico*. See also Tafuri, *History of Italian Architecture,* 1989: 153-54.

35 Secchi, *Il Racconto Urbanistico*, 66.

36 Ibid.

espansione], the external zone"[37]—an external space proper to the appropriation and quantitative management of Nature.

Yet, an undemanding critique of post-war treatment of natural features by the work of architecture, urbanism and planning should not diminish the deep discontinuity in State interventionism between the so-called *Miracolo Italiano* and today—when, as we will see, the Public is *de facto* made to retreat from planning authority. Rather, the point is that the quantitative productivism that emerges out of the first twenty-five years of Italian post-war planning is entangled in a web of non-welfarist influences that still characterize the retreat of the State from planning authority today, the effects of which started to play out most notably in the seventies and eighties. Perhaps the tendency of urbanism and planning disciplines to hark back to the brief existence[38] of the Western European welfare state and its interventionist politics in the fields of housing and services points precisely at this interruption.[39] At the same time, to do away with all of the dangers of nostalgia,[40] we will try to update this disciplinary *welfarism*[41] in light of contemporary intersections between capitalist modes of production, State sovereignty and other articulations of the human/nature divide.

Up until the 1970s, the productivism of Italian urban planning was bound to the imperative of building housing, often for the end of

37 Ibid., 67.

38 "The organization of space […] has had much to do with the Golden Age's patient capital, when it showed a convergence between places, resources, priorities, technics […] based on widespread trust and dream of stable wellbeing (a dream that would have turned out to be incredibly brief)." Bianchetti, *Spazi che Contano*, 106.

39 "For urbanism, foundational values and aporias are redistribution and the privilege awarded to training actors." Carlo Olmo, *Architettura e Novecento. Diritti, Conflitti, Valori* (Rome: Donzelli Editore, 2010), 52.

40 Nostalgia in urbanism is perhaps most evidently at work within its idea(s) of community. According to Jean-Luc Nancy, the West is always already "given itself over to the nostalgia for a more archaic community that has disappeared, and to deploring a loss of familiarity, fraternity and conviviality." Nancy, *The Inoperative Community,* 10. In this sense, "the nostalgia for a communal being was at the same time the desire for a work of death" (Ibid., 17). On the dangers and contradictions of a communitarian (and nostalgic) dimension of urbanism see Richard Lee Peragine, "Not a Project at All." There are however reflections on the radical potential of nostalgia for urban planning, see Carmelo Albanese, "Memorie dei luoghi e nostalgia come strumenti per la progettazione urbana," *Machina*, November 18, 2021. Available at: https://www.machina-deriveapprodi.com/post/memorie-dei-luoghi-e-nostalgia-come-strumenti-per-la-progettazione-urbana

41 Or what could be called urbanism's (at times problematic) "continuous research of a concrete dimension of *welfare*." Secchi, *La Città dei Ricchi, la Città dei Poveri,* 56. This has much to do with the central question of redistribution today. See also Secchi, *La Città del Ventesimo Secolo* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2005).

speculative profit and programmatic state-building.[42] As mentioned above, this logic of production was grounded on imbalanced territorial development between rural and urban areas, as much as Northern and Southern Italy, and acted as a measure to counter unemployment and eventually disperse the power of workers' organization. But the Italian State would shortly thereafter need to face and alleviate the difficulties caused by the structural contradictions of such a form of housing production, as well as by the political events which took place during and after 1968. In this sense, the Law of 1972 (DPR January 15, n 8) revolved around the capacity of newly refashioned regions to mediate the high-powered conflict of the time, between an organized working class and social movements and industrial production. But also, we can read some of the reforms of this period against the background of the incipient forms of globalization, a time that demanded a radical change in scale.

More connectivity implied the need for *more* space for the end of *more* production. While, until then, it had been a matter of *urban* planning, production thereby became truly *territorial*; the breaking down of State power into "regions"[43] welcomed the demands of larger-scale planning. The famous work of a group of urbanists at the Politecnico di Milano on the "*città-fabbrica*" [city-factory] to refer to the ways in which the social organization of labour—"*fabbrica sociale*" [social factory]—was planned within the metropolis, along with its conflicts, at this point, needed to be scaled up to territorial dimensions: the figure of the "distributed factory" described the "decentralization" of productive settlements, and concomitant "political decongestion" of the labour force at the larger territorial scale.[44] This necessity of production ordered territory, while articulating a novel arrangement between institutions, forces of production and planning; in Tafuri's words:

42 Production is indeed a lens through which to examine housing and inhabitation within the Fordist paradigm: "for a long time the question of inhabitation was erected against that ideological background that came with the transformation of industrial forms of capitalist accumulation." Bianchetti, *Il Novecento*, 73-74. In this sense, architects "were right to take up the problem [of housing], but wrong to believe that it was their invention. It had already been invented and dramatized by the capitalist system, which having urbanized masses of farmers to generate manpower for industry without providing for their settlement in the city, now found itself in a tight spot, caught in the web of its own contradictions. The alarm expressed itself in the slogan 'more housing or less production' (and in the architects' more strident echo 'architecture or revolution'). The remedy prescribed was the construction, possibly in series, of the cheapest possible housing." Giancarlo De Carlo, "Architecture's Public," in *Architecture and Participation*, eds. Peter Blundell Jones, Doina Petrescu, Jeremy Till (London and New York: Spoon Press, 2005), 8.

43 *Regione* is the political and administrative territorial unit of the Italian State. There are currently 20 regions in Italy.

44 Alberto Magnaghi *et al.*, *La Città Fabbrica. Contributi per un'Analisi di Classe del Territorio* (Milan: Cooperativa Libraria Universitaria del Politecnico, 1970), 68-72.

> "a new institutional armature and a new capitalist strategy were thus delineated in the early 1960s [*sic*, 'Seventies' in the Italian text] serving a politics of rationalization no longer motivated by the ethical and enlightened considerations of the preceding decade, to embrace a large-scale system of production."[45]

The emerging (neo)liberal democratic order and operations of global capital braced up to undermine the welfarist orientation the Italian state had aligned with following WWII. Novel processes of negotiation started to receive the shared interests of coalitions of corporate-private actors and public institutions over whole territories. Planning was used as a tool to mediate new configurations of power.[46]

The so-called "Oil crisis" of 1973, however, hit the large-scale intentions of the global market. At the infrastructural-industrial scale, the global capitalist economy was trying to find ways to bypass the geopolitical interruption of energy provision, while reckoning with the possibility of a sudden halt to production. Structural transformations to capital and sovereignty impacted the way in which urban and territorial planning was being organized: the practice of "regeneration," technological advancements in model analyses, communication and mobility technologies, the discourse on urban management, as well as the further handing down of planning authority to corporate and private interests have been key features of the work of architecture, urbanism and planning since the mid-70s. The transformations produced by the two-fold movement between an anomic drive of global operations of capital and the telluric weight of politi-

45 Tafuri, *History of Italian Architecture,* 105.

46 Ceccarelli, *Potere e Piani Urbanistici*. Ceccarelli highlights the relevance of studying planning as a way to understand power itself. His analysis regarding industrial production settlements shows that decision itself, rather than the content of the plan was the point of private-public negotiation processes. Such a decision is not exclusively productive nor particularly viable in economic terms but corresponds to experimentations of economic *and* political power through the development of production districts. Substantiating Tafuri's claim, Ceccarelli's work reconstructs how workers' struggles oriented political decisions in Pomigliano d'Arco, Taranto and Ottana—failed settlements from an economic-productive perspective, but laboratories of political experimentation. In doing so, Ceccarelli questions the welfarism of planning. In his words: "In actual fact this sheds light on how, the old principle of an administrative public machine, in theory *inspired only by the goal to answer to "public interest*," was replaced by an administrative machine *inspired by the principle of satisfying public interest, while looking for and securing profit at the same time*. This shift is far from secondary; it upends the old order of priorities, the traditional system of criteria against which the effectiveness of political action could be indexed" (Ibid., 82).

cal territorialism set the stakes of novel forms of sovereignty,[47] radically altering the configuration of cities and territories in and beyond the Eurowestern world: the deindustrialization—or rather, delocalization[48]—of production, changing demographic trends, evidence of environmental damage, and sprawling urbanization conjure up a seemingly unrecognizable image of the city. A unitary image of the latter no longer held, as the realm of the urban was increasingly thought of as a complex assortment of "fragments." Trading on a deconstructivist or post-Heideggerian questioning of nihilism that owes a lot to *pensiero debole*,[49] Italian architectural theory imported the end of metaphysics as a formal argument in the context of the physical voids of deindustrialization.

This conjuncture did little to upend the logic of production and the impacts on planning were not long in coming. Rather, as put by Bianchetti, "the feeling was that of an important reserve of land within cities. A reserve that was taken, with some approximations, as an extraordinary opportunity to redraw."[50] Deregulation brought about the atomization of urban development, which picked up on the discourse on regeneration. Rather than expansion, an incipient discourse on transformation, renovation and regeneration started to take up the discursive and operative horizon of urbanism[51]. To this day, in fact, the use of the term regeneration in particular seems to have preserved its logics and effects, as the next chapter will discuss more in detail. Along with these keywords, the increasingly negative social and ecological impacts of indefinite urbanizations pushed Italy, as well as the rest of the Western world, to try to focus planning efforts

47 The demise of the nation-state must consider the parallel reinforcement of state-apparatuses. Rather than claiming that a set of factors are engendering the crumbling of the State, we might consider the pressure of neoliberal finance and securitization strategies as producing an intensification of state-sovereignty in certain domains, above all, in those of policing, border and migration management, and thus 'of tendencies towards authoritarian statism, with a much more decisive turn to militarization and para-militarization and a greatly enhanced "super-vision" state.' Bob Jessop, *The State. Past, Present, Future* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 245. The State, in other words, for Jessop, is a complex social relation 'that reflects the changing balance of social forces in a determinate conjuncture', in this case that of a reaction to "crisis" (Ibid., 247). Within this movement of unity and disunity of the State in contemporary capitalism, however, public planning authority is indeed marred by (transnational) private coalitions of interest. For an exploration of the vast literature of this two-fold movement of unity and disunity with regards to space, see Richard Lee Peragine, "The Project of Emptiness. Sovereignty, the weaponization of space and architecture in the Bosnian Krajina" (PhD diss., Politecnico di Torino, 2024), 37–88.

48 "It is essential to remind ourselves that the world has not deindustrialized, everything is made somewhere. Where things are made, however, has dramatically changed." Steven High, "Theorizing Deindustrialization," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Deindustrialization Studies*, eds. Tim Strangleman *et al*. (New York: Routledge), 28

49 Tafuri, *History of Italian Architecture*, 189-201.

50 Bianchetti, *Il Novecento è Davvero Finito,* 115.

51 This horizon of regeneration is not clear of conflict. Giancarlo de Carlo, for instance, speaks of how "landowning capital and state bureaucracy had combined interests, preparing the brutal operation known as 'urban renewal'." De Carlo, "Architecture's Public", 10.

on already urbanized land and already existing built environments. This shift however should in no way be conflated with an abandonment of the productivist logic, although it might have amounted to a relative fall in building production. The fact that the physical expansion of built environments onto whole territories became a matter of political and scientific debate neither means that such a form of restraint was actually binding, nor that the compulsion to build was brought to a halt in the construction industry: "a *continuous* growth, that merely changed in terms of form and intensity."[52] Production as construction found other ways to prolong its building agenda, according to a paradigm we might call *qualitative productivism*.

In Italy, the incipient forms of the thought and practice of regeneration showed in the cultural and economic productive value of Italy's old towns [*centri storici*]. I *Piani di Recupero* [Recovery Plans] are an example of this, with Bologna's highly praised 1974 plan for social housing within the perimeter of the town's walls being a celebrated intervention in terms of the extension to a local government of the welfarist orientation of the Italian State of the previous decades.[53] The plan for Bologna aptly portrays the shift to qualitative productivism and was grounded in an analytical and typological survey of existing buildings by Saverio Muratori, Gian Franco Caniggia and Paolo Maretto, whose work enabled "the transformation […] of the first survey regarding historical-environmental values from quantitative into qualitative."[54]

The work of urban planning in particular increasingly saw itself as a *katechon,* as a material and moral bulwark to deregulated economic and political power whose final end coincides with the slowing down of sprawling development.[55] Illegal construction is an exemplary site of conflict between private unfettered construction and public restrain, as well as an indicator of planning's environmentalism in the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1980s and 1990s, in order to face the construction of illegal buildings and settlements, a number of legislative measures came into force to try to simplify building per-

52 Michelangelo Russo, "Un'Urbanistica Senza Crescita?," in *Urbanistica per una Diversa Crescita,* ed. Michelangelo Russo, xviii.

53 Carlo De Angelis, "Quarant'anni dopo. Piano PEEP Centro storico 1973. Note a margine, tra metodo e prassi," *Ricerche e Progetti per il Territorio, la Città e l'Architettura* 6 (2013): 36-52; De Lucia, *L'Italia era Bellissima*, 25-26.

54 Salzano, *Fondamenti*, 134.

55 In this sense, we might interpret Bianchetti's words, through Luigi Mazza: "A technique which is exercised in the name of State-power and with regards to land. Not an end in itself. Neither the pure manifestation of authority. On the contrary, the protection of land from the violence of the market." Bianchetti, *Il Novecento è Davvero Finito,* 107.

mits, such as the first building amnesty [*condono*]. Building amnesties have solidified the correspondence between fiscal, economic measures and territories, while entrenching the conflict between public and private interests that undergirded the Fundamental Law of Urbanism. Law 431/1985 (Legge Galasso) should be framed within this antagonism and sensibility toward the question of illegal urbanization. Following global discourse on environmental governance,[56] Law 431/1985 *stewards* and *protects* the environment, "zones of particular environmental interest," rather than the "natural beauties" of the previous (Fascist) legislation.[57] At the same time, building amnesties introduced an "exemption-as-rule" [*deroga come regola*] approach to urbanism which encroaches on the binding environmentalism of the Legge Galasso: "the technics of environmental evaluations were only formally binding […] objectives as solemnly declared as they were unfailingly ignored."[58]

This two-fold process triggered many critical voices. Bernardo Secchi and Giuseppe Campos Venuti refer to planning instruments devised in this period as "third generation plans"[59] to indicate a planned shift in intensity: while general plans (PRG) organized growth and development homogeneously across the whole territory, third generation plans set out to differentiate specific uses and functions which would strategically orient urban and territorial transformation. In this context, the logic of expansion was replaced by regeneration (or transformation). Secchi in particular highlights the importance of "social practices,"[60] through which the work of urbanism might be capable of gauging the density of social relations. These plans thus brought to the fore renewed interest in urban *quality*, opposed to the strictly quantitative approach that acted as the presupposition of previous planning tools. Third generation plans jettisoned the logic of quantity for quality, the idea of a model city for its analytical interpretation. As Tafuri puts it in his review of them, these plans are:

> "a critique of quantitative urban planning and the model-plan [..] articulated intervention into existing structures [which] assumed quality as its objective, historical and morphological analysis as its method, and vacant urban lots as its chosen places for intervention.

56 Luisetti, *Geopower,* 10.

57 Ibid., 220-222.

58 De Lucia, *L'Italia era Bellissima,* 41.

59 Giuseppe Campos Venuti, *La terza generazione dell'urbanistica* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1987).

60 Secchi, *Il Racconto Urbanistico*, 60-61.

> Thus we have moved from the dogma of indefinite growth in the countryside [*sic,* "*territorio*" in the Italian text] to a keen interest in transforming the least qualified elements of existing cities. Considerations of an ecological and demographic character have been wedded to ideas concerning the new demand for transformation."[61]

Quality refers both to urban space and the environment, with such a new demand for transformation amounting precisely to a call for projects of "urban regeneration." However, as Tafuri points out, the efficacy of the subjective metric of "quality"—"a *go-to word* that served all uses"[62]—crumbles under the pressure of actual intervention. If third generation plans shed light on a differentiated approach whose goal is to abandon the functionalist rubric of modernist planning, as well as the quantitative logic of welfarist urbanism, at the same time, the complexity and contradictions of capitalist accumulation exceeded the operative capacity of the discipline and its call for a universal notion of (urban) quality. Urbanists and architects such as Giuseppe Campos Venuti and Secchi, or, earlier, Giancarlo De Carlo,[63] recognized this limit and attempted to develop ways to wade through these conflictual currents.

The tension inherent to the logic of quality is further vexed by the political conflicts inherent to planning. Third generation plans could not but be the result of what is called *urbanistica contrattata*, or a form of negotiation between private and public actors—"that is, when property, not the common [*il comune*] rules,"[64] the definitive "subordination of public interest to the private."[65] This means that the plan renounces its work as a mode of execution to the primacy of a "a decision-making process" within a highly divided society, in which territorial phenomena can no longer be planned as expected—if they ever could. Against this impossibility, architecture and urbanism are made to coincide, with the danger "that one may ask of architecture something it cannot offer, and thus forgo more careful analyses and interpretations of contexts."[66] This leads, according to Tafuri, to "the abstract superimposition of *project-plans* onto an urban structure

61 Tafuri, *History of Italian Architecture*, 157.

62 Bianchetti, *Il Novecento è Davvero Finito,* 116.

63 "The invention of nodes of intense architectural quality aims to cover over the lack of quality of urbanized fabric in their surroundings and divert attention away from the strictly quantitative thefts sanctioned on this same fabric Giancarlo De Carlo, *Architettura della Partecipazione* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2015), 59.

64 Salzano, *Fondamenti,* 195.

65 Ibid., 196.

66 Tafuri, *History of Italian Architecture*, 159

whose morphological structure needed to be understood before any attempt was made to intervene."[67] There are moreover cases where urban design could do little to counter issues which needed radical political and economic restructuring, within and beyond Northern and Western Europe. Put differently, under the economic pressure and political atomization of the deregulated city, large-scale attempts to plan the city gradually gave way to smaller-scale architectural and urban design projects of regeneration. Therefore, *projects* rather than *plans* were put forward, as a way to overcome these issues by making intervention shorter-term, downsizing predictions (and so financial burden), working through a liberalized and diluted form of participation,[68] and ultimately making urban planning and architectural intervention correspond in a form of urban design.

We can consider the nineties and, to a certain extent, the early 21st century as a prolongation and intensification of some of the aspects that architecture, urbanism and planning had been preoccupied with starting from the mid-1970s. At the same time, the accelerated atomization and deregulation of capitalism at the turn of the century introduced new discursive registers and figures to design disciplines. This "ambiguity,"[69] as put by Bianchetti, amounts to "*the conflation* of old and new *values*, their re-articulation."[70] Indeed, the nineties further the idea of acting on the existing city through quasi-autonomous urban design projects.[71] But the latter also bring to the fore the discourse which takes its cue from the neoliberal register of management, as exposed by the "the many enthusiasms about participation and governance innovation that occupy all of the nineties."[72] At the larger scale, as Francesco Indovina's work suggests, urban and territorial analyses were concerned with how the city's exhibited an unfamiliar "dispersed" structure,[73] while attuning to an ecological sensi-

67 Ibid., 164; see also Bianchetti, *Il Novecento è Davvero Finito*: 121-122.

68 De Carlo, *Architettura della Partecipazione*, 82. See also Markus Miessen, *The Nightmare of Participation. Crossbench Praxis as a Mode of Criticality* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011).

69 Bianchetti, *Il Novecento è Davvero Finito,* 16.

70 Ibid., 10*;* 107-33.

71 What Carlo Olmo, with Secchi, calls "project-based urbanism" of the mid-1980s, which "will cross over into the autonomy of the architectural project." Olmo, *Architettura e Novecento,* 52.

72 Bianchetti, *Il Novecento è Davvero Finito,* 122.

73 "[…] we are in the presence of urban sprawl [*città diffusa*] every time that, despite the absence of proximity, conditions for urban types of use occur"; the *città diffusa* is urban "not just in morphological terms, but due to its elements of organization, function and use." Francesco Indovina, "È necessario 'diramare' la città diffusa? Le conseguenze sul governo del territorio di un chiarimento terminologico," in *Dalla Città Diffusa all'Arcipelago Metropolitano*, Francesco Indovina, with contributions from Luigi Doria, Laura Fregolent and Michelangelo Savino (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2009), 121. Also, Bianchetti, *Il Novecento è Davvero Finito,* 24-42.

bility. The experience of the ordinary, of the everyday, held a central position, promoting "an out-of-date humanism"[74] that "has removed contrasts and refused the constitutive dimension of antagonism."[75]

What about today? What has changed since such a period of ambiguity at the turn of the century? Deregulation is combining with forms of economic protectionism and with an anti-liberal politics fomented by the identitarian communitarianism of muscular States supported by corporate autocrats, or what Richard Seymour calls "disaster nationalism."[76] This novel arrangement of capital and power is accelerating the global war economy and has brought forward the possibility of a multipolar order, or what has been called an "open transition,"[77] while setting out to erode the Green Transition's contradictory but vital objectives. In such a context, cities and territories, as well as the planning process itself, increasingly experience a process of privatization and dependency to sectorial production (energy, agri-food, logistics, war). The Public *allows* this encroachment because, within the deregulated economy it has contributed to usher in, it retreats from its previous social role—one that in Italy, as we have seen, has indeed been ambiguous, contrary to an idealized account of welfarism. Thus, in the context of the Anthropocene's recognition of a generalized state of economic, political and ecological interconnection, the question of planning the "sustainable future" of the Green Transition is a fraught and fundamentally indeterminate task. In order to frame the stakes of this specific form of "transitional planning," the next paragraphs will consider planning instruments which (should) set the standards for architectural, urban and territorial intervention nowadays in a specific geographical and historical context—Emilia-Romagna.

Law no. 24 of 2017 of Emilia-Romagna, known as "Regional Discipline on the Protection and Use of Territory," came into force on January 1, 2018. Law 24/2017 focuses on existing built environments and attempts to mitigate the impacts of climate change on them. Unlike previous decades, this law moreover brings together several planning

74 Bianchetti, *Il Novecento è Davvero Finito,* 49. The very humanism that Bianchetti discussed thoroughly a few years later. Bianchetti, *Spazi che Contano*.

75 Ibid., 9.

76 Seymour, *Disaster Nationalism.*

77 Trading on and problematizing a world-systems theory perspective, Mezzadra and Neilson stress the possibility that the current regime of global war will not lead to a hegemonic power, but to a new, multi-polar arrangement of power. Mezzadra and Neilson, *The Rest and the West*; Sandro Mezzadra, "Una Transizione Aperta," *Rivista geografica italiana* 130, vol. 3 (2023): 122-125.

tools into one, called General Urban Plan [*Piano Urbanistico Generale*] and thus articulates Law 24/2017's directives at different scales.[78] The main goal of the Law is "zero land consumption" by 2050, an objective which aligns with the objectives of the European Green Deal. The tenet of "zero land consumption" within Law 24/2017 poses a limit to urban expansion, while advocating urban regeneration projects and the reuse of already urbanized land. *Reuse*, crucially, is promoted by exempting such regeneration projects from certain construction fees and taxation or by facilitating administrative processes. Expediting procedures is consistent with the Law's stated goal of pursuing "the sustainability, equity and competitiveness of the social and economic system."[79] Discursive similarities to the Green Deal's definition quoted at the start of this section are evident.

Land consumption stands for the conversion of previously untapped land—that is, whose natural features might be considered "healthy"—into built environments for economic activities such as forestry, agriculture or other industrial productions, as well as their infrastructures. According to Law 24/2017, land is posited as a non-renewable "common good." Yet, in spite of such a stewarding definition, some (re)development projects are excluded from the total calculation of land consumption[80]. Land consumption in fact is allowed in the case of what are considered to be *relevant public works*, that is: works that have a trans-municipal remit and/or consist in the renovation and expansion of existing business activities; production facilities with a strategic territorial role; developments in the field of logistics, agriculture and manufacturing, as defined by a 2016 Presidential Decree which facilitates certain administrative procedures; agricultural buildings; and, finally—the lonely "green" element—parks.[81]

Another important feature of Law 24/2017 is that it sets out to keep land consumption within 3% of the total urbanized territory (relative to when the Law came into force), meaning that, until 2050, it should be contained within a maximum of 3% on top of already urbanized

78 See Orioli, "Pianificazione urbanistica nella città che cambia."

79 Available at: https://demetra.regione.emilia-romagna.it/al/articolo?urn=er:assemblealegislativa:legge:2017;24&dl_t=text/xml&dl_a=y&dl_id=10&pr=idx,0;artic,0;articparziale,1&anc=tit3

80 "Consumo di suolo, la legge c'è 'ma la Regione deroga'," *il Manifesto* (May 20, 2023). Available at: https://ilmanifesto.it/consumo-di-suolo-la-legge-ce-ma-la-regione-deroga

81 More precisely, Regional Law 24/2017 of Emilia-Romagna (Art. 5) sets the goal of achieving zero land consumption by 2050. Within this timeframe, a total land consumption of up to 3% of the urbanized territory is permitted (Art. 6, para. 1). However, this quota excludes (Art. 6, para. 5) a number of settlement types, notably "productive settlements of regional strategic interest" (point c) and "productive settlements identified pursuant to Presidential Decree No. 194 of September 12, 2016" (point d).

land. However, such a limit presents further contradictions, also in light of the type of relevant public works exempted from land consumption calculations. Such operations are in fact not part of this 3%. Furthermore, since Law 24/2017 planned a period of three to five years before effectively coming into force, the 3% limit in many municipalities ended up encouraging new construction projects before the end of such a transition—in a familiar acceleration of construction within the period of the 1967 moratorium. Finally, critics have pointed out that 3% may already be too much, insofar as it is added *on top of* regeneration plans. Put differently, rather than an alternative measure, the mechanism that underlies the creation of this threshold turns the limit itself into a territorial device to regulate capital investment.[82] Through its own selective suspension *vis-à-vis* land consumption, Law 24/2017 does not alter—much less upend—the logic of production *qua* construction, all the more so considering that the infrastructures of logistics and agriculture—that is, productive activities—are the main drivers of land consumption.[83]

It is not by chance, then, that SNPA (*Sistema Nazionale Protezione Ambiente*) ranks Emilia-Romagna fourth among Italian regions per land consumption[84]; due to logistics in particular, the latter is two times the national average. Lower land consumption trends north of the main axis of the Po Valley [*Pianura Padana*], such as in the province of Ferrara, are also witnessing this expansion.[85] According to SNPA, Emilia-Romagna is, moreover, the first region per sprawl in flood-prone areas— an aspect which has aggravated the impacts of the devastating floods of 2023 and 2024[86]—and its legislation allows land consumption even within protected and high landslide risk areas. Arguments against Law 24/2017 also question the retreat of the Public from any prescriptive indication regarding land use, density, volumes, limitations to construction, which noticeably restricts the

82 In this sense, local authorities become "public companies." See "Modello emiliano al contrario, la città come una public-company," *il Manifesto* (January 1, 2017). Available at: https://ilmanifesto.it/modello-emiliano-al-contrario-la-citta-come-una-public-company; "Il territorio consegnato alla speculazione fondiaria," *il Manifesto* (March 10, 2017). Available at: https://ilmanifesto.it/il-territorio-consegnato-alla-speculazione-fondiaria

83 See Sandra Vecchietti, ed., "La Pianificazione Comunale nella legge 24/2017 'disciplina sulla tutela e l'uso del territorio' della Regione Emilia-Romagna," *Urbanistica Informazioni* 280-281 (2018): 28-47.

84 SNPA, *Consumo di suolo, dinamiche territoriali e servizi ecosistemici. Edizione 2024* (Rome: Report Ambientali SNPA, 2024), 34.

85 Local authorities recently approved a steering committee to supervise the construction of a Simplified Logistics Zone whose land consumption will amount to 6,5 hectares. See https://www.comune.ferrara.it/it/b/57684/ferrara-istituisce-la-cabina-di-regia-per-la-zona-logistica-semplifica

86 "Cementificazione, il triste record dell'Emilia-Romagna," *il Manifesto* (May 19, 2023). Available at: https://ilmanifesto.it/cementificazione-il-triste-record-dellemilia-romagna

Law's planning authority and further consigns planning decisions to a negotiation process with private interests.[87] Planning is consigned to operative agreements [*accordi operativi*] with private investors, who, in the name of reuse, are exonerated from specific taxation, planning standards or obligations.[88] In this sense, regeneration plans can also take place through the highly polluting practice of demolition-and-reconstruction.

Regional Law 24/2017 cloaks these contradictions in a specific appropriation of the language of regeneration and reuse. Briefly tapping into Ferrara's PUG's general report,[89] we might argue, in fact, that the plan perfectly conforms to the discourse and logic of sustainability. The plan focuses on sustainable mobility, ecological networks, healthy lifestyles, *while* incentivizing growth and production, and does so legally, through *ad h*oc variants and exceptions to the very rule it puts forward. The concern for greening contemporary modes of production, as well as the specific articulation of the human/nature divide put forward by the thought and practice of sustainability, surface in between the PUG's lines and maps. Rather than a "common good," land amounts to a resource, or maybe, inadvertently, it is used as a common good in the sense afforded to the word by Law 24/2017: common *as* public, and thus, within the condition of State institutions in today's historical conjuncture, appropriable by way of private corporate investment through "operative agreements" [*accordi operativi*].[90] This also means regeneration and reuse—the paradigms for development in the agenda of sustainability—create a privileged order that promotes private real estate investment and urbanization in the case of productive activities.

Law 24/2017 exposes how the stewarding "management" proper to the environmental governance criteria at work within 21st century urban projects of regeneration has coupled with the metrics and criteria of "sustainability." Following notable research on the topic, we might locate a shift: from a relation to Nature as an external, hollow quantity which emerges in the welfarist provision of "green space,"

87 "Lettera a Gentiloni: 'La pianificazione del territorio in Emilia Romagna non è una questione privata'," *il Manifesto* (January 19, 2018). Available at: https://ilmanifesto.it/lettera-a-gentiloni-la-pianificazione-del-territorio-in-emilia-romagna-non-e-una-questione-privata

88 "Il territorio consegnato alla speculazione fondiaria," *il Manifesto*. See Federico Gualandi, "Gli Accordi Operativi," *Urbanistica Informazioni*, no. 280-281, pp. 38-40 (2018).

89 Available at: https://www.comune.ferrara.it/it/b/64054/relazione-generale-pug-2

90 De Lucia, *L'Italia era Bellissima,* 100.

to that whereby Nature is understood as "a common good" that can engineer significant urban quality, as aptly described by the PUG's definition of land. The logic of qualitative regeneration acts as an intermediate step in this transformation from quantity to sustainability, whereby the latter seems to incorporate both metrics. One might retrieve this ecological, economic and political change focusing on the PUG's strategic position regarding so-called "differentiated urban planning standards":

> "The PUG, through a strategy of urban and ecological-environmental quality, pursues the objective of reinforcing the attractiveness and competitiveness of urban and territorial structures, while heightening its settlement and environmental patterns: the growth and qualification of services and technological networks, the quantitative and qualitative increase of public spaces, the valorization of identitarian, cultural and landscape heritage, the improvement of environmental components, the development of environmental well-being and the increase of resilience for housing systems with regards to climate change phenomena and seismic events. The strategy moreover indicates criteria and general conditions which, by detailing the urban and territorial policies of the plan, make up the frame of reference for operative agreements and public implementation plans."[91]

Quality, here paradoxically understood in quantitative terms, is central to this strategy, as is a generalized growthist indication regarding infrastructure, public space, landscape protection, mobility, environmental wellbeing and resilience. As such, the resulting ambiguous concatenation of quality *and* quantity (through public-private "operative agreements") expresses the core aim of sustainability: the reduction of ecological and social harm *within* growth. The PUG aims for more production, more growth, more construction; along with, more urban quality, more identity, more resilience. Overall, the plan aligns with the rush for a vague and salvatory sustainability.

The point here is not to shrug off or downplay the goal of reducing the negative externalities of production or the urgent need for a shift away from a fossil economy. But to highlight the ambiguous intention—hence, the "enthusiasms and mistrust" caused by the project of the Green Transition[92]—to do so through a theory, and therefore practice, of economic growth, expansion, and development. In other

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91 Available at: https://demetra.regione.emilia-romagna.it/al/articolo?urn=er:assemblealegislativa:legge:2017;24&dl_t=text/xml&dl_a=y&dl_id=10&pr=idx,0;artic,0;articparziale,1&anc=tit3

92 Bianchetti, *Le Mura di Troia,* 107.

words, to do so by skirting questions regarding the "fatal coupling"[93] of power and capital undergirding the work of architecture, urbanism and planning.

If this exploration has sought to highlight how the organization of space in post-war Italy has preserved its relation to production *qua* construction, while formulating different articulations of the human/nature divide, the next section now will move on to practices which attempt to resist this productivist tension, not as a principle but as a situated critical disposition.

93 The wording is notably used by Stuart Hall, "Race, Culture, and Communications: Looking Backward and Forward at Cultural Studies," *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society* 5, vol 1 (1992): 10-18. The original refers to racism as a "fatal coupling of difference and power" (Ibid., 17).

Unproduction: an Ethics of Minimal Intervention

Since 1942's *Legge Urbanistica Fondamentale*, Italian planning has lived through several changes connected to economic and political conditions, including environmental concerns. Nevertheless, these discontinuities have not interrupted its underlying logic. Indeed, one might argue all of these phases, however, were based on a form of productivism—both quantitative and qualitative—which the thought and practice of sustainability (with both conflicts and obstacles) now attempt to steer in another direction.

During Fascism, the functionalist form of planning was propaedeutic to urban and rural productivism. The regeneration-reclamation of Nature acted as a symbolic register for the ideology of communitarian nationalism through the tropes of fertility, virginity, community, while working as a resource for autarchic production. After WWII, the Italian welfare state assumed Nature in quantitative terms. The city as a productive organism was planned according to the logic of expansion, around building speculation and the maximization of ground rent. The planned production of built environments, especially housing, in this context, was a conjunctural means to forward the industrial programme and ideology of the State while keeping unemployment low and pacifying social conflict. In the 1970s, amid the restructuring of political power and the incipient forms of a deregulated global economic market, deindustrialization and the early insertion of ecological criteria into economic reason enabled regeneration to supplant the logic of expansion. From a unitary whole, the city started to be understood in light of its economic, political and spatial fragmentation.

Public-private negotiation replaced functionalist plans, paving the way for decision-making processes which stripped institutions of their planning authority. Smaller-scale regeneration urban and architectural design projects replaced larger-scale intervention, while State programmes gradually coincided with the necessities of glo-

balization. Attempts were made in this period by so-called third generation plans to induce a shift in planning logics from a quantitative metric to a qualitative metric that focused on social practices and answered to the retreat of State-welfare provision. The 1990s and 2000s were an ambivalent prolongation of these trends: more industrial delocalization, more regeneration, more discourse on quality; as well as novel attention for urban management, the dispersion of architectural, urban and territorial analyses, as well as ecology, through the pacifying removal of conflict and critique. Mounting ecological concerns and the radicalization of deregulation in the economic and political sphere were thereafter infused with a consolidated discourse on sustainability. Quantity and quality, together, are today both imbued with the green metrics of sustainable urban development, although its declared intentions often remain on paper. As we argued for Law 24/2017, land consumption is sanctioned by laws which apply through their very suspension.

In spite of ruptures, we have claimed that, throughout these phases, production acts as a fundamental continuity and prime concern of architecture, urbanism and planning. The stated shift from quantity to quality has not meant that building has stopped taking place but that it has rather entailed a change in *how* building takes place: a strategy to argue for the necessity of construction in other discursive and operative forms. We thus might suggest, once again, that architecture, urbanism, planning—at least since 1942, to remain within the scope of this book's discussion—have been undergirded by a form of productivism, what with Agamben we called a "energetic tension" toward construction or a will to build at all times and costs: production as construction.

But what does such a critique bring us to? Rather than positing a chiliastic, Edenic architecture that resolves conflict, or a pure exteriority to the existing social constraints of capital and power, one might only invoke a form of *not-doing* which in no way amounts to a retreat into the supposed virtues of inaction but calls for *another* form of doing. This possibility starts to take form only if room is given, or rather, made, to think and therefore act differently. Once the underlying logic of architecture, urbanism and planning—productivism—is exposed, and, so, once other ways of thinking about the specificity of their work is possible, alternative ways of doing and practicing are arguably on the horizon. In this sense, if the underlying logic of

architecture, urbanism and planning is production, can we think of a form of *unproduction*? Of course, this other form of doing comes along with the specific contradictions and limitations that within a capitalist society cannot be done away with, nor is such a doing totally subtracted from the need for concrete, productive activity. The goal will rather be to consider these ambiguities from the start.

Unproduction: an unusual word[1] which this chapter uses to refer to the act or process of *not equating production to construction*. At the same time, conflating unproduction with an all-out lack of production or failure to produce would put forward either the occurrence of an unintentional error that provokes such an interruption; an incapacity to act, an inefficacy or, at best, a 20th century form of laziness or inaction[2], beyond this chapter's intentions. Therefore, what follows will put forward unproduction as a doing that does not conform to the productivism highlighted above, that is, an *unproductive doing* that questions architecture, urbanism and planning's very own compulsion, within the existing political economy, to build at all costs. Put differently, it wishes to indicate a doing which does not serve an end or purpose of utility, the only "useful" purpose supposedly being the accumulation of power and capital.[3] Unproduction in architecture, urbanism and planning, understood in this sense, does not set out to suggest an escapist retreat from action, nor the renunciation proper to an asceticism subsumed under capitalist aestheticization[4]. Rather, it is arguably a form of "dismantling"[5] or "unmaking"[6] that makes

1 Caye, "Architecture, Dilation, Unproduction." Caye's argument about unproduction lies in locating a dehiscence between technology, used in a movement of self-limitation toward nature rather than its intensification and manipulation, and production, as the Romantic creation or industrial product of Western *poiesis*. Architecture, for Caye, is a "technology of unproduction," both production and its meditative restraint, practice and theory.

2 For instance, a divine inaction that amounts to a state of perfection, according to Kazimir Malevič, *L'Inattività come Verità Effettiva dell'Uomo* (Napoli: Cronopio, 2023).

3 Uselessness and architectural thought is discussed in Camillo Boano and Richard Lee Peragine, "A Pedagogy of Uselessness: Challenging Solutionism and Utility in the Anthropocene through Architectural Pedagogy," *The Journal of Architecture* 29, vol. 4 (2024): 445–68.

4 Pier Vittorio Aureli, *Less Is Enough on Architecture and Asceticism* (Moscow: Strelka Press, 2013). "In capitalism," Pier Vittorio Aureli argues, "ascetism is appropriated as a moral imperative directing the subject to work harder, produce, accumulate and finally consume more." (Ibid., 15). Nevertheless, Aureli continues, trading on Benjamin, ascetism holds the radical potential of another form of dwelling, not defined by the productivity of private property (Ibid., 17-20).

5 Frédéric Neyrat, "Dismantling the World the Capitalocene, Effective Constructivism, and the Inhuman," *Das Questões* 13, vol. 1 (2021): 2-11. "To dismantle the world would not mean to make it more human (it has already been tried and it is called the Anthropocene), but to enable the inhuman to exist as that which does not ask to be built, that which does not ask to become, that which does not beg to be connected, or even to be empowered. (Ibid., 9).

6 Neyrat, *The Unconstructable Earth,* 182-185. "To unmake always defines two operations. One is intellectual and invites us to rid ourselves of any of our past illusions, such as those related to Progress or to "cheap nature" (Jason W. Moore). The other is practical: To unmake means to dismantle or prevent from constructing that which harms us. These two operations are effectuated in reverse of geo- capitalist pro duction, which produces as if antiproduction didn't exist, extracting fossil fuels from the depths of the Earth as if nothing could restrain them" (Ibid., 185).

room for a practice at odds with the work of design *qua* production and, thus, as argued above, with the constructivist appropriation of the Earth within contemporary capitalism.[7]

There can arguably be no such thing as a principle or guideline for the project of space with regard to unproduction, but we might look into a number of practices whose very end is that of exposing or questioning the discipline's productivist tension. In this sense, rather than giving indications about a formal-technological register to collect similar "outcomes" as part of a handbook of "best practices," what follows will hopefully highlight planning and design *strategies* which resolutely go in this unproductive direction. In other words, this section sets out to claim another approach to *thinking* design and intervention. Sometimes such strategies do not result in anything, bringing to the fore a fundamental disciplinary paradox implied by unproduction: the notion invokes a project that does (materially) very little, if anything. Unproduction upends the nexus between project-production-construction, i.e. the disciplinary "production" that is presupposed to be "the effectuation of a project through the implementation of a will."[8] Put otherwise, these projects do not aim at suggesting formal solutions but at highlighting a certain *disposition* toward doing architecture, urbanism and planning. Perhaps, these projects together will draw out the contours of an ethics *and* politics which loosens the grip of the "energetic tension" toward construction.

Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal's project for Place Léon Aucoc is often discussed in a similar fashion.[9] This "Bartlebian act"[10] can be read through the lens of an unproductive doing in relation to the philosophical body of work on inoperativity.[11] The refusal by the two

7 Ibid.

8 Jean-Luc Nancy, "What is to Be Done?," *Diacritics* 42, vol. 2 (2014): 112.

9 On Lacaton and Vassal's oeuvre, see Marco Enia and Flavio Martella. "Reducing Architecture: Doing Almost Nothing as a City-Making Strategy in 21st Century Architecture," *Frontiers of Architectural Research* 8, no. 2 (2019): 154–63; Robin Wilson. "Evidence of 'Doing Nothing': The Utopic Document of Lacaton & Vassal," *Architectural Theory Review* 18, no. 1 (2013).

10 Milos Kosec, "The Bartlebian Act," *Horizonte Journal for Architectural Discourse* 9 (2014): 101-111.

11 Part of this section directly borrows from J. Igor Fardin and Richard Lee Peragine, "(In)activity and Architecture: 'doing nothing apart from…'," as well as the work done for our intervention at the workshop "Inactivity: Between Aesthetic Practice and Sociopolitical Challenge," held at the Institute for Cultural Inquiry (ICI) in Berlin, 11-12 July 2024. The direction of this text is no way a revocation of that research but an attunement to it, as well as a prolongation of its findings. I take up the opportunity to thank J. Igor Fardin for his generosity and our continuous exchange of ideas, the fruits of which underlie this entire chapter. In this sense, focusing on unproduction, is an attempt to put critical distance with regard to the ontological argument contained within "overlapping yet divergent formulations of inoperativity"; Micheal Krimper, "Nonsovereign: Inoperativity From Bataille To Agamben," *Diacritics* 49, vol. 3 (2021): 32. In doing so, unproduction wishes to highlight the limit and contradictions design theory and practice is immersed in within contemporary capitalism, aspects which are somewhat glossed over by inoperativity.

French architects to design a new square in Bordeaux if not by maintenance work following the recognition that the site needed little else,[12] is not a simple negation of architecture altogether but a more profound gesture *vis-à-vis* architecture's productivism. What does this decision mean and do to architecture, urbanism and planning? Indeed, Lacaton and Vassal's project adds elements to thinking of unproduction as a practice that resists production, while performing a paradoxical unproductive action—a doing-by-not-doing, which is, nevertheless, *still* a strategic decision regarding practice with respect to a specific condition and issue (construction). In this sense, unproduction alters the notion itself of the project since, as claimed so far, the latter is normally indexed against the concrete effect it produces, rather than its thought and mode of execution. The project, under such conditions, cannot but amount to a form of doing in the sense of producing and, thus, building. On the contrary, by seeking to recode the project's compulsion to do, Lacaton and Vassal's unproduction does not entail jettisoning the project, nor design knowledge per se, but exhibiting the possibility that doing in architecture must not necessarily align with the logic of production. Place Léon Aucoc, in this sense, is instructive insofar as it breaks with the binary decision between building and not-building, while exhibiting the possibility of doing through a thought of unproduction and its practice.

Cedric Price's work also holds the possibility of an internal disarticulation between project and construction[13]. At first inspection, one of Price's concerns was granting human interaction the liberty of doing without the top-down intervention of planning authorities or of architects' authorial designs.[14] His idea of design was also funda-

12 Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal, "Place Leon Aucoc, Bordeaux." Available at: https://www.lacatonvassal.com/index.php?idp=37#.

13 See Stanley Mathews, *From Agit-Prop to Free Space: The Architecture of Cedric Price* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007); Samantha Hardingham, ed., *Cedric Price Works 1952–2003: A Forward-minded Retrospective* (London: AA Publications, 2016).

14 The most notable example of this idea is expressed in Rayner Banham, Paul Barker, Peter Hall, Cedric Price, "Non-Plan. An Experiment in Freedom," *New Society* 338 (1969): 435-443, in *Non Plan. Essays on Freedom Participation and Change in Modern Architecture and Urbanism*, eds. Jonathan Hughes and Simon Sadler (London and New York, 2000). "What would happen if there were no plan? What would people prefer to do, if their choice were untrammelled?" (Ibid., 10). As put by Paul Barker himself years later: "Non-Plan, however, was never against some kinds of negative planning (for example: this land shall not be built on); the trouble, so often, lay - and lies - with would-be positive planning" (Ibid., 7). Unproduction arguably is about neither, nor a regime of constraints and regulation, nor the "freedom" of a private individual who wishes for more space.

mentally an attempt to do away with the productivism of building.[15] In this sense, his design proposal for a competition for a river-side area in Western Manhattan, in 1999, brings us closer to framing the thought and practice of unproduction.[16] In such a project, Price explicitly, and provocatively, decided the riverside plot, one of the very few unbuilt spaces in the city, needed very little. As jotted down in his sketches, archived by the Canadian Centre for Architecture: "the present FALLOW element of the site is fortuitous—and must be explioted [*sic*!]."[17] As put by Price himself:

> "I was not the winner, I am not surprised, because my project required a long-term commitment. I suggested that this area of the West Side was the last vacant area to bring fresh air from the river into the city, and therefore very little would have to be done to it; the last thing they should be doing is covering the train tracks and building on them. […] The existing conditions were ideal without doing anything."[18]

Put differently, Price suggested that what was *already there* was more than enough to satisfy the project's brief. Price's idea can be read as an attempt to emphasize this condition by designing interventions that would highlight the benefit of not doing anything, or fundamentally "very little," in terms of construction.[19] While resisting any easy juxtaposition, the unproductive gestures of Lacaton and Vassal's project or Cedric Prices's design proposal are both still relevant, if not more so, today, almost 30 years later, in light of the increasingly entangled yet differentiated harmful effects to people and environments. Pritzker Prize Lacaton and Vassal have since then gone on to pursue this initial strategy at bigger scales—their project for an extension of 530 dwellings in Bordeaux, for instance, or the Grand Calais—but the resistance to productivism that undergirds their design for Place

15 Stephen Mullin, "Cedric Price: 1934–2003," *Architectural Research Quarterly* 7, vol. 2 (2003): 113–18. Stephen Mullin's 2003 obituary answers to readers of Price's contempt for buildings: "Anybody who actually knew him knows how hard he grafted to get them up. It's just that he didn't love them for their own sake, but for the contribution they could make to human happiness and delight. When they ceased to provide that, it was time to move on" (Ibid., 117). We might locate in this building for building's sake one of architecture's productivist lineages. See also Tanja Herdt, "From Cybernetics to an Architecture of Ecology: Cedric Price's Inter-Action Centre," *Footprint*, 15, vol 28 (2021): 46.

16 The project material can be accessed at https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/archives/380477/cedric-price-fonds/396839/projects/400346/ifpri

17 See https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/search/details/collection/object/443634

18 See José Manuel López Ujaque, *Preferia Hacer (Cas) Nada en Arquitectura: Postproducción a Través de Cuatro Declinaciones Activamente Perezozas* (PhD diss., Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid, 2017), 37–88; José Manuel López Ujaque "IFCCA Prize Competition for the Design of Cities | Hudson Yards," *Hidden Architecture*. Available at: https://hiddenarchitecture.net/ifcca-prize-competition-for-the-design-of-cities-hudson-yards/. See also Hans-Ulrich Obrist, ed., *Re: CP | by Cedric Price* (Basel, Birkäuser, 2003), 53-54, cited in López Ujaque, *Preferia Hacer (Cas) Nada en Arquitectura*, 98.

19 To this end, the project proposal included the use of laser interventions that would reproduce the space taken up by skyscrapers that potentially would have been built instead of the park.

Léon Aucoc appears to have shifted toward an identification with a peculiar aesthetic and mode of operation.[20] On the contrary, this chapter's intention is to consider unproduction as a mode of thinking and practice that leads to material design results, while avoiding univocal aesthetic ideas or prescribed formulas. In this sense, the point is to contest the internal dehiscence between thought and action that mars the work of architecture, urbanism and planning in its productivism. This separation is arguably the somewhat unstated aim of both of Price and Lacaton and Vassal. Both convey a sense of the potential and limitations of unproduction by bringing to the fore deep-seated questions that trouble a foundational disciplinary presupposition: the illegitimacy of a form of design that relinquishes the equation between "doing" and the "concrete productive activity" of construction.[21] The ecological and social issues of the Anthropocene that architecture, urbanism and planning practice have contributed to create, forces design to further question its relation to a form of doing that coincides with capitalist production in the form of building. The saliency of these questions has been more recently picked up by the work of Charlotte Malterre-Barthes,[22] whose "Moratorium on New Construction," by advocating for a "pause in building new structures," is more than just a juridical vindication, insofar as it touches on the project's compulsion to do and build.[23] Starting from the recognition that there is no such thing as a non-extractive architecture, Malterre-Barthes's moratorium is proposed as a legal form of "dissidence" toward those technocratic agendas[24] which contribute most pronouncedly to disciplinary productivism. In this sense,

> "the relevance of Malterre-Barthes' project resides in the fact it does not argue for a counter-project but for a selective interruption of construction (and demolition) projects themselves, questioning architectural practice's compulsion to form, and opening up an ethical space in which architecture's potential-not-to build *can* be considered."[25]

20 Fardin and Peragine, "(In)activity and Architecture." Indeed, the risk of such a retreat into an autonomous aesthetic realm is an ever-present possibility. The encroachment of artistic practices into the field of architecture and, to a lesser extent, urbanism (although its insistence on "public art" is a sign of such a process), and their incorporation into planning scenarios, points toward the possibility of misconstruing them as an immaterial design intervention, thereby doubling the primacy of construction.

21 Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content,* 68.

22 Malterre-Barthes, *A Moratorium on New Construction*.

23 Please refer to chapter III of the present book.

24 Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, "Teaching Not To," *Journal of Architectural Education*, 78, vol. 1 (2024): 160.

25 Peragine and Fardin, "From Keywords to Use", 144.

This project thus makes room for the social-environmental questions of the Anthropocene, while resisting the productivism that assumes design disciplines as technological fixes, as well as their palliative approach to "solving" them.[26] In this sense, the point of sustainability should not be that of building greener buildings—not only—but of questioning architecture's relation to production. The discipline might do so if it stops simply understanding itself as a potential to build and looks at its potential-not-to build.[27] Malterre-Barthes' moratorium, rather, endorses "methods of prolonging,"[28] while contesting the thought that proposes "construction as panacea, the silver bullet for everything from housing to unemployment,"[29] as we have seen previously through the exploration of post-WWII Italian planning.

Malterre-Barthes's unproductive doing is grounded in a negation of new construction and, as such, is directed at exposing "ideas otherwise unacknowledged or unquestioned."[30] Refusal in fact is a central category of Malterre-Barthe's work. In her words, "the absence of construction is a corrective action that happens *before* buildings are constructed […] a refusal of harm."[31] The reading this chapter wishes to forward is that such a refusal is not an all-out rejection, but something more nuanced—an approach closer to the unmaking of construction through strategies of minimal intervention, which stems from an inseparability of thought and action, by way of another articulation of the human-nature divide.

Critics of the Anthropocene have pointed to the familiarity—or even tardiness—of this geological markers' ecological and political concerns. Without a doubt, social and environmental damage of economic and political system, including architecture, urbanism and planning is anything but novel. In fact, one of Lucius Burckhardt's main preoccupations throughout the 70s and 80s was to explore and

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26 This harm being for Françoise Vergès tethered to such a techno-solutionism insofar as it constitutes "the result of the long history of colonialism and racial capitalism and its Promethean thinking—*the idea that "Man" can invent a mechanical, technical solution to any problem.*" Vergès, "Racial Capitalocene," chapter 4, emphasis added.

27 Fardin and Peragine, "(In)activity and Architecture." As put by Anne Lacaton "the first [thing] to do is to think, and only after that are you able to say whether you should build or not." Anne Lacaton, "We don't much believe in form," *Oris*, no. 24 (2003): 116.

28 Malterre-Barthes, *A Moratorium on New Construction*, 40.

29 Ibid., 44.

30 Ibid., 90.

31 Ibid. A suggestion Malterre-Barthes makes building on strategies of Black redaction, see Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake. On Blackness and Being* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016). Refusal is a growing field of interest in architectural theory: Jill Stoner and Ozayr Saloojee, eds., "Architectures of Refusal," *Architectural Design* 92, vol. 6 (2022).

contest the harm provoked by construction projects. His interest in the contradiction of building practices might help us unpack the unproductive doing this chapter sets out to formulate. In particular, Burckhardt arguably brings to the fore ways of undoing the link between the act of construction and the operativity of the notion of solution that lies at the heart of productivism. In doing so, it gives substance to the minimal intervention that seems to characterize the proposals of Lacaton and Vassal, Price and Malterre-Barthes. Finally, taking a (chronological) step back in this review of unproductive practices by referring to Burckhardt, allows us to take a (physical) step away from the scale of the architectural object or urban design intervention, and, thus, to introduce the question of planning.

In his vast oeuvre, however, Burckhardt's commitment to the reconstruction processes after the earthquake in the Belice Valley, an area that stretches across Western Sicily, between the cities of Palermo, Agrigento and Trapani, holds a crucial position. In January 1968 a 6.4-magnitude earthquake struck Belice, destroying several villages, displacing 100.000 people, killing hundreds. Reconstruction was lengthy, centralized, oversized, incomplete, incoherent.[32] The towns that were most affected by the earthquake that were moved and the new construction and infrastructures that were built ended up being severely underused, in light of the low population and number of vehicles in this area of the island, both before and after reconstruction. Reconstruction, as underlined above, was organized under situated political and economic pressures specific to the historical context of post-WWII Italy. In September 1981, the Centro Studi Belice, the Deutscher Werkbund—the president of which was Burckhardt himself, at that time Dean of the Faculty of Urbanism in Kassel —and the University of Palermo organized a number of international seminars and visits. The third of these conferences was called "The Minimal Intervention" and its content might further clarify what unproduction could mean for urbanism and planning, beyond the scale of the architectural intervention.[33]

Burckhardt's critique of reconstruction in Belice is fundamentally oriented by his reticence about the notion of solution. Indeed, if architecture coincides with the production of built objects toward the

32 Ettore Sessa, "Architettura e forma urbana nella ricostruzione del Belice," in *Catastrofi e dinamiche di inurbamento contemporaneo. Città nuove e contesto*, eds. Marco Rosario Nobile and Domenica Sutera (Palermo: Edizioni Caracol, 2012), 85-101.

33 Markus Ritter and Martin Schmitz, eds., *Lucius Burckhardt. The Minimal Intervention* (Basel: Birkäuser, 2022), 123-45.

end of economic and political power—what we have called production *qua* construction—the discourse legitimating such operations revolves around the fact that they will *solve* problems.[34] When faced with a set of issues that supposedly hampers urban development– the ostensible lack of "identity" of a square or of economic "attractiveness"; a matter of perceived "security"– architecture, urbanism and planning are called in to give an answer, i.e. to solve the problem. Even beyond the realm of design disciplines alone, this solutionism, according to Burckhardt, is a fantasy, or in his words: "a neat solution doesn't deliver a real solution, for this is not at all possible—it merely redistributes the problems."[35] The slickness of architectural and urban intervention covers over the fundamental complexity of urban problems. This solutionism in architecture, urbanism and planning presents itself in the form of construction, as "the social mechanisms in decision-making tend to culminate in buildings, also in cases where softer strategies would be more effective."[36] The decision-making process—what we located above as the replacement of the modern-functionalist public authority by public-private negotiation processes—is oriented toward construction for the end of capitalist accumulation. In other words, building is conceived as the final product and, indeed, solution of planning processes. Or, in Burckhardt's terms: "all planning results in so-called solutions, namely, major interventions, usually in the form of a building, which possibly mitigate or at least influence to some degree the problem in hand yet also have other, unforeseen effects."[37]

While the production of buildings or infrastructure may temper the issues it is called on to solve, it also necessarily introduces unpredictable elements to an already complex scenario. This interventionist or, in the terms of this chapter, *productivist solutionism*, according to Burckhardt, entertains a close relation with planning, insofar as the plan most often serves as means of legitimation for intervention that hits hardest economically and politically disenfranchised

34 "Architecture is a solutionist discipline, assuming there is something to fix, with an instrumental approach to design and problem-solving intrinsically part of its mandate." Malterre-Barthes, *A Moratorium on New Construction*, 134. Poignantly, she insists it is precisely this skill that can contribute to mitigate, if not stop harm by interrupting new construction.

35 Jesko Fezer and Martin Schmitz, eds., *Lucius Burckhardt Writings. Rethinking Man-made Environments Politics, Landscape & Design* (New York and Vienna: Springer Verlag, 2012), 234.

36 Ritter and Schmitz, *Lucius Burckhardt*, 123. Trading on architecture and urban planning, solutionism can be defined as an ideology characterized by "an unhealthy preoccupation with sexy, monumental, and narrow-minded solutions […] to problems that are extremely complex, fluid, and contentious": Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism* (Philadelphia: PublicAffairs, 2013), 4. See also Boano and Peragine, "A Pedagogy of Uselessness," 453-454.

37 Ritter and Schmitz, *Lucius Burckhardt*, 37.

groups. "The master plan", in other words, "legitimates structural intervention."[38] For Burckhardt, the problem of solutionism—and thus of construction—is a problem of planning as politics: by naming issues, political agendas presuppose *both* their existence and the way in which they will be solved. Within this solutionism political agendas define problems, and by defining them, already invite their remedy through a concrete productive activity: problem and remedy are discussed together from the start; "solution […] the recipe for a remedy."[39] As the causal relationship between problem and solution is obscured, the upshot is a guarantee of more production as construction.[40]

Instead of considering what Burckhard's proposal of minimal intervention consists *of*—i.e. a set of specific design interventions that counter this compulsion to build—we should focus on what it consists *in*: a strategic orientation for practice that questions the productivist solutionism inherent to planning processes. Indeed, as put by Burckhardt himself: "every issue should be mitigated strategically, by means of intervening in it as little as possible, for this alone serves to minimize unexpected and harmful consequences."[41] That is to say, the social and environmental harm of planning cannot be done away with, but only reduced as much as possible, in an asymptotic movement toward the minimal intervention. Burckhardt's proposal to minimize, rather than overcome, the limitations of this stance finally amounts to the formulation of an ethical disposition. In particular, Burckhardt suggests a number of footholds and ideas that converge in two indications. First, opening our eyes to what is already there and, thus, designing according to the contextual speci-

38 Ibid. It is interesting to note that Burckhardt, in this paper, discusses Bologna as "the urban planners' Mecca" (Ibid., 40) without sparing critiques regarding the city administration's failure to effectively decentralize decision-making in urban planning processes. Burckhardt, however, reckons with the structural character of such a failure: "as a socialist government in a capitalist state, Bologna can do no more than pursue its plan to equip neighborhoods with equal or roughly equivalent infrastructure and thus offset the advantages of certain locations and hence of ground rents" (Ibid., 41).

39 Ritter and Schmitz, *Lucius Burckhardt*, 30-31.

40 A problem that for Burckhardt is of linguistic nature: "the vivid appeal of the name itself leads the public to imagine a certain, namely visible, kind of remedy, namely a building" (Ibid., 30). The PNRR, again, provides the opportunity for problematizing the insistence of this solutionist and, therefore, productivist tendency nowadays, within the Green Transition. For "Scuola Quadrifoglio," the solutionist stance of the project licensed a new construction whose economic value and ideological dimension ruled out from the start the possibility of refurbishment. Only unexpected protest led to the project being revoked. More generally, the PNRR's building production, as well as larger-scale territorial and infrastructural projects, follow the logic that more production, more building will solve the problems of contemporary Italy. See Camillo Boano, Manuel Grimaldi, Stefano Mastromarino, Richard Lee Peragine, Antonio Stopani, "The Design Politics of Migrant Farmworker Ghettos of Borgo Mezzanone, Puglia," *Environment & Urbanization* (2025): 1-22; Camillo Boano, Manuel Grimaldi, Stefano Mastromarino, Richard Lee Peragine, Antonio Stopani, "Progetto e Superamento," *Officina* 50 (2025): 50-59.

41 Ritter and Schmitz, *Lucius Burckhardt,* 123. Translation modified by the Author.

ficities and relations of a site.[42] This banal, familiar recommendation implies an aesthetic shift: a change in the way one relates to and experiences the world and thus attunes to its ecological dimension—an aesthetics as an ethics adjusted to ecological concerns. After all, "the discourse and project of urbanism *give order to a sensible world*" and, thereby, articulate the threshold of visibility.[43] From this stance, Burckhardt's second suggestion is to avoid the universal application of model solutions: reject ready-made solutions designed for any context and learn *how* to come up with a solution for a specific place and situation.[44]

These two baseline inclinations constitute Burckhardt's underlying disposition to practice, rather than its guideline. Within these two pointers lies a deeply political commitment to design theory and practice. Burckhardt's minimal intervention thus subordinates design to the definition of a politics, in the recognition that the transformation of the world cannot but begin by way of an ethical openness *within* it: a critical aesthetic attentiveness mobilized against the solutionist productivism of architecture, urbanism and planning which undergirds another articulation of both human-nature *and* the theory-practice divides. As put by Burckhardt:

> "the theory of minimal intervention means: intervene not by violent means in the landscape that palpably exists around us but, rather, use aesthetic or conceptual means to intervene in the landscape in our mind's eye. And the most minimal intervention of all […] is to prevent construction; which, however, is by no means an exhortation to do nothing."[45]

Burckhardt arguably verges onto a form of unproduction that is far from any simple retreat from design. Rather, his minimal intervention jettisons the solutionist framework that considers architecture, urbanism and planning strictly in terms of construction. The

42 Ibid., 126.

43 Bianchetti, *Il Novecento è Davvero Finito,* 138. Bianchetti explicitly builds on Jacques Rancière's aesthetics of the political, "distribution of the sensible." Rancière thinks of political action in terms of a disruption of the existing (invisibilized and neutralized) sensible order kept in place by "police power," which would make "the part who has no part"—the poor, the excluded, the oppressed—visible. See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2006). An environmental aesthetics which seeks to disrupt dominant narratives around "climate change" is developed in several contemporary works at the intersection between political ecology, art and philosophy, with a somewhat vitalist new materialist approach, see Lisa E. Bloom, *Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics. Artists Reimagine the Arctic and Antarctic* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022); Salar Mameni, *Terracene. A Crude Aesthetics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2023); Daniel Matthews, *Earthbound. The Aesthetics of Sovereignty in the Anthropocene* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

44 We might think of this by turning our attention to the contemporary focus on and funding of so-called Nature-Based Solutions.

45 Ibid., 8.

challenge posed by Burckhardt is thus not that of coming up with new design forms, but defining a disposition to practice: an ethics, a thought on the very principles and causal relations that inform the discipline itself, as well as the relations forming within and around its field of operation. The notion of unproduction for architecture, urbanism or planning is thus neither a solution to their current predicament, nor a refusal of construction *in toto*, but a search for an alternative form of doing here and now, within present historical conditions. Rather than a canon, the previous examination of the work of Lacaton and Vassal, Cedric Price, Charlotte Malterre-Barthes and Lucius Burckhardt, has sought to trace an intermittent line which draws the contours of different political orientations, scales of operation and concerns. Unproduction, as a thought and practice, is a word used to retrieve from them a common direction, while naming their heterogeneity and discontinuity

The "Red Line". The Nihilism of Unproduction

Unproduction thus invites a question *about* questions regarding the problematic legitimacy of a doing consigned to concrete, productive action. In doing so, it queries, even if only for a brief moment, what Jean-Luc Nancy, describes as "the autarky of a 'doing' that has surrendered to its own development"[1]; and this strength is all the more relevant when coupled with a sense for the contingent urgency, in the Anthropocene, of a form of doing that interrogates construction itself. Such an interrogation, therefore, cannot but trouble the distinction between theory and practice, thought and action.

This uneven research avenue is bound to face critiques, two of which deserve further attention. On the one hand, the possibility that unproduction might be read as a "nihilistic" retreat into theory in the face of contemporary challenges to architecture, urbanism and planning, and thus to politics; on the other, the evident necessity, but supposed unlikeliness, of tailoring such an ethical disposition to the large-scale "transitional plan" of sustainability within contemporary capitalism.

The former position arguably originates when thought and theory, as we discussed in the opening lines of this chapter by tapping into Agamben's thought, are misconstrued for "contemplation" and either are done away with in the name of a form of doing that has submitted to its own productivism. Possibly this critique derives from theoretical confusion, whereby ontological and political nihilism are equated to a form of inaction or political apathy and hence denuded of their radical potential. But nihilism—a historical phenomenon rather than an attitude, in which "the highest values devalue themselves"[2] —need not be a pure negation "that stops us in our

1 Jean-Luc Nancy. "What is to Be Done?," 113.

2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power. Selections from the Notebooks of the 1880s* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2017), n. 2, 15. As put by Franco Volpi: "Nihilism is thus the disorienting situation that sets in once traditional references have fallen away, that is the ideals and values that answered the "why" and, as such, cast light upon human action." Franco Volpi, *Il Nichilismo* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 1999), 4.

tracks"[3] or the irruption of negativity on an otherwise affirmative horizon.[4] Rather, nihilism might be understood as "the folding back on itself of a negativity that was already present at the source of our conceptual lexicon"[5]: an absence of ultimate foundation revealed to modern society by the rationalization of technics and the metaphysics at work within its political projects—part and parcel of which is the productivist solutionism of architecture, urbanism and planning discussed so far. This absence, it seems, cannot be "overcome" by way of "further subjective inventions,"[6] as Tafuri noted long ago, but only given new meaning: it can only be dwelled with.[7] In this sense, one dare say, unproduction is a way of reckoning and engaging with the nihilism of contemporary capitalism.

Unproduction implies one cannot simply do away with the negativity or lack of modern society—which, on the contrary, the disciplines of the project of architecture, urbanism and planning tend to suppress in their attempt to *design* a unitary city, community or nature.[8] The project of architecture, urbanism and planning is not (only) about "what we must do in order to relate to other points of view or to overcome our (very concrete) sense of our imperfection."[9] Its moral end is not the economic "sustainability" or "progress" as given by the regime of general equivalence. Unproduction, in this sense, is an orientation that seeks to rid design disciplines of the importance (and illusion) they afford themselves within the historical mission of "repairing" a world threatened by human annihilation on Earth. At the same time, unproduction sets out not to abandon the possibil-

3 Jean-Luc Nancy, "On Negativity," *Law Critique* 32 (2021), 115.

4 "Nihilism is not the negation of being—as one often keeps hearing—but the destruction of the difference that inhabits being. […] By negating the negative that has always permeated our experience, what we call nihilism ended up strengthening it exponentially, consigning us to its destructive reproduction." Roberto Esposito, *Politics and Negation. For an Affirmative Philosophy* (Cambridge and Medford: Polity Press, 2019), 3.

5 Ibid.

6 Tafuri, *History of Italian Architecture,* 199. By way of Massimo Cacciari's work, Tafuri imputed confusion about nihilism to the state of Italian architecture in the early 1980s. The latter, in fact, gave up on all possibility of overcoming nihilism by consigning itself to an oscillating movement between light deconstruction of the end of Western values and weak projects, which "produces—literally *produces*—between anxieties and uncertainties, the same ephemeral attempts to retrieve long-gone centers and hearths." (Ibid., 196-197). Tafuri locates the importation of nihilism in the Heideggerian tones of weak thought, a trait of contemporaneous Italian philosophy; on this, see Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano, eds., *The Italian Difference Between Nihilism and Biopolitics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009).

7 "Introducing a new meaning, that is the task; provided that it is understood that the task itself does not have meaning." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Complete philosophical works, XIII: Posthumous fragments (Autumn 1887 – March* 1888), p. 9, 48; cited in Nancy, *On Negativity*, 118. Nancy continues: "take this state of the world completely seriously, to stop taking it as a negation that we will be able to traverse, toward yet another time" (Ibid., 119).

8 Peragine, "Not a Project at All." See also Bianchetti, *Le Mura di Troia*, 47-59. One, indeed, would need to "appreciate the deep meaning of the concept of coexistence, beyond the pacifying commonality often given to the term when it is endorsed as a design principle: we are together because inclusive, generous, understanding." (Ibid., 57).

9 Bianchetti, *Le Mura di Troia,* 59.

ity there might be another way of relating to production, and thus to the disciplinary divide between thought and practice. Ultimately, unproduction reckons with the fact that such a political and ethical disposition may only emerge when architecture, urbanism and planning stop understanding themselves as a "full," problem-solving and totalizing practice committed to productive action and begin locating another form of practice—or another form of *activity*, in the words of the next chapter—*within* a supposedly "nihilistic attitude."

This openness suggests ways forward also into large-scale planning systems. Giancarlo De Carlo, after the (political) failure of his planning experiences in cities like Urbino and Rimini, became notoriously averse to programmatic intervention[10]. While the exigencies, as much as the contradictions, of the Green Transition make this retreat unconvincing, De Carlo's position is nevertheless telling about the limitations of large-scale planning and its ties to political and economic power. Necessarily, such an issue also resumes the question of urbanism's relation to institutions, and thus the second critique to the notion of unproduction located at the beginning of this section. What unproductive, anti-solutionist orientation can we think of in relation to planning: an operative disposition that plays out *within* the plan and an ethics that is necessarily at work *within* institutions? This chapter leaves the answer to this matter open. But we might resume the specific planning legislation of Law 24/2017 once more, in order to suggest a final interrogation—rather than indication—regarding the question of planning within contemporary green productivism.

As highlighted above, by way of variants and the very mechanism it puts into force, Regional Law 24/2017 bypasses its goal of zero land consumption and sustainable planning by allowing the development of productive activities or demolition-and-reconstruction intervention, while giving up all planning authority to private investment. In an interview regarding Law 24/2017, the president of Legambiente Emilia-Romagna, an Italian environmentalist association, uses the term "de-planning" [*de-pianificare*]. The term resonates with that of unproduction and is used to invite the effective cancellation of plans for current expansion that since January 1st 2018—that is, when Law 24/2017 came into effect—have been given permission, according to a bureaucratic procrastination that resonates with other situations

10 Francesco Samassa, *Giancarlo de Carlo* (Rome: Carocci Editore, 2024), 117-120.

in the history of Italian planning regulation, such as the Legge Ponte mentioned above or the exemption-as-rule decision-making processes, whereby the suspension of the law itself worked as a legal bypass to further construction. This reference to de-planning amounts to a form of unproductive doing: an approach, if not *mode* of execution, instead of a production. Nor does the prefix "de-" suggest doing away with planning. Rather, it suggests the transformation of a limit into an orientation for practice: the minimization of intervention and, thus, harm, but also, the awareness of an imperfect capacity to have an impact in the world, with such a limit being the borderline space of a possibility[11]. It calls for a form of unproductiveness which acts in the here and now, within, and possibly against, the programmatic force that ties construction to large capital and power interests.[12]

While the formulation of urban planning tools that are effectively able to de-plan or that embody an ethics of unproduction is still hazy, it is not impractical. In this sense, we might finally turn to planner Vezio De Lucia, who has been one of the critical voices to argue that the Regional Law 24/2017 is insufficient and actually damaging to planning itself. In his most recent book, he critiques the intention of the then-Italian Ministry for Infrastructure and Sustainable Mobility to "contain land consumption."[13] As argued by De Lucia: "it is not enough to contain, it is urgent that we *resolutely and immediately zero land consumption*."[14] What De Lucia suggests, bearing in mind the possibilities of current planning tools, is "a *red line* that indicates the unsurpassable border between built space and rural or open space."[15] In its simplicity, De Lucia continues, this proposition can be achieved within the specific historical conditions of today. "Designing the Green Transition" implicates drawing such a red line, according to a sustainability that abandons the productivist agenda and "gyratory planning"[16] logic whereby "greener" means *more* production, *more* infrastructure, *more* construction. The negative limit implied by De Lucia's "red line" is not the acceptance of an impossibility, one either

11 "[…] a marginality that is believed can be turned into a resource." Bianchetti, *Il Novecento è Davvero Finito,* 130. At the same, we might remain wary of using the term "resource".

12 However, the negative prefix "de-" somewhat remains caught up in a binary opposition between planning and not-planning, rather than suggesting and unproductive action that undoes planning.

13 See https://www.carteinregola.it/le-risultanze-della-commissione-per-la-riforma-della-normativa-nazionale-in-materia-urbanistica/

14 De Lucia, *L'Italia era Bellissima,* 117.

15 Ibid. A halt to land consumption which does not amount to zero development, as De Lucia insists.

16 Peragine, "Gyratory Planning".

provoking the perpetuation of business as usual (the destructive force of construction) or the slump of inaction (a total refusal of construction). Rather, this limit constitutes an opening onto the new possibilities for practice, within the very impossibility represented by the red line: a doing by not-doing we have named "unproduction." The logic underlying De Lucia's proposal thus brings us toward the question invited by the next chapter of the book. If De Lucia's red line works toward the definition of an impossibility—a physical and conceptual boundary to the spatialization of capitalist development—at the same time, it brings to the fore the openness of such a limit. Indeed, within this unproductive containment lies the radical possibility of doing in another way, otherwise than productivist and solutionist agendas.

Unproductive-yet-Active

Design Perspectives on Activity and Use

Elena Dorato

"We have before us a *double process* or more precisely, a process with two aspects: industrialization and urbanization, growth and development, economic production and social life. The two 'aspects' of this inseparable process have a unity, and yet it is a conflictual process."

Henry Lefebvre, "Right to the City", in *Writings on Cities*, eds. Eleonore Kofman and Elisabeth Lebas (Cambridge: Wiley Blackwell, 1996), 70

Toward a "Radical Publicness": Defining a New Red Line for the Non-Negotiable

What spatial, social, and political forms emerge when we resist the capitalist logic of production not through passivity, but an alternative ethic of action, one attuned to the public realm?

This second chapter of the book focuses on this main question, reiterating how such resistance does not culminate in retreat or inaction. Rather, it takes shape as a practical ethics of limitation: doing less, on purpose, in order to do *otherwise*. It is an ethic that converts limits into orientations for practice, draws red lines that cannot be crossed, and cultivates forms of "radical publicness"—as later discussed—that re-center the role of public space beyond the circuits of accumulation.[1] In this sense, *unproduction* names neither apathy nor withdrawal, but a deliberate reconfiguration of urban agency: a conscious unproductive and non-extractivist doing, a refusal of solutionist productivism that opens new possibilities for public life.

As argued at the end of the previous chapter, the concept of "de-planning"—for instance—does not abolish planning; it reorients it. It recasts the plan from an instrument of expansion and production into a discipline of self-limitation, minimizing intervention and harm, acknowledging finite institutional capacities, and detaching public decision-making from the imperatives of speculative development. It proposes a new pragmatic posture: *the conversion of constraint into method*. This is not an abstract stance but an operational shift within institutions, aiming to counter the tendency—well documented in recent regulatory histories—for legal exceptions and growth-oriented variants to hollow out stated goals (such as, for instance, "zero land consumption") mostly in favor of private investment.

If de-planning is the ethic, the "red line" is its cartographic expression. It is a legal and spatial boundary that halts land consumption

1 We are fully aware that, today, it is impossible for design to situate itself genuinely "beyond the circuits of accumulation," except in utopian terms or as a purely theoretical posture. While the ultimate horizon would be indeed to move *beyond* them, in practice one can only approximate that aim—through situated tactics that resist, decelerate, or reconfigure the imperative of accumulation, even if they cannot entirely escape it.

while enabling different kinds of action within the city that already exists. The red line does not signal the impossibility of transformation; it is the precondition for a different urban practice—one that privileges reuse, repair, and re-distribution over addition, expansion, and extraction.

Before its physical and territorial dimension, the red line can also be understood as a conceptual threshold: a normative demarcation that distinguishes the values at stake and the permissible degrees of intervention from those elements that, especially within an unproductive conception of spatial design, must remain *non-negotiable*. In this sense, the red line does not merely trace where building must stop; it clarifies how we act within the already-built city and what forms of action are admissible. It establishes a hierarchy of interventions—e.g. *repair, reuse, maintenance, subtraction*—that are compatible with publicness, while excluding those that erode access, commons, and ecological integrity. As a procedural boundary, it commits institutions to reversible, proportionate, and transparent measures. As a substantive boundary, it affirms the primacy of everyday use, unconditional accessibility, and the affordability of presence over extraction, branding, and securitization. In short, the *red line* could function both as an enabling constraint for action and as a value filter: it authorizes adaptive, context-sensitive adjustments, yet bars any trade-off that would compromise the public realm as a shared, irreducible good.

Within this framework, and as I will try to better exemplify throughout the next few sections, the *non-negotiable* criteria could be broadly applied to at least four interlinked commitments: no new land consumption (a hard stop on the spatialization of capitalist growth into open land); publicness over production (decisions must prioritize presence, access, and shared use before yield, branding, or footfall metrics); reversibility and care (interventions adopt the burden of proof—designed to be undone if they diminish public life or ecological integrity); and institutional modesty (governance recognizes limits as productive constraints and resists exceptional procedures that convert public authority into conduits for private accumulation).

These commitments open to a potential concept of "radical publicness," not intended as a stylistic claim about codified public spaces or a metric of activation, but a normative and operational principle that positions public space as a primary commons: a domain where

rights are exercised through use, where conflict is accommodated rather than designed out, and where governance protects access against privatizing drifts.[2] Ideally, *radical publicness* names the spatial, legal, and managerial conditions that guarantee unconditional access and legibility;[3] the right to linger, assemble, and dissent;[4] the affordability of presence (e.g. time, cost, care)[5]; and the primacy of ordinary use over extraction (like branding, securitization, and rent capture).[6]

In practice, radical publicness shifts professional action from capital-intensive "improvements" to long-term stewardship; from one-way branding to reversible, low-tech adjustments; from permanent fixtures to portable, legible supports for encounter, shade, sitting, and care.[7] It could reframe how the city acts on itself (fewer prescriptive forms, more conditions for *activity* and *use*—and a governance compact that treats publicness as non-negotiable) while translating the unproductive-yet-active ethic into binding criteria: unconditional access, the right to "act" and to dissent, anti-extractivism, care and reversibility—even de-construction, when necessary—and transparent governance.

The attempt to articulate a concept of radical publicness is not to coin yet another possible definition of *publicness*,[8] thus adding to the already extensive list of authors and perspectives, but rather to take critical distance from the prevailing forms of urban public space production that continue to dominate today. "Public space

2 Among many authors, see the seminal contribution to this concept given by Edward W. Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *New Left Review* 53 (2008): 23-40; Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, eds. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) .

3 Cf.: Setha Low and Neil Smith, eds., *The Politics of Public Space* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (New York: Guilford Press, 2003).

4 Cf.: Kurt Iveson, *Publics and the City* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007); Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970).

5 Cf.: Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Stephen Carr, Mark Francis, Leanne G. Rivlin, and Andrew M. Stone, *Public Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

6 *Ex multis*: Ali Madanipour, ed. *Whose Public Space? International Case Studies in Urban Design and Development* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010); Margaret Kohn, *Brave New Neighborhoods: The Privatization of Public Space* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

7 These specific aspects will be the very focus of the final section of chapter II, grounding on the work by William H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (Washington, DC: The Conservation Foundation, 1980).

8 The disciplinary debate on the centrality—today more than ever—and the complexity of this issue remains intense. As evidence of this, in June 2025 the XXVII National Conference of the Italian Society of Urban Planners (SIU) was held at the Politecnico di Milano, entitled "Publicness: the challenges of the public dimension in cities and territories." Acknowledging the erosion of the "condition of being public," the Conference set out to address the profound transformations that currently shape the sense and meaning of publicness across many domains of collective life, focusing on those concerning the role and responsibility of urban planning, as well as the practices of planning, design, and governance of the city and the territory.

is often the least successful part of the city, the most insignificant, in the sense that its significance has been erased. Yet public space is the urban material that, more than any other, is able to give form to the contemporary city."[9] Nevertheless, the concept of public space is both complex and relatively recent. Its theory and lexicon are indeterminate. What may or may not be understood as "commons," on what grounds, and through which generative processes be understood as "commons," on what grounds, and through which generative processes is anything but univocal. Thus, public space has been interpreted, defined, mobilized, and surely also designed[10] in divergent ways across disciplinary traditions. In its singular form, following Habermasian theory,[11] public space may be understood as a non-territorial and symbolic sphere: the abstract domain in which public opinion is formed through civic debate and the exercise of reason, writes Paquot.[12] But singular public space is also "[…] an anthropological space—a space of the mind as well as of bodies. A profoundly creative space, dense with contaminations, crossings, exchanges, and conflicts. […] A place where affects and passions, might be released, at a distance from the contemporary normalization and the compulsion toward continuous innovation."[13] From a partially analogous perspective, Pierluigi Crosta[14] argues that public space—as a social construct—derives primarily from its *uses*. Whether manifested in spatial forms or merely in practices, it does not necessarily persist beyond the variability of social interaction. Public space, Crosta suggests, refers to the third spaces of urban social life—neither work nor residence—that cannot be privately appropriated by their users. Its significance lies not in any pre-given essence, but in its role as a

9 Mariavaleria Mininni, "Il progetto dello spazio pubblico: dare forma alla città contemporanea," in *Urbanistica per una diversa crescita. Progettare il territorio contemporaneo*, ed. Michelangelo Russo (Rome: Donzelli Editore, 2014), 291.

10 Although published twenty years ago, the book by Matthew Carmona, Tim Heath, Taner Oc, and Steven Tiesdell, *Public Places – Urban Spaces: The Dimensions of Urban Design* (Oxford: Architectural Press, 2003), remains a key reference precisely because it systematizes a wide range of theoretical perspectives and design approaches to public space, from morphological and visual traditions to social, cultural, and managerial dimensions. By juxtaposing these different frameworks, Carmona and colleagues underscore the absence of a single, stable definition of public space, highlighting instead its multiplicity of meanings and the plurality of disciplinary lenses through which it is understood and shaped.

11 In much of his work, Habermas treats the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*) as a unitary—singular—category, not as a physical place but as a communicative, normative, and institutional one. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); idem, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996). In the latter, the public sphere is a network of communications linking informal publics to formal procedures (rights, institutions) through deliberative "sluices"; publicness is not a location but a procedural condition enabling rights, dissent, and inclusion to be translated into legitimate decisions.

12 Henry Paquot, *L'Espace Public* (Paris: La Découvert, 2009).

13 Enzo Scandurra, "Metamorfosi dello Spazio Pubblico," in *Idee di Spazio, lo Spazio nelle Idee. Metropoli contemporanee e spazi pubblici*, ed. Claudia Mattogno (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2002), 174.

14 Pierluigi Crosta, *Pratiche. Il territorio «è l'uso che se ne fa»* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2010).

topographical device whose meaning is continuously produced and redefined through use. Within public space, different people engage in different activities, and from this co-presence they come to recognize diversity, at times also accepting the reciprocal constraints that such interaction inevitably entails.

In its plural form, however, public spaces designate the concrete, geographically situated settings—streets, squares, parks—always accessible to the public(s),[15] through which everyday urban life unfolds. These spaces are typically defined by accessibility and gratuity,[16] ideally enabling movement, pause, leisure, and informal encounters, both planned and unplanned. With respect to this plural configuration—so dear to architects and planners—several authors have cautioned that approaching the issue of public spaces primarily through their designation risks falling back into the traps of functionalist thinking, where specific spaces are equated with specific functions. Instead, attention should be directed first to the communicative processes—both communication and non-communication—that unfold and are staged within space.[17] From this perspective, the question of public space becomes an inquiry into the culture of places, their potentialities, contextual effects, and the negotiated uses of collective environments.

> "The primary quality of a public space would therefore be to have no particular function, to be interpretive, and to be accessible to the greatest possible range of roles and behaviors. But this ideal outline is now being called into question: because public space defers to certain practices, it is no longer always a place where compromise is worked out."[18]

The passage from the singular to the plural form is not merely semantic but conceptual, reflecting a shift from abstract political ideal to embodied, material practice. This ambiguity is further deepened by the urban condition itself: public spaces are simultaneously arenas of conviviality and indifference, of heterogeneity and coexistence, where the presence of strangers generates both openness and unpredictability.[19] Precisely this layering of meanings—symbolic and material, political and quotidian, inclusive yet contested—renders public

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15 Paquot, *L'Espace Public*.

16 Pierre Merlin and Françoise Choay, eds., *Dictionnaire de l'urbanisme et de l'amenagement* (Paris: PUF, 1988).

17 Isabelle Billiard, "L'Espace Publique," *Les Annales de la Recherche Urbaine* 32 (1986): 87-94.

18 Ibid., 88.

19 Michael Walzer, "Public Space. Pleasures and Costs of Urbanity," *Dissent* 33, no.4 (1986): 470-475.

space an intrinsically heterogeneous category, also quite subject to instrumentalization.

In the midst of the debates of the 1980s, the French sociologist Isabelle Billiard was already warning that "more than ever, it seems difficult to interrogate public space. At best, one can speak of a juxtaposition, a fragmentation of urban spaces, social times, uses, and cultures of place, to which only the continuity of flows and networks lends the appearance of continuity."[20] Acknowledging and sharing the condition of a "decline of public space"[21] in the contemporary European city, Bernardo Secchi observed that public space "[…] seems to have pulverized into an episodic assemblage of fragments, linked to one another by spaces lacking any proper status."[22] Yet, recognizing the great potential of public space as a testbed for the experimentation of new ideas, he argues that "the project of the contemporary city is fundamentally and primarily tied to a project of the soil, one that might be able to give meaning to an inevitably dispersed, fragmented, heterogenous city."[23] Such a city—one that mutates and takes form through the design of its public and open spaces—does not yet exist, but has long been in the process of construction, even in the absence of a clear project. Here, "[…] the individual fragments—like laboratory experiments, points of crystallization within saturated solutions— take on, along with their own role and formal, functional autonomy, also their own responsibility."[24]

Building on this position, Cristina Bianchetti deliberately advocates an urbanism that accepts fragmentation, contradiction, intermittence, and conflict as intrinsic qualities of public space: "Can public space be reconsidered, in the terms of both design and critique, starting from discontinuous, fragmentary spaces by paying greater attention to the quality of relations and emotions? […] At its core, this approach entails overcoming the idea of continuity (physical as

20 Billiard, "L'Espace Publique": 94.

21 Scandurra, "Metamorfosi dello Spazio Pubblico," 179. According to the Author, the decline of public space stems from the dissolution of shared ideals and a sense of belonging that once characterized our society, which has proven incapable of formulating and sustaining a collective project-making ("*progettualità condivisa*"). "The new forms of work and production […] have generated a fragmented multitude of social subjects whose only common identity is a total submission to the laws of the market."

22 Bernardo Secchi, "Spazi Pubblici Europei," in *Il futuro si costruisce giorno per giorno. Riflessioni su spazio, società e progetto*, ed. Giulia Fini (Rome: Donzelli Editore, 2015), 60.

23 Ibid., 65. The concept of "*progetto di suolo*" had already been introduced by the author in the text: Bernardo Secchi, "Progetto di suolo," *Casabella* 520-521 (1986): 19-23. For the adopted English translation of the expression, see the publication "The Project of the Soil," *OASE* 110, (January 2022).

24 Ibid., 66.

well as social) that underpinned modern public space."[25] Bianchetti resists the desire to recuperate public space into an idealized civic order or to frame it as a special thematic domain within planning. Instead, she positions it as a battleground—semantically and materially unstable—through which the very meaning of *the urban* is contested, believing that the opposite of the scenographic space of both modern and postmodern design is a spatial condition composed of disarticulated, fragmented, and precarious sequences; a space continually traversed by bodies.

> "Urban design is still, for the most part, a project of public space, [*nonetheless produced*] within recognizable traditions. Icons from a few decades ago are placed squarely at the center of a new discursive formation built upon the nexus between urban quality and spatial justice. […] The claim is that, together, urban quality and spatial justice can produce a livable city."[26]

And she continues:

> "This discursive formation is not innocuous. It is highly political. […] Under the banner of justice and quality, a violent reappropriation of the city is under way, in the name of an abstract humanism presented as a new goal. Public space is the terrain of this reappropriation. For these reasons, it is important to return to public space."[27]

Its richness lies not in definitional clarity but in its contradictions: as the *locus* where accessibility collides with exclusion, where difference and conflict coexist with routines of everyday life, and where civic culture potentially intermingles with leisure and commerce. Especially this final aspect—leisure and commerce—contributes to rendering public space arguably *productive*, or frequently the victim (or the accomplice, depending on the perspective) of an extractivist logic. In support of this position, Catalan anthropologist Manuel Delgado argues in his insightful book *Public Space as Ideology*[28] that, for many planners, architects, and designers, public space has come to signify little more than the void between buildings—an area to be filled in a manner consistent with the objectives of developers and public authorities, which are often closely aligned. Within this per-

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25 Cristina Bianchetti, *Spazi che contano. Il progetto urbanistico in epoca neo-liberale* (Rome: Donzelli Editore, 2016), 50.

26 Ibid., 49.

27 Ibid., 49-50.

28 Manuel Delgado, *El Espacio Pùblico como Ideologia* (Madrid: Catarata, 2011). By the Author's own admission, the title of this book is a respectful reference to the work by Jürgen Habermas, *Science and Technology as "Ideology,"* in *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987): 81-122.

spective, public space is conceived as a zone of intervention and control, to be organized to guarantee smooth circulation, appropriate uses, and desirable meanings. It is thus designed as a sanitized environment that ensures security and predictability, particularly for adjacent commercial developments or official buildings.

Reframing Secchi's notion of "*progetto di suolo*" through a critical lens that emphasizes the extractivist dynamics underpinning the production of public space, Delgado observes that

> "[…] to speak of space, in a context determined by the capitalist ordering of territory and by property-development production, always ends up being a euphemism: what is really meant is always *soil*. […] What could well be recognized as the idealism of public space today appears in the service of the capitalist reappropriation of the city. […] This process unfolds in parallel with a withdrawal by public actors from their putative mission to guarantee fundamental democratic rights—the free enjoyment of the street, decent housing for all, etc.—and with the dismantling of what once passed for the welfare state." [29]

Delgado's argument—much like the one presented by Bianchetti—thus unmasks the frequent rhetoric of public space as deeply entangled with productivist logics. What is presented as a neutral arena for social interaction is, in practice, subordinated to the imperatives of capital circulation and urban branding. Today, more and more often, public space becomes a tool for securing flows, controlling behaviors, and safeguarding adjacent real-estate value, rather than a medium for exercising democratic rights. In this sense, the idealism once associated with public space—its potential to embody openness, plurality, and citizenship—is redirected towards the reproduction of urban profitability and the neoliberal reappropriation of the city.

To invoke the well-renown claim regarding the "right to the city," introduced more than fifty years ago by the French Marxist philosopher and urban theorist Henri Lefebvre, *unproductive public space* would allow the right to an everyday existence that is not subordinated to capitalist interests (or to the direct control of the State).

> "Let us say that the State and private enterprise strive to absorb and suppress the city as such. […] Despite their differences and sometimes their conflicts, [*they*] both converge towards segregation. […] The State and the firm seek co appropriate urban functions and to assume and ensure them by destroying the form of *the urban*. Can

29 Ibid., 9-10.

> they? […] Can the powers and institutions at the top dispense with this relay, this mediation, the city? Can they abolish *the urban*? […] Productivist rationality which tends to suppress the city at the level of general planning rediscovers it in the controlled and organized consumption of a supervised market. After having been kept away from the global level of decision-making, the city is reconstituted at the level of executions and application, by institutions of power."[30]

To express such a dynamic, Billiard employs the term *subjugation* rather than *segregation*: "In all instances, we are confronted with a process in which public space is no longer conceived as a space for the negotiation of identities and practices, but as a space of subjugation, generating new meanings and new practices."[31]

In his final work on urban questions, *La Production de l'Espace*, Lefebvre also emphasizes that (*public*) space should not be understood merely as a constitutive element of society, but rather as the historically necessary outcome of processes, strategies, and social projects. In short, public space is a social product in which abstract social processes and structures become, in specific ways, concrete and powerful.[32] In this sense, the critiques advanced by Delgado and Bianchetti underscore what Lefebvre makes explicit: that the production of public space is never neutral but always bound up in competing logics—"every production of space is always competitive"[33]—and that any unproductive and non-extractive alternative must confront these dynamics head-on. As Anne Vogelpohl describes it, society is not produced *in* space, but *upon* space; and space is, in a dialectical sense, both the condition and the product of every society: emancipation, therefore, can only be achieved once an "emancipatory production of—public—space" has been initiated.[34]

Precisely because of these entrenched dynamics, public space should regain centrality not as a backdrop for consumption but as an *infrastructure of co-presence*—the everyday realm where unequal bodies

30 Henri Lefebvre, "Right to the City," in *Writings on Cities*, eds. Eleonore Kofman and Elisabeth Lebas (Cambridge: Wiley Blackwell, 1996): 140-142.

31 Billiard, "L'Espace Publique": 93.

32 Henri Lefebvre, *La produzione dello spazio* (Milan: Moizzi editore, 1976).

33 Daniel Mullis, "Du Droit à la Ville à la Démocratie Radicale," in *Du Droit à la Ville à la Démocratie Radicale*, eds. Collectif Engagé (Paris: Association Culturelle Eterotopia France, 2019), 17.

34 Anne Vogelpohl, "Städte und die beginnende Urbanisierung. Henri Lefebvre in der aktuellen Stadtforschung," *Raumforsch Raumordn* 69 (2011): 233-243.

negotiate visibility, protection, and recognition,[35] and where they can exercise "[…] a plural and performative right to appear, one that asserts and instates the body in the midst of the political field."[36] As Scandurra convincingly argues, the rearticulation of public space within a complex society should not be understood as a nostalgic return, a regressive fantasy about a lost golden age, or even as a bold utopian projection. Rather, it represents the possibility of holding together, in an acceptable balance, the opposing poles of the dilemmas through which our society moves. This democratic public space is the arena in which the major collective choices are rendered visible—where it becomes possible to act to reduce the exclusion and silencing effects that complexity itself tends to produce.

> "However this space may be configured in the new global society, it must meet the requirements of encounter among differences, of non-selection and non-exclusion, of the non-concealment of problems, and of active life[37]—that is, it must live up to the possibility of expressing and manifesting forms of solidarity, conviviality, and friendship; voicing and displaying dissent; communicating emotions and affections; and rendering our experiences social."[38]

Accordingly, the notion of "radical publicness" introduced earlier is intended precisely to distance itself from the dominant forms of *publicness* practiced today in our cities, which mainly operate through a symbolic and productive register. By contrast, *radical publicness* is grounded in an unproductive-yet-active ethic of use, privileging access, dissent, care, and reversibility over symbolic display or extractive value, and affirming *publicness* itself as a non-negotiable urban principle.

Drawing on different applications of key concepts (i.e. *radical publicness, activity*, *use*), the following sections will discuss a selection of planning and design case studies to highlight the multiple potentials and articulations of what we may understand as an "unproductive-yet-active" project. The aim is by no means to provide definitive

35 Cristina Bianchetti, *Corpi tra spazio e progetto* (Milan: Mimesis, 2020); Elena Dorato, *Preventive Urbanism. The role of health in designing active cities (*Macerata: Quodlibet, 2020); Ash Amin, "Collective Culture and Urban Public Space," *City* 12, no. 1 (2008): 5-24.

36 Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 11.

37 Here the Author clearly recalls Hannah Arendt, for whom (*public*) space is also a realm irreducible to attempts at homogenization and domination. "[…] The reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised." Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 57.

38 Scandurra, "Metamorfosi dello Spazio Pubblico," 181.

answers or solutions to the many issues and challenges of contemporary urbanism raised throughout this book. Rather, the intention is to engage in discussion—by introducing and substantiating a range of possible theoretical perspectives—on the potentials and benefits that an unproductive mode of practice might bring, particularly with regard to the multifaceted *public dimensions* of cities and territories.

An Unproductive Politics of Public Space

Can a logic of non-productivity, restraint, and minimal intervention yield even greater public value?

While we remain convinced of the affirmative answer to this question, it is not easy to identify planning and design practices that effectively illustrate its implications in (in)operative terms. This difficulty arises because, to this day, the productivist approach to public space projects remains one of their intrinsic and structural characteristics. This is equally true, on closer inspection, of mainstream practices often presented as more sustainable, socially inclusive, and ecologically just—most notably that of "regeneration." To regenerate is literally to generate (or produce) again. The term regeneration is among the many that urbanism has borrowed and adapted from biology and anatomy.[1] In its biological origin, regeneration refers to the capacity of cells or tissues to renew themselves after damage or loss, restoring both form and function as they were before. When transposed into the urban field, however, the term retains this semantic trace of renewal while acquiring a specific—and explicitly (re)productivist—meaning, as urban regeneration denotes not only the physical transformation of the built environment but also the production of new socio-economic relations and cultural meanings within the urban fabric.[2]

It appears quite evident that this metaphorical borrowing from biology is far from neutral: on the contrary, it tends to naturalize processes that are in fact political and contested. In practice, urban regeneration has often functioned less as a curative process of repair than as an economic strategy, in which land and public goods are mobilized

1 Patrick Geddes, *Cities in Evolution. An Introduction to the Town Planning Movement and to the Study of Civics* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1915); Marcel Roncayolo, *La ville et ses territoires* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997); Dorato, *Preventive Urbanism*.

2 Cf. Anna Laura Palazzo and Antonio Cappuccitti, *Rigenerazione urbana. Sfide e strategie* (Rome: Carocci Editore, 2024); Chris Couch, Charles Fraser, and Susan Percy, *Urban Regeneration in Europe* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

as assets for speculative accumulation.[3] Richard Sennett employs the metaphor of the work an artisan may undertake with a broken vase, as cities—like crafted objects—inevitably *break*, undergoing decline, fracture, and crisis. The choice among different possible "forms of repair"[4] then becomes a central ethical and practical question for urban design and planning. Through *restoration*, the artisan seeks to return the object to exactly what it was before, without any visible variation. Through *remedy*, the function of the object remains unchanged, yet the hand of the artisan becomes visible, and the process may integrate more advanced techniques or more efficient materials than those of the original version. The scar of repair remains legible and may even strengthen the city—an idea analogous to infrastructural upgrading or adaptive reuse. Finally, a third type of intervention is *reconfiguration*, in which the fracture of the vase—or the city—provides the opportunity to create something altogether different, both in form and in function; for instance, the artisan may decide to reuse all the fragments of the vase to fashion a plate.

Reconfiguration follows the same rationale as urban regeneration, a process that carries within it a dual intentionality: it can be pursued with the frugality of the craftsman, who seeks to grant new life without wasting precious resources, or it can be guided by neoliberal logics of extraction, aiming to generate greater value than before. The former, more restrained approach is exemplified by Lacaton and Vassal in their possibly inoperative project for Place Léon Aucoc in Bordeaux,[5] as commented on in the first chapter of this book, where value is explicitly attributed to the very absence of grand transformative gestures. The latter, by contrast, epitomizes the mainstream ethos of contemporary urban regeneration. While fully aware of the risk of overstatement (as already noted, it is far from easy to identify in current practice "pure" examples of *inoperative* interventions or of *unproductive-yet-active* public spaces), I wish to draw upon a comparison between two opposed intentionalities: the redevelopment of Place de la République in Paris and that of Piazzale Loreto in Milan. Neither of these projects can, strictly speaking, be considered "unpro-

3 Cf. Arturo Lanzani, *Rigenerazione urbana e territoriale al plurale. Itinerari in un campo sfocato* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2024); Francesca Danesi and Marco Frusca, eds., *Politiche della città. Rigenerare, abitare, convivere* (Milan: Mimesis, 2021).

4 Richard Sennett, *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 288. Sennett had already elaborated the metaphor of repair as a central dimension of skilled practice in his book: *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). The translation of craft into urban ethics underscores Sennett's conviction that cities, like crafted artefacts, require care, judgement, and an openness to imperfection.

5 Marco Enia and Flavio Martella, "Reducing Architecture: Doing Almost Nothing as a City-Making Strategy in 21st Century Architecture," *Frontiers of Architectural Research* 8, no. 2 (2019): 154-63.

ductive" in the sense adopted in this book. The interest, however, lies in the stark contrast between the more parsimonious orientation of the Parisian scheme—manifest in design intentions, functional and compositional choices, and even in the use of materials—which pursues, almost exclusively, the safeguarding of *publicness*, and the productivist logic of the Milanese plan, which promotes privatization, volumetric expansion, and restricted accessibility as the supposed guarantees of success for a space that, in effect, will no longer be truly *public*. This is particularly significant given the overt abdication of public institutions from their role as stewards of transformative processes, leaving the initiative to private investors and property developers (precisely the opposite of the non-negotiable "institutional modesty" introduced in the previous section).

Quite comparable in scale (3.4 hectares at République and 3 hectares at Loreto) and in centrality within the urban fabric, both squares embody considerable civic value[6] and, in the second half of the twentieth century, became key nodes of vehicular circulation and modal interchange. Both projects were also the result of international design competitions; yet in Paris the procedure was administered solely by the municipal government, which inaugurated the new square in 2013, whereas in Milan it was conducted jointly with the *Reinventing Cities* initiative.[7] Both winning teams[8] proposed a basic spatial strategy centered on pedestrianization, prioritizing active and public mobility, and similarly closing one of the four edges of the square to traffic, thereby avoiding the "roundabout effect." Beyond this shared structural move, however, the two regeneration projects followed di-

6 Place de la République is home to the statue of Marianne, the monumental personification of the French Republic—its secular and civic ideal. Marianne functions both as symbol and as site: she embodies republican values such as the rule of law, citizenship, laïcité, social solidarity, and the right to public assembly. Piazzale Loreto stands as a primary *lieu de mémoire* of the Italian fight to Nazi-Fascism, condensing the memory of martyrdom, the collapse of the dictatorship—marked by the hanging of Benito Mussolini, Clara Petacci, and other Fascist leaders on April 29, 1945—and the enduring moral claim of the Resistance.

7 *Reinventing Cities* is an international competition coordinated by *C40 Cities*, a network of mayors supported primarily by philanthropic foundations (notably Bloomberg Philanthropies), donor agencies, and membership contributions. The program provides the framework and rules for low-carbon, socially inclusive regeneration, while participating municipalities contribute land or underutilized assets and legitimacy. The actual redevelopment projects, however, are financed and implemented by private real estate consortia, who acquire the sites under the conditions established by the competition, expecting returns. In Milan, the program has been adopted by the municipality as a framework to mobilize private investment for the redevelopment of several strategic areas, including Piazzale Loreto, for which Nhood's €80 million investment was the grant of surface rights over the square for the next ninety years.

8 In Paris: TVK (lead urban architects), Martha Schwartz and Areal (landscape architects), Yann Kersalé (lighting designer), Atec (engineering consultants), Citec (traffic engineering consultants), TransSolar (environmental and sustainable design consultants), Ville Ouverte (public participation and consultation). In Milan, under the claim "*A Partnership that Multiplies Value*," the following are currently at work: Ceetrus Nhood (one of the leading actors in real estate and urban regeneration in the country), Metrogramma Milano, MIC-HUB, Studio Andrea Caputo, Arcadis Italia, LAND, SIST, Manens-Tifs, Temporiuso, FROM, and Squadrati Srl.

ametrically opposed logics, resulting in profoundly different spatial, social, economic, and political outcomes.

At République, TVK and collaborators developed what they termed "*La plus grande place piétonne de Paris*" through a strategy of minimal intervention, retaining existing features (notably preserving all trees) and enhancing only a limited number of carefully selected elements. Among these were: a continuous level surface without obstacles, gradients, or barriers, ensuring universal accessibility and optimal usability; the enhancement of visual corridors towards the statue of Marianne, now encircled by a small reflecting pool doubling as seating; and the provision of sufficient lighting and evenly distributed benches. The only newly introduced structure was a small glass pavilion for civic use on the north-western edge. By contrast, in Milan, the project assumed the form of an unmistakably anachronistic functional program: the pedestrianized square (less than one-third of the total surface area) was sunk below ground level, reached by long staircases and substantial changes in elevation, and overshadowed by three newly built "prismatic geometries" accommodating shops and other commercial or service functions, justified as a functional mix intended to "restore value to the neighborhood."[9] Solar panels and green roofs were presented as emblematic markers of sustainability, with the scheme proudly certified under LEED and GBC Neighborhood protocols.[10]

Equally revealing are the contrasting communicative strategies adopted to frame the two projects.[11] The video produced by TVK to accompany their competition entry took the form of an analog collage: a hand sketching a central perspective on paper, onto which cut-out images of the square from postcards across different historical moments are assembled, producing a spatiality that is at once new and disarmingly simple. This evokes the project's essential qualities: openness, accessibility, formal restraint, and multiple modes of use,

9 See the slogans employed on Nhood's official website for the LOC – Loreto Open Community project: https://loretoopencommunity.com/

10 It is worth noting that, to date, the LOC project remains formally on hold, following objections raised by numerous citizens' committees and a renewed skepticism on the part of the municipal administration regarding the project's actual suitability in relation to the city's current climatic and urban needs—specifically, its capacity to mitigate the urban heat island effect.

11 Since 2013, the designers have curated an engaging online blog [http://republique.tvk.fr/] documenting the square's varied and sometimes unexpected uses, assembling photographs, drawings, and videos that capture its everyday life.

culminating in a space genuinely returned to its citizens.[12] Even the soundtrack is integral, reiterating the core principle of movement and accessibility ("*people movin' out, people movin' in*"). By contrast, the video for Piazzale Loreto is a static sequence of renderings, overlaid with slogans that condense the full repertoire of contemporary speculative regeneration: "A new model of urban regeneration," "An accessible and inclusive public space," "An intelligent and sustainable neighborhood," "A major hub of services and activities to connect communities," "A multi-level landscape with a green heart," and so forth.[13]

Debate and protest surrounding the Milanese project were—and to some extent remain—intense. Just days after the awarding of the competition in May 2021, Alessandro Benetti published a highly critical (and compelling) article in *Domus* under the claim "a square must remain a square."[14] As in this case, the rhetoric of urban, ecological, and social regeneration often conceals processes of displacement, commodification, and rent extraction, masking the conversion of collective spatial rights into tradable development opportunities. Thus, while in disciplinary terms "regeneration" ought to suggest restoration and balance, in practice it frequently reproduces the very logics of productivity and accumulation critiqued earlier in this book. The severity of the Piazzale Loreto case lies in the deliberate alienation of an urban commons through a public–private negotiation that applied the principles of land equalization (i.e. *perequazione*) by granting development rights and additional building volumes in exchange for a meagre, hardly accessible, and effectively ancillary public space. As Benetti trenchantly remarked: "In a democratic country, a great square […] is above all the space of public gatherings. And indeed, on the vast parterre of the renewed Place de la République, demonstrations multiplied almost immediately. […] In a Piazzale Loreto carved up by LOC, where—and with what credibility—will we be able to demonstrate? Amid flowerbeds, shrubs, and tree trunks? Or squeezed between the shop windows of *Unieuro* and *Calzedonia*? Or on the sloping roof of a café?"[15]

12 The TVK full video is available at: https://vimeo.com/17849176?turnstile=0.4yEf4dtvJkh3ezA6UIahSB65m9RChasbPkAedqRWPRwSTGYKASMnDVAOsC2SCzeA-JXKx7Uttt6H4Wop5uIMpm7_OvytrTCI3fdP2aV7ky8fe33ASXcXR9TaVenZ-p-p424xHWiO7OqGINAqT40BqQsfnx79fhRdTTo1ASWG6dKi_A1xQ9xtvOSEuoDdQls-DrgLiTns50vE73mZghjw82w

13 The LOC full video is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45c6O1Wq9NA

14 Alessandro Benetti, "Piazzale Loreto non esisterà più," *Domus* (May 24, 2021). Available at: https://www.domusweb.it/it/architettura/gallery/2021/05/17/piazzale-loreto-non-esister-pi.html

15 Ibid.

Also offering a recent critical commentary on the LOC project is Lucia Tozzi, who explicitly cites the "inoperative" approach of Lacaton and Vassal in Bordeaux as the only viable solution for envisioning a different—*opposite*—urban future, one oriented towards the construction of a *radical publicness* grounded in an *unproductive-yet-active* project. In her words, "to break free from this logic that stifles the authority of the public and compresses the general interest [*we must*] concentrate on small improvements and, above all, on the process of maintenance, repair, and adaptation. We must privilege the ordinary and the continuous over the extraordinary; halt demolitions and excavations except where indispensable; and direct public intelligence and resources toward alternative solutions."[16]

If we shift the lens to the strategic definition of objectives and instruments of planning in relation to the unproductive-yet-active project of public space, we can discern a comparable trajectory in the experience of several European cities, particularly in the closing decades of the twentieth century—just before the advent of the large-scale redevelopment projects made possible by the massive involvement of private capital, even in the production of collective space. Among the existing examples, it is worth recalling the pioneering case of Barcelona which, until the 1990s, pursued a succession of politically and design-driven initiatives that embodied a loosely unproductive approach to the transformation of the urban public realm. With the impact of the 1992 Olympics, however, spatial planning policies rapidly shifted from a social-democratic, welfare-oriented vision to a neoliberal, entrepreneurial agenda marked by the abdication of comprehensive planning in favor of emblematic architectural objects; the prioritization of growth-oriented policies anchored in large infrastructural investments; the transformation—and consequent gentrification—of entire working-class districts into new "creative and technological poles" such as District@22; and substantial investments in tourism, among other strategies.[17]

16 Lucia Tozzi, "Riqualificazione di Piazzale Loreto, siamo in tempo per ripensarci?," *Domus* (June 20, 2025). Available at: https://www.domusweb.it/it/notizie/2025/06/20/riqualificazione-piazzale-loreto-milano-diventa-centro-commerciale.html

17 Cf.: Horacio Capel, *El Modelo Barcelona: un examen critico* (Barcelona: Ediciones Serbal, 2005); Javier Monclus, "The Barcelona Model: an original formula? From Reconstruction to Strategic Urban Projects (1979-2004)," *Planning Perspectives* 18, no.4 (2003): 399-421; Stephen V. Ward, *Planning the Twentieth-Century City: The Advanced Capitalist World* (London: Wiley Europe, 2002); Donald McNeill, *Urban Change and the European Left. Tales from the New Barcelona* (London: Routledge, 1999).

The first phase of Barcelona's contemporary urban transformation—the construction of the democratic city between 1979 and 1986[18]—provided the municipality with the opportunity to inaugurate a genuine "politics of public space."[19] In order to confront the social, economic, and spatial challenges of the democratic transition, urban planning was articulated into two macro-sectors: the large and the small scale.[20] These were not conceived as separate or antagonistic domains but as complementary aspects of a unified conception of the urban project, as argued by Solá-Morales.[21] It was during this complex transition that the first Metropolitan General Plan (PGM-76, covering Barcelona and twenty-seven surrounding municipalities) was approved, which became the starting point and essential reference for understanding the city's subsequent transformations.[22] The PGM, effective for twenty years, already emphasized the quality of urban public space and the need to reduce residential density in the consolidated city. Large areas of land were subtracted from the real estate market to introduce new green spaces and public facilities, while both building heights and floor-area ratios were reduced to avoid excessive congestion and to keep speculation under control.

A similar radical intervention by the public sector had already taken place two decades earlier in Copenhagen. There, the sudden demographic growth and rapid industrialization from the 1950s onwards—combined with an exponential rise in car ownership that directly conflicted with the pioneering transit-oriented development principles of the 1947 "Finger Plan"—was generating dynamics of densification and suburban sprawl that diverged from the plan's strategic vision. In response, both national and local authorities began to purchase vacant land with the explicit purpose of leaving it undeveloped: maintained as open, green, *unproductive-yet-active* fields for recreation, to safeguard it from urban speculation.[23]

18 Joseph Maria Montaner, Fernando Alvarez, Zaida Muxí, and Roser Casanovas, eds., *Reader: Modelo Barcelona 1973-2013* (Barcelona: Comanegra, 2013).

19 Ajuntament de Barcelona, *Plans i Projectes per a Barcelona, 1981-1982* (Barcelona: Area d'Urbanisme, Ajuntament de Barcelona, 1983).

20 Joan Busquets Grau, *Barcelona. Evoluciòn urbanìstica de una capital compacta* (Madrid: Editorial Mapfre, 1992).

21 Manuel de Solá–Morales i Rubio, "La segunda historia del Proyecto Urbano," *DEARQ: Journal of Architecture* 1 (2007): 30-41.

22 Denis Bocquet, Silvia Infusino, and Filippo de Pieri, "Le trasformazioni urbane di Berlino e Barcellona," in *1970-2000: Episodi e temi di storia dell'architettura*, eds. Francesca Filippi, Luca Gibello, and Manfredo Di Robilant (Turin: Celid, 2006), 115-124.

23 Ole H. Caspersen, Cecil C. Konijnendijk, and Anton S. Olafsson, "Green space planning and land use: An assessment of urban regional and green structure planning in Greater Copenhagen," *Danish Journal of Geography* 106, no.2 (2006): 7-20.

In Barcelona, during this initial phase, a pivotal figure in the debate on public space came to the fore: Oriol Bohigas—scholar, urban planner, and leading advocate of the city's regeneration. In 1980 he joined the Urbanism Department, exerting a decisive influence—both theoretically and operationally—on future strategies and interventions aimed at creating a capillary system of high-quality public spaces. Through his work, Bohigas advanced the idea of localized, evenly distributed actions across the city, while also championing the development of new parks and green areas. Many of these projects became possible thanks to the municipality's acquisition of privately owned vacant lots, subsequently returned to the public as genuine civic spaces that would otherwise have been lost to private investment. Bohigas' position rested on the conviction that the main problem of the European city was not, broadly speaking, a matter of growth pressures—such as demographic expansion, economic recession, or the volume of real estate stock—but rather of improving urban quality: "[…] life conditions within the neighborhoods have radically changed because the collective use capacity of them has grown."[24]

At the same time, new planning instruments were introduced, such as the *Special Plans for Inner Transformation* (PERI), launched at the beginning of the 1980s to address the targeted, spatially confined interventions envisaged in the PGM. These plans—essentially urban design projects that remain in use in Barcelona's planning system—were shaped by the European planning debate (notably the experience of Berlin's IBA) as well as by the persistent demands of neighborhood associations (*associacions de veïns*).[25] One example is *Plaça Soller*, a large public space in the city's north-eastern sector, developed between 1981 and 1983 as a direct result of residents' determination to prevent the site from being consumed by private, speculative development.

Towards the end of the 1980s, after Barcelona secured the nomination for the 1992 Olympic Games—a decisive rupture from every point of view—the city entered its second phase of urban transformation. In this period, the approach to public space design became even more minimalist, conceiving such spaces as "voids," simple

24 Oriol Bohigas, *Reconstrucciò de Barcelona* (Barcellona: Edicions 62, 1985), 28.

25 These organized groups of the civil society appeared during the last years of Franco's regime and continued to have an important role influencing public and planning decisions up to today. Vàzquez Montalbàn, in his book *Barcelonas* (Barcelona: Editorial Empùries, 1987) emphasized and described this civic movement as the actual "embryo of basic democracy, with a participative will in reshaping and managing the city" (213).

stages for urban life. Projects were expected to convey clarity and transparency, reinforcing the relationship between public areas and their surrounding built environment. This design culture, which Miquel Martí described as an "expressive restraint" in interventions on public space,[26] relied on a limited palette of elements: uniform paved surfaces, modest furnishings, and a few natural components. The objective was not to concentrate scarce public resources on a handful of emblematic spaces, but rather to distribute them widely across neighborhoods, following a humble stylistic register—an unproductive approach that nonetheless ensured broad accessibility and everyday use. The 1991 reconfiguration of the *Cathedral Square* exemplifies this phase. Bombed during the Second World War and subsequently used as a surface car park, this historic site was transformed into a pedestrian space, with vehicular presence drastically reduced through the construction of a new underground parking facility.[27] The continuous, granite-paved surface facilitated pedestrian circulation and direct access to the Cathedral, while simultaneously providing a loose, highly flexible setting where a wide variety of practices and activities could unfold. Benches, lights, bins, and trees were aligned along the northern edge of the square, leaving its central core as an actively unproductive open space.

A more recent and even more radical example is the *Pou de la Figuera*—popularly known as the *Forat de la Vergonya* ("the hole of shame"). At the end of the 1990s, an urban renewal plan in Barcelona's central district entailed the demolition of several insalubrious blocks in the Ribera neighborhood, leaving a 6,000 m² void that quickly degenerated into neglect. In 2000, the municipality initiated a regeneration scheme in collaboration with two mixed-capital companies, Procivesa and Foment de Ciutat SA.[28] In 2004, 14.6 million Euros were allocated for the construction of new buildings and a private car park.

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26 Miquel Martì, "Barcelone. La reconquête des centres par l'espace public," in *Voies publiques. Histoire et pratique de l'espace publique a Paris*, ed. Simon Texier (Paris: Edition Picard, 2006), 222-225.

27 Citywide pedestrianization was widely implemented by the municipal administration. The most renowned case is Gràcia, the city's smallest district yet the second most densely populated: between 1981 and 1985, amid strong neighborhood mobilization, the municipality introduced a pedestrianization program that restored a human scale and high levels of accessibility. Motorized traffic was channeled to perimeter roads, creating continuous pedestrian cores, while underground car parks were built beneath the principal plazas. By 1993, numerous smaller vacant or neglected sites had also been rehabilitated for public use. See Carme Segura, Eduard Farré, and Esteve Camps, *Les Places de Gràcia: impressions de Josep Buch* (Barcelona: Edición Taller de historia de Gracia, 2001).

28 These agencies, which for decades—and in part still today—have overseen urban restructuring works in the central district, operate as public instruments with substantial private capital participation. Their responsibilities include expropriating, compensating, and relocating residents affected by transformation processes, as well as demolishing or restoring buildings and selling land or properties to private developers, thereby generating profit.

Yet residents—who had not been consulted—mobilized to oppose the plan, demanding instead the creation of green public space, which the area lacked. Through conflict and negotiation, the inhabitants asserted their *right to the city* by informally constructing and managing an unproductive-yet-active public environment: a children's playground, football and basketball nets, a community garden, benches, trees, and a small stage used for local events and performances. With the support of architects Artigues and Riera, this frugal project, completed in 2008, was simply grounded in the reorganization of collective functions according to the historic parcel structure, articulated through stone enclosures, trees, and rows of steel poles. As Delgado has argued, it is precisely here that urban public space becomes a site where relational networks find their "interstitial dimension."[29] It is only a few years later, with the election of Ada Colau as mayor (2015-2023)[30] taking an explicit stance against the neoliberal approach of the contemporary city, that Barcelona entered a period of a "new municipalization"[31] of public spaces, infrastructures, and services.

Turning our gaze once again to the Danish capital, we can find a further parallel: in those same years, Copenhagen began to experiment with new instruments and processes in an effort to systematize and scale up an approach akin to what had occurred at *Pou de la Figuera*. In 2005, the *Copenhagen Urban Space Action Plan* (CUSAP) came into force, defining the so-called "third generation" of the city's urban public space.[32] The Plan's objective was to reorient interventions toward diffused, minimal, site-specific, and less costly actions in the urban public realm. The CUSAP also formally articulated an intention to strengthen the practice of systematically involving future users in project development and planning—the so-defined "Danish way" within progressive social and urban policies[33]—by developing a more robust policy framework as well as a new *Quick & Simple*

29 Manuel Delgado, *El animal público. Hacia una antropología de los espacios urbanos* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1999).

30 During her mandate, Colau—political activist and principal driving force behind the acceleration of the Superilles project, originally conceived some forty years earlier by Salvador Rueda as an evolution of Cerdà's urban grid towards a post-automobile, more livable, and genuinely public city—opposed the privatization and alienation of public assets for the benefit of private actors in urban processes. Instead, she advocated for new democratic and open policies grounded in the valorization of the commons, with particular attention to bottom-up initiatives.

31 Evgeny Morozov and Francesca Bria, "Au-delà des villes intelligentes. Alternatives démocratiques et communes à Barcelone," in *Du Droit à la Ville à la Démocratie Radicale*, 61-67.

32 Municipality of Copenaghen, *Copenhagen urban Space: Action Plan* (special edition). The 6th Biennial of Towns and Town Planning (2005). Available at: https://www.kk.dk/sites/default/files/agenda/10e5e3673913a82347393eca4f915e362f13d80b/11-bilag-2.pdf

33 Gene Desfor and John Jørgensen, "Flexible urban governance. The case of Copenhagen's recent waterfront development," *European Planning Studies* 12, no.4 (2004): 479-496.

quality standard. The quick and simple idea emphasized the value of straightforward improvements over exclusive design solutions—an approach that has often proved difficult to implement in the case of permanent transformations but particularly useful for experimentation, especially when pioneering novel urban methods and tools.[34] Examples of this quick and simple planning procedure include the green connection at *Gunnar Nu Hansens Plads* and the first transformation project for *Sønder Boulevard*.

34 Jesper Dahl and Brian Hansen, "Strategies and Projects in the City of Copenhagen," in *Piétons dans la Ville. L'espace Public Partagé*, ed. Jean-Jacques Terrin (Marseille: Parenthèses, 2011), 54-71.

Open Space Architecture as a Field of Weak Forces

Continuing the investigation into the possibilities and applications of an actively unproductive public space, this section turns to the experience of *SESC 24 de Maio*, designed by 2006 Pritzker Prize laureate Paulo Mendes da Rocha in collaboration with MMBB Arquitetos. The significance and distinctiveness of this project lie, among other aspects, in its primarily architectural scale—one that is subverted, overturned, and opened by a deliberate public intentionality, rather than by a regenerative logic of (re)producing economic value. This example—like the one discussed in the following section, though diametrically opposed in scale and therefore particularly revealing—embodies the four non-negotiable commitments previously introduced to articulate the concept of *radical publicness*. First, no new land or material consumption, achieved through the near-total reuse of existing structures; second, publicness over production, privileging presence, access, and shared use above economic profit; third, partial reversibility (especially in use) and care; and finally, institutional modesty, exemplified here by the stewardship of the entire initiative by SESC, as will be discussed shortly.

Located in the dense urban core of São Paulo, at the intersection of Rua 24 de Maio and Rua Dom José de Barros, the intervention converts the former *Mesbla* department store—a 15-storey building, including one underground level, on a 40x60-meter plot—into a multifunctional public facility providing cultural, recreational, and social services. And, most important of all, offering a new, layered urban public space. Thus, it reclaims a pre-existing structure through a radical act that refuses erasure and value extraction, opting instead for reoccupation and reconfiguration—transforming a modernist architectural object into nearly 27,865 square meters[1] of open, accessible, and usable space for the public(s). "By drawing poetry from the everyday, this project demonstrates that modern architecture is

1 Angelika Fitz and Elke Krasny, eds., *Critical Care. Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet* (Wien: Architekturzentrum Wien and The MIT Press, 2019), 239.

an ongoing process, articulated through multiple strands and successive stages, and far more positively engaged with the existing city and with the discipline's history than its detractors have typically assumed,"[2] its designers wrote.

The initiative was originally commissioned and is still managed by *Serviço Social do Comércio* (SESC), a non-profit institution established in 1946 by the National Confederation of Commerce (CNC) operating in Brazil's tertiary sector. SESC's mission focuses on delivering broad-based welfare services in education, culture, healthcare, and well-being, targeting workers and their families, as well as the general public.[3] In the city of São Paulo alone, SESC manages about forty such facilities, including architectural landmarks as Lina Bo Bardi's *SESC Pompéia*, which, beginning in 1977, radically transformed a former metal drum factory that had fallen into disuse and abandonment.[4] These spaces appear to be a particularly relevant case study to the purpose of this book, as they can be considered paradigmatic of "weak urbanism"—as later explained—or "social urbanism," offering an alternative to neoliberal urban development.

The functional program is comparable to that of many other SESC units (also known as *centros* or *unidades*), largely determined by the institution itself, with limited scope for decision-making on the part of the designers. It is a building—like every SESC—with a multiplicity of uses: it accommodates sports, culture, leisure, education, visual arts, theatre, dance, and even a swimming pool. In this particular case, this feature is located on the roof top of the building, as "[…] it is no coincidence that Mendes da Rocha associated this level with the *calçadão* along Copacabana beach, an image of democratic urbanism, as the beach is usually thought of in the popular imagination, transposed onto the top of a building, bringing with it a criticism of the idea of a city as a sum of individual and private actions, controlled by the market."[5] The ratification of the block's full completion signifies a revision of the orthodoxy of the isolated building set within an

2 Pablo Mendes da Rocha, Fernando de Mello Franco, Marta Moreira, and Milton Braga, "Historia de dos unidades. SESC Pompeia y SESC 24 de Maio," *SUMMA+* 163 (2018): 12.

3 In Brazil, SESC is financed through a legally mandated 1.5% payroll tax on companies in the commercial sector, sustaining a redistributive model of social infrastructure that is, in some respects, comparable to the historic welfare state model.

4 Cf.: Criconia Alessandra, "Una Citadela da Liberdade a San Paolo. Il Sesc-Pompeia di Lina Bo Bardi," *Rassegna di Architettura e Urbanistica* 142/143 (2014): 129-139; Luciano Semerani and Antonella Gallo, *Lina Bo Bardi: il diritto al brutto e il SESC-fàbrica da Pompéia* (Naples: CLEAN Edizioni, 2012).

5 Alexandre Benoit, "De la plaza interior al calçadão suspendido," *EN BLANCO Revista de Arquitectura* 35 (2023): 114-115.

open void—a paradigm already challenged by Lucio Costa with the *Jockey Club* in Rio de Janeiro, or by Clorindo Testa with the *Banco de Londres* in Buenos Aires.[6]

It is an explicitly public program, which, despite the evident spatial complexity resulting from the vertical stratification of multiple levels, challenged the designers to implement a minimal set of highly focused interventions. These interventions were almost entirely oriented towards creating spatial unity and fostering relationships—among people, among spaces, and among uses. The true innovation of the project lies in the fact that it does not merely represent a building that hosts multiple public functions. Rather, it embodies a public space capable of incorporating functions within it. This marks a fundamental inversion of perspective: a shift from architecture as container to space as *enabler*. Viewed through the lens of unproductive design, the project resists the logic of extraction and accumulation, offering instead a model grounded in openness, coexistence, and the provision of collective urban value. A proper example of unproductive-yet-active urbanism, with great transformative power. It embraces a posture of minimal transformation with maximum activation: a formerly privatized, commercial structure becomes a vertically layered common. The intervention does not add unnecessary volume or design flourishes—it activates what is already there through a logic of reuse, openness, and infrastructural generosity. Thence, SESC 24 de Maio is a complex cultural and recreational apparatus that is also a political act—an explicit stance against a mainstream design approach that remains largely productivist, speculative, and extractivist.

According to Mendes da Rocha, the most significant element of the project is the continuous ramp that connects all levels of the building, conceived to evoke the very idea of the city and its unfolding. It provides a clear route capable of transforming this broad urban block into a sequence of spaces—a path that extends in a playful and open-ended manner, like a promenade. "[…] The ramp, which I prefer to call *an endless street* […] is one of the urban elements that we brought into the interior of the building [*and*] plays a fundamental role. […] Architecture is a form of knowledge of the city's

6 Mendes da Rocha et al., "Historia de dos unidades."

repertoire."[7] On the side of the ramp, a transparent façade has been introduced to provide protection from wind and rain while maintaining visual continuity with the surroundings and enabling natural ventilation. "This transparent 'internal' façade is composed of a steel structure that, from a technological standpoint, differs greatly from the common glass façades in the First World. In this case, it is a three-dimensional modular structure in welded steel: in effect, a rather low-tech element."[8] The other principal façades of the block are left open, without windows or other enclosing elements—like collective balconies overlooking this vibrant city and its many contradictions.

One of the designers stated objectives was to preserve the existing building, radically refusing the idea of demolishing and rebuilding from scratch. Instead, they recycled, adapted, and valorized what already existed—the whole structure and foundations—significantly reducing material waste. A few architectural elements were added using exposed concrete—most notably the ramp and four central pillars—while the retained structure was simply painted white, allowing the old and new to coexist in a deliberate, legible manner. Through its combination of heritage preservation and inclusive spatial programming, SESC 24 de Maio aims to address key urban challenges in São Paulo—including speculative development pressures, social conflict and exclusion,[9] and the scarcity of public space.[10] The resulting architecture stands today as a paradigmatic case of spatial welfare within the city center. Thus, the project aligns with the rejection of reducing urban typologies to a limited set of formulas, instead foregrounding the covered square as a fertile architectural and urban type: a new species of public space.[11] In this regard, during an interview conducted in 2021 by the Belgian architecture and urbanism broadcaster *Archi Urbain*,[12] Milton Braga—architect and founding partner of the MMBB studio—explained what, for him, is the most significant aspect of the project: namely, how SESC 24 de Maio in-

7 Paulo Mendes da Rocha, "Sobre o edifício Sesc 24 de Maio" [interview by Giacomo Pirazzoli] *Vitruvius* 09 (2018). Available at: https://vitruvius.com.br/revistas/read/entrevista/18.075/7107?page=2

8 Ibid.

9 Romeo Farinella, *Le fragole di Londra. Attraverso le città diseguali* (Milan-Udine: Mimesis, 2024).

10 Cf.: Romeo Farinella, Valter Caldana, eds., *Downtown São Paulo. Reflections of an international design lab* (Rome: Aracne, 2022).

11 Mendes da Rocha et al., "Historia de dos unidades."

12 Archi Urbain, *ARCHI URBAIN (15/37): Paulo Mendes da Rocha + MMBB / SESC 24 de Maio* [YouTube video interview] (June 17, 2021). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRM_MRvqn38

tegrates into the urban fabric of downtown São Paulo, becoming a most active and public part of it. The area is characterized by numerous galleries and urban passages, and SESC becomes yet another of these permeable paths. In fact, its ground floor is called by citizens *Praça do SESC* (the square): it offers a double passage through its interior, allowing people to cross from one side to the other freely, without checkpoints or controlled access—there is no door, no reception area. The square unfolds and stratifies, acquiring distinct qualities at each stage along the ramp. At ground level, it extends the continuity of the street; higher up, it becomes more intimate despite the presence of the verticalized interior balcony. Further along, it reveals an inventive character through a rectilinear reflecting pool and the apparent torsion of the square mezzanine, which exposes the obliquity of the site. Ultimately, it culminates in the rooftop swimming pool, exploding into a panoramic view of the metropolis.

The result is a space that is deeply democratic in nature. It offers a reasonable degree of urban quality while remaining accessible to a diverse public. Here, the "real city" becomes visible: a genuinely plural urban society, the coexistence of rich and poor. Often, those who are economically marginalized do not feel entitled to access public institutions—especially when architectural thresholds are rigid, unwelcoming, or opaque—says Braga. At SESC, however, the transparency of its relationship with the street invites inclusion. This openness means that people who might have nowhere else to go often use the building as a place of rest and shelter, occupying the common areas simply because it is available to them. The building accommodates rather than excludes, and this, the speaker reflects, is one of the most beautiful aspects of this project.

The CESC 24 de Maio is profoundly attuned to the social life of the city. Its porous relationship with the street and its open terraces invite informal uses, lingering, and encounters—recalling William Whyte's call for spaces that are not overdetermined, as later discussed—but instead respond to how people actually *use* the city. Rather than prescribing behaviors, this "open space architecture" creates conditions for use, re-use, and improvisation. In this sense, the project becomes a space of *radical publicness*: not because it is monumental or symbolic, but because it is active, accessible, and somehow even unpredictable. This ethos aligns it with the unproductive-yet-active framework in several key ways. It does not aim to build *more*, but to care differ-

ently for what exists; it enables the collective life of the city without fetishizing newness or consumption; it defines architectural success through activation and use, not production.

Reflecting on this project, we are powerfully reminded of Cristina Bianchetti's articulation of "urban interiors," formulated in contrast to more conventional interpretations of the concept. "In a relational sense," she writes,

> "urban interiors are domestic spaces, but not reassuring ones. Rather, they are anxiety-inducing. They mediate between the need for shelter and the desire for exposure, situating distance and desire within a tension that is precisely what defines them. These are spaces deeply entangled with the tensions, desires, and emotions of *being in public*."[13]

Thus, urban interiors may be spatially bounded yet remain elastic—always capable of reintroducing "something from outside." They can emerge—either deliberately or inadvertently—from processes of urban transformation, from architectural accretions or parasitic structures, from public actions or policies, or from institutional projects aimed at fostering a form of "proximity-based welfare," as also exemplified by the intentional strategy of the Brazilian SESC system. These spaces function as a kind of "anomaly" within the continuous fabric of urban public space.

In fact, Mendes da Rocha said about the SESC 24 de Maio: "It is an interior and simultaneously a machine for discovering the world with the gaze, creating dialogues with the nearest and/or furthest urban landscape. Furthermore, the horizontality of the compressed space of the Garden [*i.e. the roof terrace*] is a device that induces to look outward, towards the city. This building is conceived from the inside out. […] After all, for architecture, there is no private space. Space is and will always be only public, even if its use varies over time."[14] In Bianchetti's account, the urban interior, as a mode of public space, no longer operates on a symbolic level but assumes an *active*, practical dimension—a space constructed around shelter, seduction, and exposure. "What matters is to grasp the subversive and protective potential of fragmentation, of the fragment, and to reflect on the residue."[15] And she insists:

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13 Bianchetti, *Spazi che contano*, 64.

14 Mendes da Rocha, "Sobre o edifício Sesc 24 de Maio."

15 Bianchetti, *Spazi che contano*, 68.

> "Urban interiors are *spaces that matter* precisely because they withdraw the notion of the public from a mental space inhabited by abstract figures, measurable quantities, and cognitive impulses stripped of psychic affect. It is a space amputated from part of itself—and therefore at peace. Urban interiors restore this space to the idea of an interiority that affirms its public power."[16]

The unproductive project, as articulated in this text, functions as a radical critique of the productivist rationality that has historically governed urban planning and the design of public space. In this sense, it can be meaningfully aligned with philosophers Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti's "weak thought" (*pensiero debole*)[17], which advocates for the abandonment of Western metaphysics, with its reliance on absolute foundations, strong structures, and universal subjects. Like *pensiero debole*, this kind of an unproductive project renounces the obsession with performance, measurability, and efficiency. Both are grounded in the acceptance of contingency, historicity, and multiplicity as the basis for an ethics and aesthetics of incompleteness, openness, and non-finalization. Whereas modernity understood the project as a deterministic and ordering device—"strong," in Vattimo's terms—the unproductive project, in alignment with weak thought, affirms indeterminacy as both ontological condition and design resource.

Similarly, unproductivity does not entail the negation of action, but rather a different mode of agency: one *unproductive-yet-active*, that operates without being driven by teleology, and designs without requiring output. In this respect, it is not only operational but ethical, echoing the spirit of *pensiero debole*, which refuses imposed meaning and opens to interpretation as a plural and shared practice. In this light, the unproductive project such as SESC 24 de Maio constitutes a spatial form of weak thought; therefore, does not propose a new projectual truth, but rather enacts a strategic suspension of the need for truth, in order to better inhabit ambiguities, thresholds, and voids—spaces and conditions that resist capture by strong, prescriptive design. In his critique of contemporary architectural practice, Andrea Branzi proposes a conceptual shift: architecture must abandon its traditional figurative and formalist orientation and embrace a "weak and diffuse"[18] logic—a paradigm suited to the immaterial, relational,

16 Ibid, 66.

17 Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, eds., *Il Pensiero Debole* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983).

18 Andrea Branzi, *Modernità debole e diffusa. Il mondo del progetto all'inizio del XXI secolo* (Milan: Skira editore, 2006).

and infrastructural dimensions of today's urban condition. "The notion of weakness to which we refer does not imply any negative value of inefficiency or incapacity; rather, it denotes a particular process of modification and knowledge that follows natural—not geometric—logics, diffuse rather than concentrated processes, and reversible, self-balancing strategies."[19]

The aim is for an architecture that operates as a field of weak forces—a swarm of objects, services, and sensory interactions—capable of interfacing with an increasingly fragmented urban reality. In this context, the built environment no longer operates through clear correspondences between form and function. Instead, it should be understood as a "semiosphere": a spatial medium that hosts immaterial processes, perceptual experiences, and ephemeral transformations that escape the traditional representational codes of architecture itself. Branzi advocates a "non-violent adjustment" in design thinking: one that is open to the autonomy of objects, the distributed nature of performance, and the blurring of boundaries between architecture, infrastructure, and—as in the case of the SESC 24 de Maio—urban (*interior*) public space. The author calls for "models of weak urbanization—that is, models that are reversible, evolutionary, and provisional—responding directly to the shifting needs of a reformist society that continuously reworks its own social and territorial organization, decommissioning and re-functionalizing the city."[20] Within this framework, architecture is conceived as a practice that ought to transcend the limits of the building understood as a structural and typological concentration, instead activating diffuse modalities and performances within the broader environment, beyond the conventional boundaries of the single construction. It is imagined as an open system of environmental components, "traversable" in nature, allowing space and territory to be permeated not through closed borders but through open filters. In this vision, architecture becomes less about composition and more about an enzymatic capacity to engage with broader processes of transformation, not by imposing external figurative codes but by cultivating internal environmental qualities, dispersed across the city rather than confined within the building's perimeter.

19 Ibid, 14.

20 Ibid, 10.

As Mendes da Rocha declared,

> "if someone has observed that this building has simplified finishes devoid of sophisticated details, and maintains that it is still a brutalist approach, I would respond that, in general, classifications or critical theories do not greatly concern me. I work with what we are seeing and touching, and this is what I respond to and what I can be judged upon. […] Basically, I think that the finish of the city's architecture is the people who complete it."[21]

Thus, in the context of São Paulo—a city increasingly marked by spatial inequality, hyper-production, and privatization—the SESC 24 de Maio "[…] aims to contribute in an *affective* manner to the recovery of the city center."[22] It becomes a gesture of resistance: not by refusing to act, but by choosing *how* and *why* to intervene. It offers a model for design that prioritizes relational intensity over material output, and that reclaims architecture's potential to serve the commons without feeding the machine of urban speculation.

21 Mendes da Rocha, "Sobre o edifício Sesc 24 de Maio." The thought of Mendes da Rocha can be understood not only through his personal experiences but also in relation to debates then current among Brazilian geographers. See Vanessa Grossman, "Geographic Imagination: From the Americas to the Planet," in *Paulo Mendes da Rocha – Constructed Geographies*, eds. Jean-Louis Cohen and Vanessa Grossman (Matosinhos: Casa da Arquitectura, 2023).

22 Mendes da Rocha et al. "Historia de dos unidades": 18.

The Practice of Doing Less: Degrowth, Absence, and Maintenance

On a completely opposite scale to the SESC 24 de Maio is the *Landschaftszug* project in Dessau-Roßlau, Germany, initiated in 2001 in response to the severe demographic decline affecting East German cities following the reunification. The rapid de-industrialization process, together with a misguided privatization policy and the destruction of existing structures, soon deprived the location of its economic base. This resulted in high unemployment, out-migration, and decreasing occupancy levels.[1] In the specific case of Dessau, the city experienced a reduction of approximately 30% of its population, falling from over 119,000 inhabitants in 1989 to 88,000 in 2009, to less that 80,000 in 2024.[2] This process of shrinkage was also one of the main driving factors behind the 2007 administrative merger of Dessau and Roßlau into one unique city, thence participating in the *IBA Stadtumbau*[3] since.

The local government demonstrated notable foresight in recognizing that the urban restructuring necessitated by demographic change and ongoing shrinkage could not be effectively addressed through traditional municipal planning instruments, which remained largely geared towards *growth*, but it necessitated the development of entirely new concepts and methodologies. In other words, "a *different* kind of growth requires a *new urbanism*."[4] In his essay *Un'urbanistica*

1 Karina Pallagst, Terry Schwarz, Frank Popper, and Justin Hollander, "Planning Shrinking Cities," *Progress in Planning* 72, no.4 (2009): 1-36.

2 Population data from the IBA-Stadt-Monitor. Available online at: https://www.iba-stadtumbau.de/index.php?dessau-rosslau-en

3 In 2002, the state of Saxony-Anhalt commissioned the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation and the Saxony-Anhalt State Development Company to prepare and stage the *International Building Exhibition* (IBA) *Urban Redevelopment 2010*—the first building exhibition to focus on a whole Federal State. Since then, the *IBA Stadtumbau*, under the motto "Less Is Future," has transformed 19 cities into a living laboratory, where urban planners, architects, citizens, and representatives from politics and administration have tested new instruments of urban transformation in response to demographic decline. Each city pursued its own specific theme, with Dessau-Roßlau focusing on "Urban Cores Areas – Landscape Zones." Further information and detailed economic data can be found in the booklet: Ministry for Regional Development and Transport Saxony-Anhalt, *International Building Exhibition Urban redevelopment Saxony-Anhalt 2010* (Grafisches Centrum Cuno GmbH und Co., 2010).

4 Michelangelo Russo and Enrico Formato, "Spazi pubblici-paesaggi comuni: un progetto per la rigenerazione urbana," in *Urbanistica per una diversa crescita*, 286.

senza crescita? ("An Urbanism without Growth?") Michelangelo Russo advances precisely this argument, maintaining that contraction should not be understood as an alternative model to growth, but rather as one of its contemporary legacies. "In territories undergoing contraction, it is essential to formulate a strategy of growth in opposition to the generic tendency toward a cyclical return to expansion. In these contexts, development means the regeneration of systems and materials that have exhausted their role and function, and that must be rethought within innovative spatial and housing models […]. Territories in contraction must reimagine their future development through innovative forms of social creativity, so as to envision new economies and new ecologies for the construction of forms of coexistence in the urban space, sustained by a rational and responsible use of resources."[5]

Working jointly with the Bauhaus Dessau and the IBA office, the municipality convened an interdisciplinary planning workshop that brought together a wide range of actors. The outcome of this dialogue was a deliberate move away from conventional master planning in favor of a more open-ended approach. Conceived as a twenty- to thirty-year undertaking, the process was intended to adapt flexibly to shifting spatial and temporal conditions within the town. This orientation required the development of an entirely new framework for planning and land management. The *Landschaftszug*—literally, "landscape belt"—developed around two focuses: firstly, the stabilization of urban cores, and secondly, the development of extensive landscape corridors in the spaces in-between these cores. It is worth noting that—at least in theory—such a spatial configuration was not new to the city. In fact, after World War II, when Dessau became part of the GDR and most of its defense industries had been relocated to the Soviet Union as war reparations, former ducal estates were transferred to public ownership, creating conditions for imagining a different urban future.[6] Urban planners across political orientations opposed the restoration of the dense pre-war blocks and narrow streets, generally agreeing instead that reconstruction should achieve a more balanced relationship between the built environment and the natural landscape. As discussed by Davids, the concept of *Stadtlandschaft* (city-landscape)—an open, loosely structured urban fabric interwo-

5 Michelangelo Russo, "Un'urbanistica senza crescita?," in *Urbanistica per una diversa crescita*, XVII.

6 René Davids, "Urban decline to green paradigm: learning from Dessau," *Journal of Urban Design* 28, no.5 (2023): 508.

ven with large green spaces—emerged in the debate as the preferred post-war model. Within this context, in the 1940s Hubert Hoffmann, a former Bauhaus student who assumed responsibility for Dessau's city planning after 1945, advanced a proposal aligned with the modernist notion of a "segmented and loosened city," promoting the idea of neighborhood clusters (i.e. *cores*) of about 5,000 residents each, organized within a continuous green matrix,[7] in which greenways would provide healthier living conditions, cleaner air, and accessible recreational areas. A model that, however, was never pursued by the socialist regime.

In a certain sense, this underlying concept can be interpreted as a derivation or, perhaps, a simplified evolution of Ungers and Koolhaas's manifesto for Berlin *The City in the City*.[8] However, rather than emphasizing the figurative dimension of the "archipelago," the Dessau-Roßlau project clearly reengages with the original theme of shrinking cities and the exploration of approaches and models for their "re-naturalization," the development of relationships with pre-existing elements—particularly architectural and heritage structures—and the attribution of value through the notion of cultural landscapes. "Ungers develops an urban model as a response to its shrinking condition. Within the fragmented structure, the proposal envisages a process of urban thinning through autonomous *nuclei* configured as islands within a green archipelago."[9]

This "model of weak urbanization [*consisting*] in the cohabitation of half-agricultural and half-urban territories"[10] strongly resonates with the *Sixth Suggestion* by Andrea Branzi for a post-environmentalism, articulating a vision of contemporary urbanism as a field of possibilities, shaped by weak forces and spontaneous programmatic outbursts. Namely, "create threshold areas between city and countryside, through hybrid territories, half urban and half agricultural; productive territories, horizontal, hospitable (but without cathe-

7 Cf.: W. Nerdinger, "Bauhaus Architecture in the Third Reich," in *Bauhaus Culture from Weimar to the Cold War*, ed. Kathleen James-Chakraborty (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 139-152.

8 Oswald Mathias Ungers, Rem Koolhaas, Peter Riemann, Hans Kollhoff, and Arthur Ovaska, "Cities within the city. Proposals by the Sommer Akademie for Berlin," *Lotus International* 19 (1978): 82-97; Florian Hertweck and Sébastian Marot [critical ed.] *The City in the City. Berlin: A Green Archipelago. A manifesto (1977) by Oswald Mathias Ungers and Rem Koolhaas with Peter Riemann, Hans Kollhoff and Arthur Ovaska. Köln: UAA Ungers Archives for Architectural Research* (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2013).

9 Michele Caja, "From the Urban Island to the Insula. Morphological Variations around a Theme," *History of Postwar Architecture* 12 (2023): 109.

10 Andrea Branzi, "For a Post-Environmentalism. Seven Suggestions for a New Athens Charter," in *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*, ed. Charles Waldheim (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006), 112.

drals), following seasons and weather, allowing conditions of flexible and discontinuous housing."[11]

Thus, *Landschaftszug* began by establishing a continuous landscape corridor from the station to the southern town, at times requiring the acquisition of derelict and privately owned sites through negotiation or symbolic compensations. "Evolving from a purchasing policy, it aimed to steer the problem of unoccupied houses by concentrating demolition in a contained area of strategically vacated land,"[12] in order to maximize continuity. Demolitions were unavoidable due to large-scale residential vacancy; yet de-construction was not viewed as a final act but as the opening of provisional opportunities, marking a radical shift in the conceptual and operational foundations of contemporary urban planning and design. This act of de-construction through the tearing down of abandoned housing stock created large "voids" within the urban fabric: instead of redeveloping them in conventional terms, the project reinterprets them as spaces of possibility: landscape corridors to be incrementally cultivated through maintenance, ecological adaptation, and public use. In this sense, it does not merely reuse space, but reclaims it as a collective, open-ended common. Moreover, following extensive public debate, the design prioritized low-maintenance wild meadows to foster biodiversity and accommodate limited financial resources. Recognizing that this transformation would require a long-term, incremental process involving a diverse array of actors—and that demolished areas would remain vacant for extended periods without immediate redevelopment (if ever)—the city of Dessau-Roßlau commissioned the office Station C23 to draft a spatial-temporal concept for the potential evolution of the *Landschaftszug*, which was mainly developed between November 2004 and 2008.[13]

Within the theoretical framework of unproductive-yet-active urbanism, this project also offers a compelling case for rethinking the role of the designer, "[...] involved in this process not as the dominant force, but rather as one player in a cooperative process,"[14] the tem-

11 Ibid, 111.

12 Sigrun Langner, "Navigating urban landscapes— adaptive and specific design approach for the 'Landschaftszug' in Dessau," *Journal of Landscape Architecture* 9, no. 2 (2014): 16-27.

13 Phase one of the project, namely *01 Entwicklungskonzept zum Landschaftszug* ("Development Concept for the *Landschaftszug*") received the German Landscape Architecture Award 2009, and recognition at the Architecture Award Saxony-Anhalt 2010.

14 Langner, "Navigating urban landscapes": 24.

porality of interventions, and the very purpose of spatial planning in contexts marked not by expansion, but by degrowth, disuse, and long-term uncertainty. It foregrounds action over production, presence over performance, and care over control. Rather than attempting to regenerate a shrinking city through economic intensification or architectural spectacle, the *Landschaftszug* operates on the premise of *doing less*: through subtraction, temporariness, and the strategic curating of existing conditions. It aligns closely with the core principles of an urbanism that acts without necessarily producing, by reframing decline as a resource, voids as opportunities, and maintenance as design text. And it does so actively, reflexively, and with long-term intentionality, resisting closure, permanence, and programmatic determinism.

We believe this project should—or, at least, could—be read through the lenses of what is today termed *Ecological Urbanism,*[15] both as an affirmation of and a critique of *Landscape Urbanism*.[16] The latter, which developed in the context of global capital, post-Fordist models of flexible production, and informal labor relations, acknowledges that urbanization continues to reduce settlement density while the architecture of the city becomes increasingly commodified as a cultural product, shifting the determinants of urban space from building to landscape. Hence, "in this horizontal field of urbanization, landscape has a newfound relevance, offering a multivalent and manyfold medium for the making of urban form, and in particular in the context of complex natural environments, post-industrial sites, and public infrastructure."[17] Ecological Urbanism, "[…] promises to render [*landscape urbanism*] dated discourse more specific to ecological, economic, and social conditions of the contemporary city. [*Thus,*] ecological urbanism implies the projective potential of the design disciplines to render alternative future scenarios,"[18] embracing on the 'programmatic indeterminacy' of landscape.

15 Cf.: Mohsen Mostafav and Gareth Doherty, eds., *Ecological Urbanism* (Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers and the President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2010).

16 The origins of Landscape Urbanism, emerged during the 1990s, can be linked to postmodern critiques of modernist architecture and planning. Figures such as Charles Jencks and other advocates of postmodern architectural discourse criticized modernism for its failure to create a "meaningful" or "livable" public realm, for its neglect of the city as a historical manifestation of collective consciousness, and for its inability to engage effectively with diverse audiences. See Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977).

17 Waldheim, *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*, 15.

18 Charles Waldheim, "Weak Work: Andrea Branzi's 'Weak Metropolis' and the Projective Potential of an 'Ecological Urbanism'," in *Ecological Urbanism*, eds. Mohsen Mostafav and Gareth Doherty (Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers and the President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2010), 114.

Unlike most contemporary large-scale projects, it did not begin with a Master Plan but with a recognition of *absence*: not as a deficiency to be filled, but as a structural condition to be understood, framed, and then worked with. In this perspective, as argued by Gabriele Pasqui, the reflections of the "irregular" scholar Charles Lindblom on the notion of "probing"[19] appear particularly fitting. Lindblom adopts the term *probing* in place of *inquiry*, precisely because it better captures the radically uncertain nature of social processes and, with a certain flexibility, of planning and design processes as well. Probing "[…] is not carried out exclusively by experts but is the outcome of an interactive process [*which*] does not merely concern the identification of the most appropriate means to achieve predefined ends; rather, it is fundamentally concerned with the very definition of problems."[20] It is precisely upon this recognition of *absence* as a structural starting point that it became possible to develop a forward-looking strategic vision, albeit one that remains highly flexible, as we shall soon see. In this perspective, the words of French philosopher Edgar Morin are particularly valuable, when he asserts that "there are effectively two ways to confront the uncertainty of action. The first is full awareness of the wager involved in the decision, the second is recourse to strategy."[21]

Sigrun Langner, professor of Landscape Architecture and Planning at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, and partner in Station C23-Architekten und Landschaftsarchitekten, described the adopted design approach through the metaphor of *navigation*: a continuous, context-oriented process of strategic definition, adjusting, adapting, and repositioning in response to changing spatial, ecological, sociodemographic, and economic conditions.

> "This reflexive method of working is analogous to navigating a ship in a reefy sea, where navigating stands for a departure into the unknown. There is a vague idea about the journey and what the destination is, as well as a notion of what to expect once you get there, but the route is not yet fixed. It is necessary to continuously adapt, and correct, the route with regard to existing conditions, as opposed to a 'finished' design concept or product."[22]

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19 Charles Lindblom, *Inquiry and Change. The Troubled Attempt to Understand and Shape Society* (New York: Yale University Press and Russell Sage Foundation, 1990).

20 Gabriele Pasqui, *Gli irregolari. Suggestioni da Ivan Illich, Albert Hirschman e Charles Lindblom per la pianificazione a venire* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2022), 114.

21 Edgar Morin, *Seven Complex Lessons in Education for the Future* (Paris: Unesco, 1999), 47. Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000117740

22 Langner, "Navigating urban landscapes": 17.

This understanding of design as "navigation" (*a journey through*) rather than "construction" (*the realization of a fixed endpoint*) implies a fundamental reorientation of urban practice, where the project is not a work to be completed, but a terrain to be continuously discovered, interpreted, cultivated, and maintained. It reframes the fundamental role of strategic orientation over the development of static master planning. Paraphrasing Edgar Morin, just as uncertainty in knowledge can only be addressed by "navigating on a sea of uncertainties dotted with islets of certainties,"[23] so too the formulation of a design strategy is itself a form of navigation. From this perspective, Jean Hillier's work provides a robust foundation, conceptualizing spatial planning as a form of "strategic navigation." This entails exploring the "virtualities" not yet visible in the present, speculating on what might still unfold, and interrogating what, in a specific moment and context, we may think or do—and how such actions could shape spatial forms that are both socially and environmentally just.[24] In fact, "[…] traditional forms of strategic spatial planning are increasingly out of synch with the rapid pace of change, complexities and uncertainties of the world that they attempt to plan. There is a need for development of a new, more flexible, form of planning"[25] which involves "[…] taking risks, the consequences of which can be thought about, but cannot be known."[26]

This model for the urban future of the Dessau-Roßlau region can be framed and understood through several interconnected and unproductive concepts. One of the most salient features is undoubtably its incremental, adaptable, and potentially reversible methodology. In fact, each intervention is designed to be tested, evaluated, adapted—or even undone—according to its effects over time, as a proper "open-ended" development.[27] "Landscape is a medium […] uniquely capable of responding to temporal change, transformation, adapta-

23 Morin, *Seven Complex Lessons in Education for the Future*, 45.

24 Jean Hillier, *Stretching Beyond the Horizon: A Multiplanar Theory of Spatial Planning and Governance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); idem, "Strategic Planning as Strategic Navigation," *CRIOS* no.1 (2011): 25-42; idem, "Strategic navigation across multiple planes: Towards a Deleuzean-inspired methodology for strategic spatial planning," *Town Planning Review* 82, no.5 (2011): 503-528. Hillier develops her compelling arguments by drawing from Foucault's reflections on the metaphor of ships and navigation (*pilotage*) in the exploration of spatial planning, urban planning, and governance, as well as from Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the boat as "a floating piece of space" and of the journey as a mode of "being in space."

25 Jean Hillier, "Strategic navigation across multiple planes": 504.

26 Patsy Healey, "Making choices that matter: the practical art of situated strategic judgement in spatial strategy-making", in *Empowering the Planning Fields: Ethics, Creativity and Action*, eds. J. van den Broeck, F. Moulaert and S. Oosterlynck (Leuven: Acco, 2008), 28.

27 Sigrun Langner, "The Dessau Landschaftszug. A Landscape Belt on Demolished Wasteland by Process-Oriented Design," in *Designing for a Region*, ed. Nancy Meijsmans (Amsterdam: Sun Academia, 2010), 144-151.

tion, and succession. These qualities recommend landscape as an analog to contemporary processes of urbanization and as a medium uniquely suited to the open-endedness, indeterminacy, and change demanded by contemporary urban conditions."[28] Embracing uncertainty and unpredictability as an intrinsic and inevitable condition—especially in relation to shrinkage—the *Landschaftszug* advances by pausing, reflecting, and re-situating, actively involving numerous stakeholders each bringing different demands, competences, and needs.

This operational flexibility, partially also due to limited financial resources, mirrors the "reflection-in-action" model advanced by American epistemologist Donald Schön,[29] since the actors involved—planners, citizens, local authorities—constantly learn from the outcomes of each step, adjusting subsequent moves without rigid commitment to a predefined blueprint. "Alliances between citizens, politicians, housing companies, landscape architects, engineers, farmers, and others are constantly being initiated and stimulated through the rebuilding of the landscape,"[30] says Langner. In the case of Dessau, "this entire process of *reflection in-action* which is central to the 'art' by which practitioners sometimes deal well with situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict"[31] acquires a distinct political dimension: it becomes a *form of resistance* to the extractive, forward-moving temporality of capitalist urbanism.

Thence, the project assumes a distinct and clearly exploratory and experimental character. This is especially evident in one of the subproject areas called *Kohlehandel und Andes*. Here, on the site of a former coal repository characterized by a mixture of uses—including coal trading, a coal freight terminal, a brewery, and a meat processing factory—and a significant degree of soil contamination, ten experimental plots were established to test greening methods across different subsoil conditions, supported by scientific research conducted by Anhalt University. Implemented between 2007 and 2008 on a surface of 3.2 hectares, these experimental patches were tested over time and evaluated not simply for their ecological performance, but for their capacity to enable long-term, self-regulating processes

28 Charles Waldheim, "Landscape as Urbanism," in Waldheim, *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*, 39.

29 Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner. How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

30 Langner, "Navigating urban landscapes": 24.

31 Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner*, 50.

of transformation. Such practices articulate an urbanism that is both procedural and propositional yet suspended in a condition of productive indeterminacy.

Giancarlo De Carlo's notion of the *progetto tentativo*[32]—a "tentative project" that unfolds as a sequence of negotiated approximations—offers a historically grounded and theoretically rich precedent for contemporary models of open-ended urbanism like the one in discussion. De Carlo's approach framed design as an ampirical, processual, adaptive, and inherently dialogic practice, one that continuously reconfigures itself through engagement with social actors, spatial contingencies, and emergent uses. This resonates powerfully with the already introduced idea of "design as navigation," where design is not understood as the implementation of a predefined form, but as a reflexive method of spatial orientation and repositioning within a landscape of uncertainty, plural interests, and shifting ecological conditions. Both approaches refuse teleological closure and instead articulate a logic of action that privileges incompleteness, reversibility, and learning. *Landschaftszug* concept of exploratory design—defined by C23 as a situated and iterative process involving testing, feedback, and site-specific adaptation—can be seen as a contemporary elaboration of De Carlo's *progetto tentativo*. In both cases, the project is not a solution but a field of possibility, unfolding through the interplay of actors, matter, and context: what emerges is a form of urbanism that resists linear progression and finalized images, favoring instead a politics and poetics of adjustment, where design becomes an instrument for navigating complexity rather than resolving it.

These convergences point to a broader epistemological shift: from design as projection to design as positioning—an unproductive-yet-active mode of urban agency rooted in responsiveness, modesty, and situated intelligence. Borrowing again Schön's words, "once we put aside the model of Technical Rationality, which leads us to think of intelligent practice as an application of knowledge to instrumental decisions, there is nothing strange about the idea that a kind of knowing is inherent in intelligent action."[33] The landscape belt is primarily shaped by the maintenance principles applied after the initial landscaping, which have been labelled as "design by maintenance"—another fundamental, unproductive concept which char-

32 Giancarlo De Carlo, *L'architettura della Partecipazione* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2015 [1972]).

33 Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner*, 50.

acterizes this project. A new planning instrument called "Aesthetic Maintenance Management Plan" (*Ästhetisches Pflegewerk Landschaftszug*) was drafted, with specific instructions helping to shape the project by inexpensive and site-specific maintenance over time. The overall design emerges successively, and to different degrees, as a product of various forms of maintenance and cultivation, as well as by incorporating different stakeholders in the production of space. The municipality is responsible for small-scale, intensive maintenance activities, particularly in landscapes adjacent to inhabited neighborhoods, along infrastructure corridors, and near the urban cores. These areas, characterized by more fixed structures and managed interventions, represent the more intensively maintained segments of the new open spaces. In contrast, the larger expanses of open meadowlands are shaped predominantly by extensive, ecologically driven processes. In these areas, where natural systems play a leading role, farmers are tasked with undertaking large-scale maintenance through agricultural practices.[34]

Citizens are invited to occupy and cultivate parcels of land within the landscape through the establishment of so-called "claims"[35]—twenty-by-twenty-meter plots where many diverse activities might take place, with the aim of fostering both cultural and physical appropriation of the emerging open space, reinforcing a sense of collective stewardship and local engagement. This represents the most direct form of spatial appropriation—of abandoned, underused, or uncertainly designated spaces—defined by Piroddi as the "principle of self-construction."[36] To put it more precisely in the words of Jean-Paul Lacaze, "to appropriate a space means to establish with it affective and meaningful relations […]. Appropriation results […] from the repeated inhabitation of places, from the possibility of improving them a little, of marking them with personalized objects, and from the habit of meeting there."[37]

A maintenance-driven project is also, necessarily, context-oriented, where "context-oriented design takes the given situation as its start-

34 Cf.: Stadt Dessau Roßlau, *Urbane Kerne und Landschaftliche Zonen. Projekte und Erfahrungen* (Urbane Kerne und landschaftliche Zonen Projekte und Erfahrungen, 2010): 38-39. Abailable at: https://verwaltung.dessau-rosslau.de/fileadmin/Verwaltungsportal_Dessau-Rosslau/Stadtentwicklung_Umwelt/Stadtentwicklung/Stadtumbau/IBA/Meldungen/Meldungen_IBA_Broschuere_20101215.pdf

35 Langner, "Navigating urban landscapes," 19.

36 Elio Piroddi, "Uso sociale dello spazio pubblico nella città contemporanea," in *Idee di spazio, lo spazio nelle idee*, 99-110.

37 Jean-Paul Lacaze, *La Ville et l'Urbanisme. un exposé pour comprendre, un essai pour réfléchir* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995).

ing point and searches for new possibilities within the existing."[38] Scholar Kelly Shannon characterizes this approach of uncovering and engaging with the inherent logic of the territory as "descriptive landscape urbanism," which "[…] could evolve from the careful reading of layered contested territories and 'designerly' investigation of potentials. The existing logics of landscapes—including its […] daily appropriations—could be reorganized at different scales and connected to new (infra)structures."[39] This directly resonates with Martì Franch's "lo-fi landscape" theory, much focused on a *design-by-maintenance* approach, in order to turn space-keeping resources into space-making ones.[40] In this perspective, Franch's most iconic project is the 2020 LILA winner *Girona's Shores*, pioneering a frugal and replicable method for developing a town-wide continuous green infrastructure. The project's strategy prioritizes iterative, low-cost, and adaptable actions over a grand, pre-defined plan, using pilot projects as "sketches" to test ideas directly on the landscape, and resulting in a system of modest, useful, and poetic public spaces created at a fraction of the cost of traditional urban interventions.

What emerges is a territory structured less by form than by relations—between actors, between ecologies, between past and future. The landscape is thus not imposed but cultivated. Maintenance, in this context, becomes not an afterthought but a design tool. Design by maintenance illustrates how spatial form can emerge not from singular acts of production, but from ongoing acts of care—an ethos that resonates deeply with the already introduced notion of "weak urbanism," where architectural intervention is understood not as a definitive imposition of order, but as a gentle modulation of existing dynamics. Through low-tech, low-cost, *lo-fi*,[41] and site-responsive actions—including experimental plantings, minimal path infrastructures, and locally attuned maintenance regimes—the project enacts a form of *weak design*: an architecture of supports rather than impositions.

38 Olivier Bormann et al., *Zwischen Stadt Entwerfen* (Wuppertal: Müller + Bussmann, 2005), 88.

39 Bruno De Meulder and Kelly Shannon, "Traditions of Landscape Urbanism. Roots of a powerful tool for 21st-century cities," *Topos. European Landscape Magazine* 71 (2010): 73.

40 Martì Franch, Alex Breedon, and Liam Mouritz, "Lo-fi Landscapes: Estudi Martì Franch," *Lansdcape Architecture Australia* 175 (2022): 38-42.

41 This concept, also employed by Franch and adapted for the Girona's Shore project, privileges ordinary use, modest means, and time-based care over capital-intensive transformation; it prioritizes process over object (adjusting in small steps, testing effects in practice, and keeping interventions reversible); and elevates maintenance and repair to first-order design acts. As discussed in the various essays collected in: Mario Lupano, Luca Emanueli, and Marco Navarra, eds., *LO-FI: Architecture as Curatorial Practice* (Venice: Marsilio, 2010), lo-fi design begins with what already exists—material conditions, social routines, existing ecologies—and explores the possibilities latent *within* them.

Furthermore, the *Landschaftszug* constructs a new relation to the public realm. Unlike "traditional" public space (often defined by monumentality, symbolic order, or programmatic clarity), it articulates a low-intensity, open publicness, anchored not in form but in *use*. Paths, clearings, residual structures, and landscape gestures allow for multiple interpretations and inhabitation without prescribing a fixed set of functions: function follows presence, reversing the mainstream hierarchies. Citizens may traverse the landscape, engage in leisure, claim parcels of land for informal use, or simply observe. "The Dessau greenway allows [*people*] to establish individual identities while offering opportunities for multiple uses including recreation, urban agriculture, and community gardens; access for alternatives to vehicular transportation; […] a linear flood control channel to absorb excess water resulting from urban flooding, storm surges, snowmelt, or unforeseen impacts of global warming."[42] In this sense, the landscape acts as a platform for *radical publicness* rather than its object—a notion deeply consistent with the ethics of an actively unproductive project. Finally, it is important to frame the *Landschaftszug* not only as a spatial intervention, but as a political proposition. In a time where urban planning is often co-opted by speculative interests and measured by its capacity to generate growth, the decision to invest in decline, to design for less, and to de-construct, represents a profound act of civic imagination. It affirms the city as a habitat for coexistence, inviting us to value slowness, incompletion, and openness as forms of urban intelligence. And it reminds us that in times of crisis—ecological, social, demographic—urbanism's most powerful tool may not be its capacity to produce, but its capacity to withhold, support, and sustain.

42 Davids, "Urban decline to green paradigm": 523.

Learning from Use: Observation, Resistance, and the Ethic of (Radical) Publicness

This final section of chapter II wishes to be a sort of "methodological consolidation." Having explored some theoretical foundations and case studies of potential *unproductive-yet-active* urbanism, I want to now turn to the systematic study of a consolidated research experience: William H. Whyte's *Street Life Project*. The intention here is to situate Whyte's learning from use empirical method of observation within the broader framework developed in this volume, showing how its insights remain strikingly relevant to contemporary urban dynamics and to the cases already discussed. It demonstrates how Whyte's approach—incremental and radically attentive to everyday practices—offers not only a historical counterpoint to the extractivist logics of public space production, but also a methodological horizon for contemporary design and planning. By re-reading his work alongside today's debates, we underscore how the ethic of observing, resisting, and enabling can still inform critical and situated interventions in the public realm.

At the beginning of the 1970s, in a moment increasingly defined by privatized, over-designed, and underused public space,[1] William "Holly" Whyte's *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*[2] offers a quiet but radical proposition: to plan less and observe more. Published at the tail end of the modernist planning regime, Whyte's work marked a crucial departure from the abstract formalism and technocratic models that had long dominated urban design. He soon became a foundational reference for the development of a series of successful practices in the study of human behavior in urban settings—some of which later evolved into what is now known as *placemaking*, albeit

1 On the classic account, see Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977). Sennett traces a long historical shift from civic role-playing and public sociability toward what he terms a "tyranny of intimacy," in which psychological comfort, privatized identity, and managed decorum take precedence over encounters with difference. This reorientation, he argues, recasts the street and the square as settings of spectatorship and control rather than open-ended interaction, encouraging sanitized, over-planned environments that are formally polished yet socially thin places that look public but invite limited use. In Sennett's reading, the erosion of public culture and the withdrawal from agonistic exposure help explain why contemporary spaces so often appear privatized, over-designed, and underused.

2 William H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (Washington DC: The Conservation Foundation, 1980).

with significant differences. Among these are the initiatives led by American urbanist Fred Kent—a disciple of Whyte and one of the young researchers involved in his work, then becoming the promoter of the *Project for Public Spaces* (1975-today), as well as the renown work of Danish planner Jan Gehl.

Instead of projecting grand visions, Whyte turned his lens—literally—onto the mundane: benches, ledges, walkways, people movements and conversations. His methods, rooted in time-lapse photography and the long, patient witnessing of public life, reclaimed *use* as a primary epistemology of space. In the context of the economically booming North American urban landscape and, more generally, the so-called Western world of the 1960s and 1970s, the limits of High Modernist urban planning—epitomized by large-scale urban renewal, zoning segregation, and top-down planning (only to give a few well-renown examples, Le Corbusier's proposals for the *Ville Radieuse* of the 1920s-30s and following models; the Charter of Athens formulated within CIAM in 1933 and published in 1943; and Robert Moses's mid-century New York programs of highway construction and urban clearance, including the Cross-Bronx Expressway and Lincoln Square/Center redevelopment)—were increasingly visible. Beyond a crisis of legitimacy in planning institutions, as extensively argued by Jane Jacobs,[3] postmodern tendencies were emerging. Together with a new pluralism in design languages, a renewed interest in context, history, and symbolism (for example, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas* of 1972, Aldo Rossi's *The Architecture of the City*, published in 1966, or Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's 1978 *Collage City*), and the decentralization and adoption of community participation in planning—although often co-opted[4]—the growing role of the private sector in urban redevelopment started to mark a shift toward neoliberal urban governance. What David Harvey would later describe as the shift from managerial to entrepreneurial urbanism.[5]

"The amount of [*city*] space was increasing. Since 1961, New York

3 Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).

4 Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari, eds., *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (London: Zed Books, 2003); Sherry R. Arnstein, "A Ladder Of Citizen Participation," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 35, no. 4 (1969): 216-224. The 1970s saw the formal adoption of community participation and decentralized governance in planning. However, these were often deployed as technocratic tools for depoliticizing dissent or as strategic means of softening resistance to market-led redevelopment. Critics argue that participatory rhetoric became a means of legitimizing top-down processes, a trend which has continued under contemporary models of *placemaking* and "governance by activation."

5 David Harvey, "From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism", *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography* 71, no.1 (1989): 3-17.

> City has been giving incentive bonuses to builders who provided plazas. For each square foot of plaza, builders could add 10 square feet of commercial floor space over and above the amount normally permitted by zoning. So they did—without exception. Every new office building provided a plaza or comparable space: in total, by 1972, some 20 acres of the world's most expensive open space."[6]

Such a way of approaching public space design was, however, producing dull and unwelcoming places—spaces that, despite their highly central locations and the manifest need for open, communal environments in a dense and mineral city like Manhattan, remained unused by the very people they were meant to serve. Many of the urban spaces observed by the *Project for Public Spaces* were in fact the so-called POPS: privately-owned public spaces, as areas dedicated for public use and enjoyment, however maintained by private property owners in exchange for bonus floor area or zoning waivers.[7] Read through Edward Soja's theory of spatial justice, this incentive-driven privatization of the public realm exemplifies how the production of urban space increasingly reflects commodification and exclusion, subordinating collective use to private accumulation; in fact, Soja contends that the right to the city must be actively reclaimed through everyday practices that assert *presence*, *use*, and *access* in the face of such spatial enclosures.[8] In this light, William Whyte's observational research operates as an empirical counterpoint and practical corollary to Soja's argument: it documents how bonus-fueled plaza production and private governance arrangements systematically impeded convivial occupation, revealing a regime of urban development that was failing—socially and in terms of public benefit—and prompting a broader reckoning with extractivist logics that left the city markedly unresponsive to its citizens.

To provide a bit of a background, William Holly Whyte was a journalist who, after serving in World War II, became a reporter and later an editor for *Fortune* magazine, where he worked from 1946 to 1958. It was during these years that he developed his signature approach—blending sociological observation, accessible writing, and critical insight—which would shape both his journalistic and later scholarly work. In 1956 he published his bestseller book *The Organization Man*: a landmark sociological study of mid-20th century American corpo-

6 Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces,* 14.

7 Jerold S. Kayden, *Privately Owned Public Space: The New York City Experience* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000),

8 Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*.

rate culture. Drawing on interviews, fieldwork, and sharp cultural critique, here Whyte explores the values, behaviors, and ideologies that define life within large organizations—particularly in the corporate, bureaucratic, and suburban settings of postwar America. The book critiques how corporations and suburban life fostered groupthink, discouraged dissent, and promoted a narrow version of success tied to institutional advancement, warning against the loss of critical thinking and autonomy it can entail.

Following up on these issues, in 1958 he collaborated with other editors of *Fortune* magazine—including Jane Jacobs—to publish a special issue entitled *The Exploding Metropolis*. This publication addressed the challenges of urban decline and suburban sprawl, transportation, city politics and open space, offering a critical perspective on the urban renewal programs that were widely promoted at the time.

> "This is a book by people who like cities. […] It is the contention of this book that most of the rebuilding underway and in prospect is being designed by people who don't like cities. […] They dislike the city's variety and concentration, its tension, its hustle and bustle. The new development projects will be physically in the city, but in spirit they deny it."[9]

Jacobs's contribution to the volume, titled *Downtown is for People*, laid the groundwork for her seminal book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), for which she received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation because of this article. Beginning with a simple yet incisive question—"What will the projects look like?"—and arguing: "They will be stable and symmetrical and orderly. They will be clean, impressive, and monumental. They will have all the attributes of a well-kept, dignified cemetery. And each project will look very much like the next one,"[10] Jacobs, too, emphasizes the power of observation as a radical departure from top-down, productivist approaches to urban design. "[…] downtown does need an overhaul […]. But there are things that are right about it too, and by simple old-fashioned observation we can see what they are. We can see what people like."[11]

The distinctly extractivist logic that, half a century ago—not only in New York—entrusted private actors with the large-scale, "compen-

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9 William H. Whyte, "Introduction," in *The Exploding Metropolis* (Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993 [1958]), 7.

10 Jane Jacobs, "Downtown is for people," in *The Urban and Regional Planning Reader*, ed. Eugénie Birch (London: Routledge, 2008), 126.

11 Ibid., 127.

satory" production of public space reflects a broader shift in urban governance, whereby the provision of collective goods became contingent upon, and subordinated to, private development incentives, often resulting in spaces that served regulatory compliance more than public life. A logic that—as I have tried to discuss in the previous sections—never after truly abandoned urban planning processes. In the past decades, scholars of critical geography and urban political-ecology have extended the vocabulary of *extractivism*—once reserved for mining, oil, or agro-commodities—to the planetary circuits of land, finance, and attention that now structure contemporary urbanization.[12] In this reading, cities are not merely the recipients of rent extracted elsewhere; rather, urban space itself becomes an extractive frontier where differential ground rent, cultural capital, and even affect are mined, securitized, and circulated as assets.[13] In the words of Scottish geographer Neil Smith,

> "in the advanced capitalist world today we all conceive of space as emptiness, as a universal receptacle in which objects exist and events occur […]. This view of space appears so self-evident that, despite its vagueness and the ambiguity that results from continually being pressed into service as metaphor, in every-day usage we are almost wholly uncritical of it. Space is simply a given universal of existence,"[14]

treated as a resource to be mined and cyclically (re)valued. And continues: "By its actions, this society no longer accepts space as a container but produces it; we do not live, act, and work "in" space so much as by living, acting, and working we produce space."[15] As Smith makes clear, the "integrative function" of ground rent refers to its role in coordinating the relative values and uses of urban land, thereby providing a degree of coherence to the spatial organization of the city. Once "[…] land itself becomes an object of speculative exchange and development, the integrative function of ground rent is disrupted"[16]: urban space—and by extension even public space—is no

12 Cf.: Martín Arboleda, *Planetary Mine: Territories of Extraction under Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2020); Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *The Politics of Operations: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017); Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid, "The 'Urban Age' in Question," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38, no. 3 (2014): 731-755.

13 Cf.: David Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital: Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); idem, "The Art of Rent: Globalization, Monopoly and the Commodification of Culture," *Socialist Register* 38 (2002): 93-110; Sharon Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); idem, *Naked City*.

14 Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*, 3rd ed. (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2008), 95.

15 Ibid., 116.

16 Ibid., 185.

longer structured by the logics of accessibility or collective need, but by the pursuit of profit through appreciation and rent capture. In this sense, speculation transforms the city into an extractive frontier, where the circulation of land as a financial asset overrides its role as a lived environment.

In his work *The Urban Process Under Capitalism*, David Harvey[17] argues that cities are not neutral containers but "second-order" circuits of capital through which surplus value extracted in production is absorbed, fixed and, periodically, de-valued again. Several interconnected arguments reveal how urban form and policy are governed by what we can call an extractivist logic—one that treats space itself as a resource to be mined and exhausted in the pursuit of profit. The most relevant perspective raised by Harvey, to the purpose of this book, is that of "accumulation for accumulation's sake,"[18] through which public space can be re-framed as vein of latent surplus value. Public space bonuses, incentive zoning and PPP mega-projects replicate an extractive logic: they convert collective spatial rights into tradable development rights, allowing private actors to harvest surplus floorspace while externalizing long-term social and environmental costs.[19] They treat surface land as a latent yield curve rather than a lived commons.[20]

Against this backdrop, Whyte's observational praxis can be re-read as an early form of anti-extractive diagnostics. For instance, by measuring the actual amount of sitting space—"[*it*] does not include any qualitative factors: a foot of concrete ledge counts for as much as a foot of comfortable bench space"[21]—rather than square foot ratios per zoning dollar, he brought to light the under-production of public benefit that accompanies the over-production of rentable area. His injunction that "people tend to sit most where there are places to sit"[22] thus pre-figures contemporary calls for a degrowth urbanism

17 David Harvey, "The Urban Process under Capitalism: a Framework for Analysis," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 2 (1978): 101-131.

18 David Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital*; David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

19 Cf.: Lisa Adkins, Melinda Cooper, and Martijn Konings, *The Asset Economy: Property Ownership and the New Logic of Inequality* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020); Jeremy Németh and Stephan Schmidt, "The Privatization of Public Space: Modeling and Measuring Publicness," *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design* 38, no.1 (2011): 5-23; Erik Swyngedouw, Frank Moulaert, and Arantxa Rodríguez, "Neoliberal Urbanization in Europe: Large-Scale Urban Development Projects and the New Urban Policy," *Antipode* 34, no.3 (2002): 542-77.

20 Cf.: Stavrides, *Common Space: The City as Commons*; Sheila R. Foster and Christian Iaione, "The City as a Commons," *Yale Law & Policy Review* 34, no. 2 (2016): 281-349.

21 Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, 27.

22 Ibid, 28.

of care and maintenance—an unproductive-yet-active approach that relinquishes the search for "highest and best use" in favor of *common use*. This methodological humility is precisely what made Whyte's project so radical. Against the grain of productivist urbanism—defined by an imperative to build, measure, and optimize—Whyte insisted on attention. He suspended the architect's compulsion to design in favor of listening to what space already was doing. In this light, observation becomes not a passive act, but a profoundly active form of resistance—resistance to abstraction, to commodification, and to the enclosure of the public by the proprietary.

After a decade observing, studying and writing books such as *The Last Landscape*,[23] exploring the impact of unchecked development of the American landscape, in 1969 Whyte had been invited by NYC mayor John Lindsay to edit the draft City Plan.

> "He agitated for an evaluative unit and contested that the City should evaluate the effectiveness of these expensive public spaces. The Plan itself was criticized for its lack of substantive analysis which held resonance with Whyte, so he offered to substantiate his long held anti-city skepticism with an immediate challenge. If he could prove what makes the good spaces good and the bad ones bad, he could amend the code. He was driven to convert his suspicion to facts and arm himself with evidence aimed at officials, planners and legislators."[24]

It was precisely as a result of this appointment that the *Street Life Project* (1970–1975) was initiated. Whyte was awarded a grant by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund to investigate street life mainly in New York City, involving a team of young research assistants with different disciplinary backgrounds. In addition to testing an empirical research methodology based on the observation of behaviors and patterns of space use by individuals, the systematic work—initially carried out in playgrounds and residential courtyards (likely with reference to the earlier work of Aldo van Eyck in the Netherlands and Kevin Lynch around the US and a number of European capitals), and subsequently extended to 16 plazas and 3 small parks in Manhattan—led to the formulation of a series of recommendations, which were adopted into New York City's 1975 open space zoning code. These recommendations are presented, in Appendix B, within the 1980 volume—referred

23 William H. Whyte, *The Last Landscape* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1968).

24 Miriam Fitzpatrick, "Fieldwork in Public Space Assessment. William Holly Whyte and the Street Life Project, 1971-75, in *Architecture and Field/Work*, eds. Suzanne Ewing et al., (London-New York: Routledge, 2011), 126.

to by Whyte himself as a "manual"—which was released alongside a compelling full-length film[25] edited using original footage from the *Street Life Project* fieldwork.

The adopted empirical methodology was carefully described in Appendix A of the book, with a particular focus on the pioneering use of time-lapse cinematography as a tool for analyzing public space use. The appendix functions as both a technical manual and a reflexive account of the research process, revealing Whyte's strategy that is deeply empirical yet interpretive, technological yet humanistic. It reflects the broader commitment of *The Street Life Project* to learning from use—to understanding public space not through abstract metrics or normative models, but through patient, situated attention to how people actually behave. At its core, the methodology relied on Super-8 time-lapse film to document public behavior over extended periods. Using cameras equipped with intervalometers, the research team captured images at regular intervals, allowing for the detailed, frame-by-frame reconstruction of spatial and social dynamics. This approach enabled the simultaneous study of multiple locations with a level of accuracy and continuity unattainable through direct observation alone.

Importantly, Whyte insists that direct on-site observation is a necessary complement to time-lapse footage. Familiarity with a site's rhythms and routines enabled the research team to detect subtle behavioral dynamics otherwise missed. The iterative process between observation and film analysis facilitated both hypothesis formation and testing: "What you have to do is to interrogate the film. Hypothesize; ask questions of the film [...]."[26] The methodology is remarkable not only for its rigor, but for its attention to context and contingency. Whyte cautions against over-systematization, advocating instead for interpretive agility, constant hypothesis revision, and sensitivity to environmental factors such as sunlight, furniture placement, or nearby architectural features.

What Whyte found in small public spaces was not chaos, but choreography[27]. People arranged themselves with precision on ledges and steps; they congregated not in the "escape" zones of open space, but

25 William H. Whyte, "The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces" (Municipal Art Society of New York, video 55', 1980).

26 Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, 109.

27 Elena Dorato, "Indeterminatezza e intenzionalità nel corpo della città," *Rassegna di Architettura e Urbanistica* 172 (2024): 28-33.

"smack in the center of the flow."[28] They self-congested. They gravitated toward available sitting space, toward sun, toward one another. "What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people."[29] This simple insight revealed how deeply flawed the spatial assumptions of much modernist planning were. Spaces designed to keep people apart—to deter "undesirables"—invariably failed to attract anybody. Whyte's insistence on everyday use as the only legitimate metric of urban design not only subverted the value systems of his day but continues to resonate amid today's quasi-public urbanism, in which corporate logics often mask private control as public generosity. In reframing the act of observation as an ethical and political intervention, Whyte contributes to what we define in this book as an *unproductive-yet-active* urbanism. That is, a way of intervening in the city not through the production of form or the accumulation of metrics, but through the cultivation of conditions for use—conditions that are not only spatial, but social and ecological.

This paradigm shift resonates with Whyte's own critiques of incentive zoning and its unintended consequences. The design of New York's plazas, incentivized by floor-area bonuses, too often prioritized quantity over quality—leading to the creation of spaces that, while ostensibly public, were devoid of life. "What you do not prescribe quite explicitly, you do not get,"[30] Whyte warned. His solution, however, was not more control but more empirical learning. Observation, in this sense, becomes a counter-project to technocratic planning: an unproductive, situated form of knowledge that reclaims use from the margins. Furthermore, Whyte's studies complicate the binary of public/private by underscoring the political charge of how people use space. "The best show window on Lexington Avenue," he notes, "looks into the sanctuary of St. Peter's Church. Passersby stop to look and comment."[31] This moment is not passive observation, but an act of engagement, one that affirms the presence of others as central to the urban experience. It is also, subtly, a claim to the city—a right to linger, to watch, to be moved.

In this light, Whyte's urban observer is not merely a researcher but a quiet insurgent, resisting the abstraction and enclosure of the city

28 Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces,* 21.

29 Ibid, 19.

30 Ibid, 30.

31 Ibid, 98.

through careful, loving attention. His work illuminates how unplanned, unprogrammed, and unproductive spaces can become the most *active*—not through intervention, but through *use*. This ethos remains urgent today. As developers—and administrators alike—wrap public spaces in layers of surveillance, branding, and exclusionary design, Whyte's legacy calls us back to the sidewalk, the ledge, the conversation; even to conflict as a fundamental and intrinsic value of public space. It calls on us to notice—to create not new forms but new ways of seeing what is already there, to make the most of it, and thus to enable the inoperativity of public-space design. To reclaim observation as design knowledge is to affirm a sort of *radical publicness*, something made not necessarily by architects— and certainly not by developers—but by the daily, even improvied acts of people using space together.

We understand Whyte's insistence on documenting mundane behaviors—sitting, lingering, discussing, or even doing nothing—as a "quiet" form of spatial resistance. The emphasis on observation and minimal intervention emerges as a political project: a refusal to surrender public space to the imperatives of extraction, commodification, accumulation, and securitization. Observation itself becomes a strategy of spatial justice—an act of staying with the city's contradictions rather than resolving them into controllable forms. By validating everyday use against the abstract metrics of zoning incentives, he reclaims public space as a lived commons rather than a market-driven artefact, a method resonating with Soja's call to foreground lived experiences and spatial practices as essential to constructing more just and democratic urban environments.[32]

Whyte's approach, however, is not without its critics. Sharon Zukin, in two of her books, *The Culture of Cities* and *Naked City*, repeatedly challenges Whyte's position, portraying him as "[...] a journalist turned urban anthropologist, who argued that the best way to control behavior in a public space is for everyone to keep everyone else under surveillance."[33] Zukin critically reflects on the transformation of New York City under the forces of neoliberal redevelopment, gentrification, and cultural commodification, focusing part of her analysis on Business Improvement Districts (BIDs): private entities that, often in New York, are also tasked with the management of public

32 Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*.

33 Zukin, *Naked* City, 139.

space. By sustaining that "authenticity" has become a tool of exclusion in contemporary urban design, the author calls attention to Whyte's own case studies in Midtown Manhattan, which reveal plazas that were producing bonuses rather than public. "Whyte's basic idea is that public spaces are made safe by attracting lots of 'normal' users. The more normal users there are, the less space there will be for vagrants and criminals to maneuver. [...] They established a model of pacification by cappuccino."[34] And on she goes: "Whyte recommended keeping 'the undesirables' out by making a park attractive."[35]

In fact, despite the evident and explicitly acknowledged distortion introduced by the active involvement of private actors in the production of public space, Whyte's work ultimately seeks to argue precisely the opposite. In chapter six of the book, dedicated to *The Undesirables*, Whyte argues that the real problem in public space is not the presence of marginal or deviant figures, but the defensive and exclusionary design strategies implemented to keep them out. These measures, he suggests, ultimately produce sterile, underused spaces that fail both socially and spatially. Whyte identifies the obsessive fear among building owners that attractive public spaces will invite "undesirable" users. Interestingly, he notes, the individuals labelled as such are rarely those who pose a genuine threat, but rather more benign figures such as the homeless, bag ladies, street performers, and informal vendors. These groups, Whyte suggests, are treated less as security risks than as symbols of disorder—figures whose visibility is seen as incompatible with sanitized corporate environments. Central to Whyte's critique is his argument that defensive urbanism—manifest in tactics such as anti-sleep benches, spikes on ledges, and hostile signage—creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: spaces designed to exclude are, paradoxically, the ones most likely to be underused, poorly maintained, and frequented by the very populations they aim to repel—"Places designed with distrust get what they were looking for."[36]

As an alternative, Whyte advocates for an approach grounded in inclusivity and social density. Through his research, he demonstrates that spaces which are open and permissive tend to self-regulate through social presence and, at times, ways of informal stewardship,

34 Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities*, 28.

35 Ibid, 30.

36 Ibid, 61.

even if recognizing the ambiguity of property rights in privately-owned public spaces, and the unresolved tensions around the legal and ethical status of such spaces.

Among the most compelling critical perspectives on Whyte's methodology is that advanced by Cristina Bianchetti in her incisive work *Spazi che contano. Il progetto urbanistico in epoca neo-liberale*,[37] where she develops a broader challenge to functionalism in urban design. In this context, Bianchetti offers a sustained analysis of what she identifies as a new form of "abstract and stripped-down humanism"[38] permeating contemporary urban planning discourse. While ostensibly committed to placing "the human" at the center of urban design, this emergent paradigm—evident in the work of figures such as Jan Gehl, who drew extensively on Whyte's teachings, and in the proliferation of pedestrian-friendly, visually coherent, and ecologically virtuous design manuals—operates, for the author, within a deeply reductive framework. Bianchetti believes that rather than embracing the full complexity of embodied public life, it reduces the subject to an anonymous, predictable figure whose behaviors in space are presumed to be fixed, manageable, and universally legible. She notes that today, "Many are once again observing individuals in public space with the attentiveness of an entomologist. And from these minute observations, they construct new catalogues of possible actions, thereby opening a convenient path for a kind of functionalism not so different from that of the mid-twentieth century."[39]

Bianchetti terms this the "new humanist functionalism"—a position that, despite its rhetorical gestures toward inclusivity and participation, largely reproduces old logics of spatial determinism and behavioral scripting. It focuses on the visual and morphological regulation of space and tends to substitute real political or social engagement with aesthetic and even hygienic ideals. As she argues, "The principal error of this new humanist functionalism is its short-sightedness: the desire to place man at the center, while simultaneously reducing him to a parody of himself. To observe only the anonymous, disembodied way he occupies public space." She continues: "How can one construct a legibility of public space while grappling with

37 Bianchetti, *Spazi che contano*.

38 Ibid, 69.

39 Ibid, 71.

a subject who is not predefined in their behaviors in space […]?"[40] This critique extends to the widespread use of observational methods in urbanism—such as those derived from Lynch, Rudofsky, Cullen, Appleyard, Gehl, and Jacobs—which Bianchetti describes as a form of entomological attention: constructing taxonomies of urban behaviors that legitimize a narrow, normative use of space. In doing so, these approaches open a convenient path back to functionalism, concealed under the language of livability, safety, and sustainability.

Importantly, Bianchetti highlights how this dominant discourse has become a discursive formation deeply aligned with neoliberal urbanism. It operates through the soft coercion of consensus—invoking density, accessibility, visual legibility, and ecological sensibility not as sites of debate but as self-evident design truths. This creates what she calls a "progressive advertisement"[41] of public space, one that flattens political conflict and spatial heterogeneity in favor of a pacified, polished, and programmable urban realm.

However, the work of William Whyte does not seem to fit this description. He began both the book and the movie with images of a street in Harlem, characterized by its chaotic vitality and the absence of boundaries or separation of uses—an environment seemingly at odds with the mainstream approaches to public space design at the time. Whyte writes:

> "One of the best play areas we came across was a block on 101st Street in East Harlem. It had its problems, but it worked. The street itself was the play area. Adjoining stoops and fire escapes provided prime viewing across the street and were highly functional for mothers and older people. There were other factors at work, too, and, had we been more prescient, we could have saved ourselves a lot of time spent later looking at plazas. Though we did not know it then, this block had within it all the basic elements of a successful urban place."[42]

In our view, Whyte's advocacy for minimal intervention, responsiveness to real behaviors, and resistance to the privatization and overproduction of public space stands as an early and powerful articulation of what we can frame as unproductive-yet-active urbanism. Whyte's empirical method—observing human behaviors in public spaces, mapping patterns of use, lingering, sitting, and gathering—

40 Ibid, 71-72.

41 Ibid, 73.

42 Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces,* 11-12.

was not just a critique of modernist spatial failures. It was a powerful reassertion of an urbanism built on minimal intervention, on supporting what already works rather than imposing what should. His work implicitly resists the encroachment of corporate-controlled, quasi-public space. It frames *use* as a political act—one that asserts rights to the city and contests the enclosure of public life by design-led commodification; he questioned the legitimacy of privately-produced "public" spaces and advocated for what we have somewhat defined as *radical publicness*.

His work brings to light *indeterminacy* in its most constructive sense: as an ontological condition of spatial design and as a prerequisite for what might be considered a successful outcome—namely, the capacity of a space to accommodate the widest and most varied range of collective uses.[43] Revisiting Whyte's work today reveals how the principles of unproductive-yet-active urbanism were already being articulated in resistance to extractivist urban trends. His work underscores the transformative potential of doing less—of creating conditions rather than objects, of enabling uses rather than prescribing form—as an ethic for unproductive-yet-active public space.

43 Dorato, "Indeterminatezza e intenzionalità nel corpo della città," 30.

Images from Place de la République, Paris

48°52'1.31"N 2°21'30.35"E

Photo credits: [1]-[6] Gianni Lobosco, 2022; [7] Cinzia Rinaldesi, 2024.

[1] The square and, on the left, the Monument to Marianne.

[2] The square's single, continuous surface and the existing trees.

[3] The pool and the small pavilion, beneath which several people experiencing homelessness also find shelter from inclement weather.

[4] [5] Pedestrians and skateboarders share the square.

[6] The mobility system around the square reconfigured with a pedestrian-priority scheme.

[7] Large demonstration following the results of the French legislative elections on July 7, 2024.

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Images from Plaça de la Catedral, Barcelona

41°23'02"N 2°10'35"E

Photo credits: [1]-[6] Elena Dorato, 2018.

[1] The "expressive restraint" of the square's design.

[2] [3] [4] [5] People gathered for a sunny-afternoon performance of the *Sardana*, the traditional Catalan dance.

[6] Cathedral Square on a Saturday morning, during the farmers' market.

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Images from Pou de la Figuera, Barcelona

41°22'58"N 2°10'39"E

Photo credits: [1]-[8] Elena Dorato, 2021.

[1] Compacted earth, tree\s, and seating; to the right, the community gardens.

[2] The limited-traffic street that cuts across public space.

[3] A protected playground for young children and, in the background, a small multi-purpose hall serving the neighborhood, constructed in a later phase.

[4] [5] [6] The community gardens.

[7] The simple raised platform used as seating or as a stage for local events.

[8] The large open area for play and sport, with two football goals and a basketball backboard.

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1a y 3a semana del mes: MIERCOLES
2a y 4a semana del mes: SABADO
VEN Y TRABAJA

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Images from SESC 24 de Maio, São Paulo

23°32'45"S 46°38'17"W

Photo credits: [1] [4]-[6] Gianni Lobosco, 2023; [2] [3] [7]-[9] Elena Dorato, 2023.

[1] One of the many floors of the building/public space, which are always accessible.

[2] The pre-existing structure that enables wide-open levels overlooking the city.

[3] A panoramic belvedere over the city, with the cooling relief of water features for all, at all times.

[4] [5] Collective seating, working, chatting, eating, resting areas.

[6] A detail of the transparent, low-tech inner façade.

[7] [8] [9] "The endless street": the progression of the internal promenade (ramp) that distributes access to all floors.

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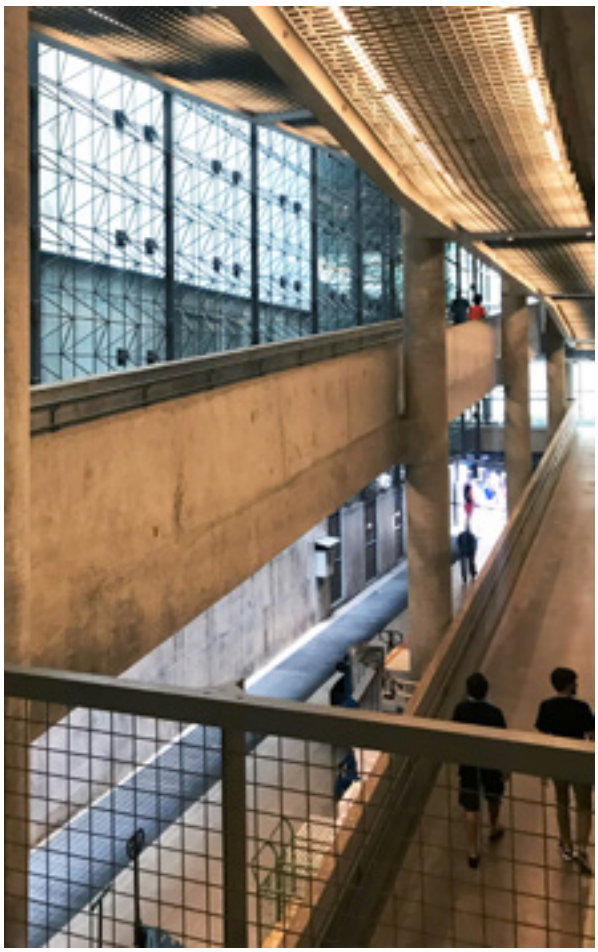

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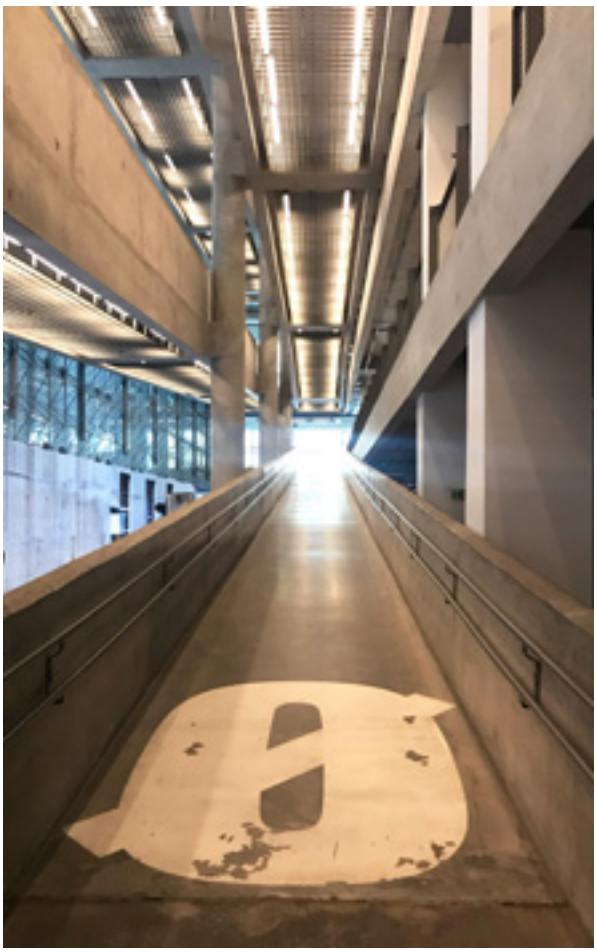

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Images from Landschaftszug, Dessau-Roßlau

51°50'34.18"N 12°13'49.42"E

Photo credits: [1]-[14] medial mirage, Leipzig, for Station C23 ©, 2009 - 2012.

[1] Experimental fields (*Kohlenhandel* area), Räucherturm tower, and the BMX tracks.

[2] The former chimney in the *Molkerei* area, once a dairy plant with administrative buildings and a school.

[3] [4] Wide open grassland in the *Neuendorfstraße* sub-project, originally the site of five residential blocks, now demolished.

[5] [6] [7] [8] Ground-surface details (junegrass, wild flowers, etc.).

[9] Gravel bands between the experimental fields in the *Kohlehandel & Andes* area.

[10] [11] Demolition of buildings no longer in use.

[12] [13] A shrub and an artwork within concrete panels retained from the previous district, as a material trace of the past.

[14] Lavender growing among concrete vestiges in the *Gartenstraße* area.

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Practical, Pedagogical and Political "Openings" of a *Moratorium on New Construction*

Elena Dorato & Richard Lee Peragine with Charlotte Malterre-Barthes

"To stop building new does not mean the end of architecture, but rather the end of the design practice as we know it."

Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, *A Moratorium on New Construction* (London: Sternberg Press, 2025), 140.

A Conversation with Charlotte Malterre-Barthes[1]

Elena Dorato: Charlotte, your book "A Moratorium on New Construction" recently came out, for Sternberg Press.[2] My first question concerns its political orientation in relation to your broader body of work, particularly with regard to the notion of the moratorium as a tool. In the book, you state—on several occasions, I believe—that you conceive of the moratorium primarily, if not exclusively, as a legal instrument. To us, however, the moratorium seems to be so much more. Could you expand on this, especially in terms of the political perspective that underpins your work? Might this also connect to your personal experience with *House Europe!*[3] as an advocacy and political platform? More specifically, in what ways does the moratorium engage with the power relations embedded in planning and architectural discourse?

Richard Lee Peragine: I'll take this one up right away, if I may. Let me read a passage from the book—these are words of legislator Robert S. Greenbaum in the 1980s, which refer to a planning moratorium that you cite as an example of an earlier attempt to halt construction. Greenbaum stated: "neither morally nor aesthetically positioned," a moratorium is a legal tool.[4] Yet this observation—as Elena was mentioning—seems to be unsettled by the chapter that possibly struck me the most, entitled *Change Value Systems*. That chapter clearly points to an extra-juridical dimension aimed at transforming public perception of the built environment: an aesthetic shift that we also discuss in previous chapters in relation to Lucius Burckhardt, for instance.

Charlotte Malterre-Barthes: Those who practice it often tend to regard law as something neutral, as in Greenbaum's case. Yet law is in fact malleable to different ends: it can operate oppressively, or it can

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1 This chapter was written based on two meetings between the authors and Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, on May 19 and June 12, 2025.

2 Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, *A Moratorium on New Construction* (London: Sternberg Press, 2025).

3 See https://www.houseeurope.eu/

4 Robert S. Greenbaum, "Land Use Interim Zoning Controls and Planning Moratoria: An Analysis Update," *The Urban Lawyer* 18, no.1 (1986): 247-252, quoted in Malterre-Barthes, *A Moratorium on New Construction*: 46.

be liberating. I believe it is anything but neutral, since it can be bent in both directions. Positioning the moratorium as a legal tool may align with the perception of neutrality, right? Meaning, it is just *a tool*. But in reality it is the actor who employs the tool that ultimately determines its orientation. As I note in the book, moratoria indeed have a history of being mobilized in both ways.

[*sounds of building demolition going on at Charlotte's end interrupt the discussion*]

CMB: So yes, there is a tension within the tool itself. Law is ostensibly meant to serve everyone in the same way, yet today we clearly see this is far from the case. The law can operate in either direction. I think of the moratorium in these terms, which is why I first try to frame it as something highly respectable and legitimate—perhaps you both fell into the "respectable," "neutral" trap of the moratorium—and then, of course, as an unraveling of what it actually means to halt construction. It is about beginning to think with and against the law, even wrestling with it, and understanding it as a contested battlefield where the state of things *can* be discussed in parallel. Shifting the ways we perceive the world is precisely the ground where I like to situate the discussion on moratoria. Red taping is a good example. Consider our present moment: on the one hand, there is the idea of justice that the law seeks to uphold; on the other, there are attacks on institutions and the instrumentalization of laws against people or ideas. This twofold tension speaks directly to the ambiguity and complexity of our contemporary condition. In the field of construction, for example, there are legal instruments designed to regulate and verify which projects may proceed, or to fast-track building permits. Quite literally, at the opposite end of this spectrum lies the moratorium—or the idea that red taping is potentially good because it will also delay the damage caused by accelerated spatial development. As long as the legal process remains suspended, the existing condition is preserved, and the harms associated with construction and demolition are brought to a halt. You mentioned *House Europe!* In my own spatial practice, I am interested in how architects can engage with legal frameworks in a militant way. I believe *House Europe!* is ultimately about opening a civic space that shifts perceptions——even if, in the end, it fails to gather the one million signatures it requires to actually happen.

RLP: We've just failed with a major referendum in Italy on Monday.[5]

CMB: I saw that. All things considered, the question becomes: how do we reclaim the public realm? I believe that is exactly what *House Europe!* is attempting to do—while also pursuing the larger ambition of forcing legal change to reduce harm at multiple levels. In this sense, one can certainly bring the moratorium into dialogue with *House Europe!* through their shared tension as legal instruments and the possibility of their instrumentalization. It is almost as if the starting point were the legal tool and it then opened onto a much broader inquiry into what it would actually mean to stop building. Another form of doing in architecture is never just about the legal tool, even if it begins from there. The legal tool is really just an entry point. I see the moratorium as somewhat like clickbait. And I think the book operates in a similar way: the "respectable" version of the moratorium functions as a provocation, a moment of discomfort, before opening onto the many issues that lie beneath the question of what happens if we stop new construction. The book is ultimately about compelling people to reflect on what building itself actually means.

ED: In the book, you mention the 2018 French ELAN law,[6] which was originally intended to end fossil fuel dependency by 2025. It is in some respects comparable to a measure introduced in Italy, commonly referred to as the *Superbonus*.[7]

CMB: The Italian renovation law—someone brought it up in class two semesters ago, and we examined it as one of several mixed bags of neoliberal "greenwashing." I understand it was eventually cancelled, largely because it was being misused.

ED: No, I don't think people abused it: they actually acted within the law. That is precisely the problem! The measure, much like the French case, essentially funded the retrofitting of buildings, with a particular focus on improving insulation performance and overall energy efficiency. Put simply, it channeled money primarily into private owners rather than,

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5 On June 8-9, 2025, Italy held five abrogative ballot questions proposing the repeal of portions of labor-law statutes—among them, restrictions on reinstatement after unlawful dismissals, limits on severance in small firms, and rules on fixed-term contracts—as well as one question on reducing the residency period for non-EU citizens to request Italian citizenship. The turnout, however, did not reach quorum.

6 Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, *A Moratorium on New Construction*: 127. The reference is to French law ELAN (Loi n° 2018-1021, November 23, 2018) "Évolution Du Logement, de l'Aménagement et du Numérique" (*Law for the Development of Housing Planning and the Digital Economy*). See https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000037639478

7 The reference is to the "*Legge di Conversione del Decreto Superbonus*" (Decreto-legge n. 39/2024). See https://www.camera.it/leg18/126?tab=6&leg=18&idDocumento=2500&sede=&tipo=

for instance, State investment in public buildings or in social and public housing. Housing agencies were technically eligible for funding, but only on the same terms as individual citizens—without any special provisions or preferential channels—since there was no clear or deliberate political intent to prioritize them. A disaster. And what we have not yet witnessed—but which we all know is imminent—is another market crisis in the construction sector. The market has been pumped up with money and activity for several years, and it is now likely to collapse. The impact at the national scale will be severe.

RLP: Indeed, Italy has a long history of using construction as a means of containing unemployment and stimulating production in other sectors.[8] This brings us closer to the core topic of both your book and ours. There are many possible articulations of this idea of "not-doing" and one of them is arguably yours: the proposal to put construction on hold. A familiar and often vexing critique of arguments that revolve around not-doing in architecture—such as the notion of *unproductive activity* that we put forward in our book—is that such a form of doing amounts to a "nihilistic" retreat or to the flat-out abandonment of architecture, as if to say: *let's just all start writing instead!* On the contrary, we argue that not-doing assumes an eminently practical and political dimension for the disciplines of architecture, urbanism, and planning. I was wondering where this position and idea first emerged in the context of your own work. From what I know, it seems to me that you have pursued at least three major lines of inquiry: (a) a concern with processes of urbanization and planning in so-called Mediterranean cities (such as Cairo[9], Marseille[10], Tangier[11]), as well as in other heavily urbanized contexts such as Singapore; (b) an interest in gendered spatial relations, together with forms of institutional activism concerning women's design work and the role of female architects within institutions; and, finally, (c) more recent work on pedagogy—which, apparently, is where the notion of slowing down or halting construction first begins to surface.

8 See chapter I, section 3 *Expansion to Regeneration; Quantity and Quality; Production as Construction*, 27-47.

9 See Marc Angélil and Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, eds., with Something Fantastic in collaboration with CLUSTER, *Cairo Desert Cities* (Berlin: Ruby Press, 2018).

10 Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, Marc Angélil and Something Fantastic, eds., *Migrant Marseille-Architectures of Social Segregation and Urban Inclusivity* (Berlin: Ruby Press, 2020). See also https://www.charlottemalterrebarthes.com/research/ecole-marseille/inclusive-marseille/

11 See https://www.charlottemalterrebarthes.com/research/tu-berlin/tangier-inclusive/. See also A. George Bajalia and Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, "Crossing Into Ceuta," *Migrant Journal* 3 (2018): 9-23.

CMB: I suppose that tracing the genealogy of an idea is always a somewhat elusive intention. Still, I do believe there are connections among the fields of research you have mentioned and perhaps the moratorium provides a way of linking them through a shared political concern. Much of it also comes together in the recognition that halting construction can mean halting a destructive practice, while at the same time interrogating the Malthusian demographics and economic imperatives that drive the industry. That said, I don't think there is a need to solve all of this now—we can hold on to some of the mystery of this genealogy. I would not, however, reduce genealogy to fields of research. I should also stress that I object to the divide between theory and practice, especially in architecture; to me it makes very little sense. I say this because I practiced for quite some time—almost ten years—in subaltern positions. I was an architectural worker, as we would call it now, albeit with various academic degrees. First as an intern, then as an architect, and later as an urban designer. I worked in very small offices in obscure French cities, as well as in more prestigious practices such as Coop Himmelb(l)au. I believe this gave me a solid sense of what practice entails, and it remains crucial for the work I do today. I genuinely believe that my professional experience has shaped my critical perspective on architectural practice and on how construction actually functions. In this sense, I would not describe myself as a theoretician. I am always open to theoretical–political disagreement and discussion, but my ideas remain grounded in practice.

ED: So, you wouldn't describe yourself as a theorist?

CMB: What I mean by rejecting the label of "theorist" has more to do with refusing to be put into boxes. I try to find alternative ways to pull the plug on what is happening—in this case, construction. In that sense, I would rather be known as an economist or simply to be recognized through the different mediums I explore because they serve the purpose at hand. For instance, I have worked on graphic novels with friends or entered competitions with designs that amounted to "nothing". All of this underscores an inherent discomfort with architecture as a discipline, a discomfort that, as I mentioned, also stems from professional practice. The turning point in my own experience likewise came through practice. One of the last projects I worked on in an office was an urban development plan for a Swiss canton. I spent a great deal of time drafting a thorough densification scheme: add-

ing new construction onto existing buildings, intensifying a beautiful industrial area, and making it, to some extent, "nice and frugal." At the very last moment, however, the project leader panicked over the Excel spreadsheets and insisted that we needed more square meters. The solution was simply to draw a box-like building somewhere on the plot—a new IKEA, or another retail or logistics facility—on an open field. That, for me, was the last straw. I thought to myself: I don't want to do this. But of course, not everyone can walk away—I could, so I did.

RLP: A refusal of architecture in light of its contradictions.

CMB: Yes, but I think the idea of the moratorium also emerges from an awareness of what it means to refuse to act. When you speak of unproductiveness—well, we all have rent to pay! That is why I considered alternative paths, including moving into academia: not only to reflect on this question, but also to wrest myself free from the feeling of not wanting to participate. I like to think of it as going on strike—an active strike: I will not do. If one has the luxury to do so, of course. These contradictions, I believe, resonate with the broader theme that runs through much of my work: nothing is neutral. Architecture is not neutral either. My interrogation of architecture's supposed innocence often produces discomfort—and is rarely accepted.

RLP: Sure, but I would like to press on with this point further. How does your academic research on other topics relate to the question of construction? Perhaps this is my misreading, but in your interview for *Arts of the Working Class*—ironically set in 2038—you speak in retrospect of a policy reform, or perhaps even a revolution, at a time when agriculture and food production have become more profitable than construction.[12] To me, this appears closely connected to your work on Cairo, which seems, at least from my perspective, to serve as an intellectual catalyst for imagining the potential of halting construction.

CMB: Perhaps if you look closely at this patchwork of mine, there is nonetheless a register that cuts across it: the sense that everything is connected to larger political systems or to our political economy. I think this also surfaces in the question of not-doing. Yet the more immediate awareness of how architecture directly translates extractive practices into building was not so clearly articulated in an early piece I wrote in 2016, "On the Ethics of Architects: To Build or Not

12 Marlo Wang and Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, "Food for Thought and Justice", 55.

To Build."[13] Interestingly, materiality was absent there; the focus was instead on the ethics of practice—on what it means to work, and for whom. Would you build prisons? Would you build for dictators? These more moral questions about building or not building provided a kind of background for how I approach the issue today. My doctoral work in Egypt revolved around what it means to urbanize. It was a hands-on attempt to understand the competition between agrarian land and urbanization.[14] In Egypt, urbanization is competing with other land uses—indeed, with the very notion of "land use." The assumption that land must always be put to use is itself a highly charged issue, and one that I sought to interrogate. So, to go back to your question, this trajectory makes perfect sense to me, though I can understand that it may appear somewhat patchy from a distance. That is also how it looks to my tenure committee, by the way—they comment, "*yes, but you're looking at everything*," and I respond: "*exactly, because everything is connected!*". To return, then, to what you were saying about the genealogy of my interest in *not-building*: much more recently, Covid—understood as a "pause"—was clearly an additional trigger. It pushed me to look back and recognize that I had been considering these issues long before. I recall mentioning to a friend during my studies—around 2004 or 2005—that perhaps we should stop building altogether, and this friend told me about Lacaton & Vassal's 1995 work.[15] It was already a decade old at the time. That conversation came vividly back to me during the pandemic, five years ago, when I realized: I have been thinking about this for so long! It took going through all these experiences to arrive at a more solidified format for the moratorium. In a way, that is what the moratorium does: it crystallizes my ideas and experiences into a single legal proposal—and, perhaps most importantly, it compels people to take it seriously. I think that is the most rewarding aspect.

RLP: Because it's legal; it is "serious", as you said.

CMB: Because it is legal, yes—and it is viable. I have a Google Alert set for the term; it pings every day. Day in and day out, someone pub-

13 Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, "On the Ethics of Architects: To Build or Not To Build", *Trans Magazin* 28 (2016). Available at: https://www.trans.ethz.ch/article/on-the-ethics-of-architects-to-build-or-not-to-build

14 Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, *Food Territories. The Political Economy of Food Systems and its Effects on the Built Environment. Case Study Egypt* (PhD diss., ETH Zurich, 2018). Available at: https://www.research-collection.ethz.ch/entities/publication/79305f14-9ffe-4d3b-a8f2-85733c2c3061

15 Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal, "Place Leon Aucoc, Bordeaux". Available at: https://www.lacatonvassal.com/index.php?idp=37#. See chapter I, section 4 *Unproduction: An Ethics of Minimal Intervention*, 51-53; and chapter II, section 2 *The Politics of Public Space Beyond Production*, 77.

lishes a proposal for a moratorium on new construction in one place or another. Usually, these are only in English, so what I see is limited to the English-speaking world or to translated content. Still, it shows that the moratorium is an existing, feasible instrument. The book also traces a history of the moratorium as a tool—of course, I do not hold a claim to originality.

RLP: Still, I believe Lacaton & Vassal's project remains, in a sense, a dead letter, arguably because it exposes the very limits of architecture itself. According to prevailing logic, if architecture does not build, then it is not architecture.[16] What I find compelling is to situate all that you are saying within a practice of architecture that is not necessarily a formal proposition or a technological solution, but rather a push toward the political dimensions of practice. In this regard, you emphasized that you worked in practice for many years, and that teaching allowed you to explore different forms of refusal—yet without collapsing them into a purely theoretical stance. This, I suppose, is where pedagogy comes in. You have pointed to the emergence of new professions endowed with "organizational and creative abilities."[17] I wonder whether this signals a shift toward a practice oriented more around *use* than around design or the architectural project as such.

ED: Around *use* and *activity*, as we argue in chapter II.

CMB: It's a lot about narratives. Lacaton & Vassal's project was published and accepted because, first and foremost, their office builds. They are respected practitioners, and within their broader practice of construction there exists this singular 'unbuilt' exception. Yet the choice to publish that project as part of their monographs on construction is significant. In reality, far more architects are already engaged in forms of non-construction in their everyday practice, often under difficult working conditions. Consider, for instance, when a client decides against demolition, or opts for reconstruction: in such cases, much of the architect's work consists in persuading the client not to proceed in the most destructive or expansive way, to argue that much less is needed, that demolition could be avoided, and that things might be done differently. Within our economic system, however, architects are rewarded when they design and build more square meters. The logic is simple: the larger the project, the greater

16 Fardin and Peragine, "(In)activity and Architecture: 'doing nothing apart from…'", *Journal of Architecture* (forthcoming).

17 Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, "Teaching Not To", *Journal of Architectural Education* 78, no.1 (2024): 158-175.

the remuneration. Conversely, the more one advises restraint or frugality, the less one is paid. This creates a structural impossibility. Yet I believe that narratives remain an underused tool in this conversation—about what to build, how to build, and, crucially, what *not to* build.

RLP: How do you deal with this in the book?

CMB: The book also reflects my pedagogical program: each spring, in class, we refer to one of its chapters. Last spring, for example, we worked on *Fix the Office*, or how not to be an "office." One student group became an "office for new narratives." Their task was to explore how one might persuade an investor to renovate rather than demolish—achieving, or approximating, the same square meters by designing new spatial uses. One proposal involved a shared laundry room, producing a rendering of such a space where it is portrayed as the most amazing room, with a view on the lake—something that could actually be marketed as luxurious. Of course, this remains a prospective exercise, and it still operates within the existing economic system. Yet it shifts perception while opening up to the possibility of a different tooling of contemporary architecture. Such a shift requires that everything collective becomes desirable, and that new narratives which extend this desirability are developed further. This ties back to your question about new professions: we could imagine a whole array of roles, with narrative-making as one of them.

ED: *A Moratorium on New Construction* is a book without images, yet I clearly recall the fascinating comic-essay you developed with the illustrator Zosia Dzierżawska, which presents many of these potential hybrid figures of new architectural roles and professions. You describe them as future "members of the community [*who are*] fluent in reparative design: they constantly sustain the spaces we live in."[18] Among them are the *maintenance architect*, the *material nurse*, the *disassembly engineer*, the *design psychologist*, the *seed librarian*, and many others. Today we often speak of transdisciplinarity, though rarely with a concrete sense of what it might actually entail or mean in practice. What you describe through the idea of *fixing the office*, it seems to me, is precisely one way of giving form to such a concept.

18 Charlotte Malterre-Barthes with Zosia Dzierżawska, "An Architecture Without Extraction," *Architectural Review* (2021). More of these insights on hybrid design professions for a non-extractive future also in: Charlotte Malterre-Barthes with Zosia Dzierżawska, "New Rules. For a generous School of Architecture," *Cartha* no.6 (2022).

CMB: Yes, this is a book without images! In my mind, it does not need them—it is deliberately dry. But returning to the figures of new professions, I think there is a certain tension here, because people read that comic in different ways. Some respond with disappointment or fear. Some conclude that *we, as architects, are going to disappear*—suggesting that the discipline will either become highly specialized or highly diluted. Others interpret it as indicating that the architect will simply evolve into something else. For us, the point was rather that there are many disciplinary strengths beyond architecture that are incredibly valuable and that could be mobilized in order to imagine and create together (across disciplines) these new professions. If you look closely at the drawing, each figure has a nonhuman companion. This suggests that transdisciplinarity may also be conceived as a trans-species alliance. The premise was that, if we were really to undertake this work, then we would require new professions—and, by extension, everyone's involvement. The ideas of cohabitation and coproduction of space become possible under such conditions. Technology too can be integrated, provided it is approached as an ally, rather than as the source of the hostile machines that we encounter, for instance, at the 2025 Venice Biennale.

ED and RLP: Neither of us went, nor will be taking the students this year.

CMB: Rightly so—yet the Biennale is just a snapshot of the present. In that case, it naively showcases the belief that technology will save us. I think technology can certainly do many things, but it has also driven us into the very situation we face today. But going back to transdisciplinarity, I would say that it is key, and this is why one of the central questions of the book is the interrogation of what we mean by *expertise*. I approach this cautiously, since expertise is often mobilized to exclude others and to marginalize other forms of knowledge. This exclusion is evident in the way architects determine how people live or experience the world: we design so much of the built environment and therefore bear a particular responsibility. I would link this back to the question of equity and gender, insofar as the profession must also reflect, demographically, the populations for whom we design. For me, this is not only a premise but one of my core convictions.

RLP: And what about "new organizing abilities"?

CMB: New organizing abilities build on the education that architects receive—an education that, at least in theory, is ultimately about learning how to manage and coordinate a construction site. You design a project, calculate its costs and breakdown, assemble the pieces, and produce a plan that ventures one, two, three, or even four years into the future. In other words, the project is choreographed in order to reach its goal. If you think about it, this is remarkable and also extraordinarily difficult: a constant back-and-forth. Take drawings, for instance: they are never going to be perfect or fully precise. The fantastic book by Francesca Hughes, "The Architecture of Error,"[19] discusses the impossible task of planning, and the lie that one can design in such a way that everything will fall into place with no issue or problem. It's a fallacious desire! Architecture, then, is a profession endowed with extraordinary skills: from narrative-making to organizational capacity; from negotiating with institutions and securing permits, to discussing projects with clients, workers, and colleagues. It is, in many ways, a complex and profoundly multi-skilled profession, and I have great respect for it. At the same time, it is plagued by structural issues that I try to address and be transparent about. Many of these skills could in fact be mobilized to act for change. Architecture already possesses all the tools necessary to conceptualize organization itself as a project: something to be envisioned, planned, computed, calculated, and ultimately executed. It is a unique profession equipped for radical transformation; it could support a revolution! Yet, it is not doing that. Indeed, in terms of work. Some of my colleagues also teach that architecture is, at its core, about designing organization. Yet today, most of these professional skills are in the service of capital. The industry thus promotes a sugar-coated image of the profession, masking its contradictions. For this reason, I believe it is all the more important to bring architecture back to this conversational practice—a dimension of negotiation, dialogue, and organization in the broadest sense.

ED: You have worked extensively on architecture, and particularly on housing. Personally, I am trying to understand and apply the broader concept of unproduction to the urban public domain. Put differently, I am attempting to shift the focus from the architectural object and the construction cycle to another scale and dimension: the scale of the common. This entails a whole new set of features, modes of participation, and

19 Francesca Hughes, *The Architecture of Error. Matter, Measure, and the Misadventures of Precision* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

uses that clearly apply to residential housing, but that are transformed when extended to the platform of urban public space. In this book, we try to work through selected examples rather than to propose a universal theory of unproduction. Projects such as the SESC 24 de Maio in São Paulo—where an existing building was repurposed into a public space instead of being demolished—or the Landschaftszug project in Dessau-Roßlau, Germany—where de-construction supported urban shrinkage—illustrate how *doing less* can be articulated at the urban or territorial scale, much like Lacaton and Vassal were able to achieve on a smaller plot, as we mentioned earlier. Do you have other projects of this kind in mind? And do you ever use such examples in your teaching?

CMB: I tend to think in terms of tools—and, of course, laws. The idea that you can legislate to render a place unproductive or at least suspend it from certain forms of activity. In the book, I use the term "reluctant architecture" to describe red-tape bureaucracy as a tool for slowing everything down—which is indeed why many of these legal frameworks are being challenged politically, through devices such as fast-track permits that attempt to circumvent the delays inherent in bureaucracy. My focus is on how legal frameworks might decelerate construction, if not make it altogether impossible. I find a certain beauty in a construction permit gathering dust somewhere, beauty even in its inconvenience. Yet this applies only to places that abide by construction law—not, for example, in Cairo. Still, there are interesting projects that focus on the act of *undoing*, such as the landscaping intervention in Cap de Creus, Spain.[20]

ED: Exactly—there Martí Franch and his colleagues deconstructed an entire *Club Med* private holiday village along the Catalan coast. It is a project of undoing: literally unbuilding and dismantling. We also refer to another compelling project by EMF, *Girona's Shore*, which is grounded in a lo-fi, design-by-maintenance approach.[21]

CMB: I don't know this last example, but it sounds great. What made the Cap de Creus project so important to us is that it operates fully within the framework of the law. According to Spanish Crown legislation, in fact, no construction is allowed within a certain distance from the sea. The undoing at work here thus becomes a retroactive

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20 The reference is to the project by EMF Estudi Martí Franch, "Public Reception Project in the Site of Tudela-Culip at the National Park Cap De Creus" (2005-2010). For more information, see https://www.emf.cat/en/projects/l/253-public-reception-project-in-the-site-of-tudel.html, and

21 See chapter II, section 4 *The Practice of Doing Less: Degrowth, Absence, Maintenance and Ecological Repair*, 103.

gesture, one which demolishes something already built. This also raises a fascinating interrogation on value. Rather than unproduction, we have referred to this as "resistance work:" practices that do things differently or question how things are usually done; forms of labor and design that bypass certain rules for the sake of another objective—something closer to cunning or trickster strategies, to think with Donna Haraway.[22] As for unproductive work, I can suggest the example of a competition entry I was involved in—though I would never present it to my students; I'm not that presumptuous! In 2022–23, for the Five World Trade Center competition in New York, with Alia Bader, we submitted a proposal entitled "I Prefer Not To."[23] Our design did nothing: instead of new construction, we proposed a park. We then calculated the funds that would otherwise have gone into the project and redistributed them through air rights to enable the construction of something else, elsewhere.

RLP: Somewhat like Cedric Price's project for Hudson Bay.[24] It fundamentally changes how one thinks about the role of the architect. To me, it entails relinquishing architectural formal expertise and radically redefining what architects do. In this sense, I also believe it is crucial to emphasize the need to develop alternative definitions of architectural practice. Earlier you described *architecture as a conversational practice*, and I thought that was a brilliant definition! Architecture possesses the skills and tools of organization. Both architecture and urban planning design forms of organization, moving from conception through to execution: yet, as you noted, these professional capacities are currently harnessed in the service of capital. We must reclaim that political space.

CMB: I consider this one of the strengths of the discipline and of the profession: the ability to explain a project, to convince someone that "this" is what they should do. The persuasive dimension of the profession is something many highly successful practices have mastered. Yet, we should also reflect on how this skill has often been used to push clients toward architectural solutions or proposals they would have never considered otherwise. This quality is frequently celebrated in architectural "masters." A striking example, in my view, is the post-war reconstruction of the Vieux-Port of Marseille, a project by

22 Cf. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: the Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

23 For the details of Malterre-Barthes and Bader's project, see https://www.instagram.com/p/CdcHSL1u9e-/?hl=bg

24 See chapter I, section 4 *Unproduction: An Ethics of Minimal Intervention*, 52-53.

Fernand Pouillon and Auguste Perret. Even if the construction of an already accepted design was underway (by architect André Leconte), Pouillon persuaded the client and city authorities to adopt his alternative project instead. Architectural history—whether oral or anecdotal—offers many such stories of "genius" architects convincing clients to pursue certain design decisions. What interests me is how this admirable skill could be redirected: used to influence or persuade a client *not to* do something, or to choose the least damaging option. As I noted earlier, I suspect this happens much more often than we think; but it does not find a place in the canonical narratives of success that reach us. This, I believe, is one of the aspects of *architecture as a conversational practice* that would deserve further exploration.

> **ED**: And then there is the entire dimension of negotiation that is inherent to practice. To realize any type of construction, one must engage with people who are deeply embedded in the practicalities of the field: meeting regularly with different trades, discussing specific design solutions with skilled workers—solutions that, in many cases, have not yet been fully designed—and constantly being ready for adjustments. In the preceding sections, we have discussed several theories and cases that illustrate what might be termed the project's complex "operational flexibility," which compels us to embrace uncertainty and unpredictability as intrinsic and unavoidable conditions of design.[25]

CMB: There is a great deal of this happening in practice and I see it as part of the conversational dimension or of the organizational aspects of architecture that interest me most. There is always the expectation that a design will be implemented exactly as planned and that one will resist the temptation to cut corners. Yet, as an architect, you inevitably have to calculate costs, negotiate with companies to reduce expenses, present these adjustments to the client, bring them back to the office, and eventually translate them into construction. Much of this back-and-forth conversation is rarely acknowledged as the valuable part of the work. In the end, the only thing that matters is what is left: the building. This conversational practice also has a distinctive cultural dimension that is lacking in many other technical professions of the built environment. Of course, there are differences—professions and contexts may cultivate such exchanges in their own ways—but in many fields, space for debate exists primarily

25 See chapter I, section 4 *Unproduction: An Ethics of Minimal Intervention*; and chapter II, section 4 *The Practice of Doing Less: Degrowth, Absence, Maintenance and Ecological Repair*: pag.

in the academic sphere of the discipline. By contrast, architecture maintains a relatively lively culture of discussion among practitioners, through events, journals, and public fora. I can speak of the Swiss-French, French, German, and even Anglophone contexts. The United States, however, seems to me to be one of the direst cases: there, discourse is largely confined to academia, while professional practice is dominated by very large firms—conditions under which this intellectual richness tends to wither.

ED: Part of this connects back to your book's chapter *Fix the Office* that we mentioned earlier. If the architect becomes—or should become—the one who persuades clients *not to* build, or if not-building is framed as an ethical practice, then how will the profession keep going, given that architects are still remunerated as a percentage of construction costs?

CMB: Honoraria must change; their calculation has to be rethought. This is, however, something that architects themselves can address. Yet, doing so also means confronting the neoliberal machine, since it involves undoing certain professional privileges or forms of protection. I often cite the example of the German Chamber of Architects, which lost its case concerning protected honoraria before the neoliberal European Courts of Commerce.[26] Still, I believe there is scope for greater professional organization to gain momentum if architects are to be on the right side of history.

ED: Evidently, this book will elicit different reactions from different audiences: the broader public, architecture students, professionals. We teach an urban design studio where the premise is that we will *not build* anything anew. Students are often shocked—it is the first time they encounter such an approach in their architectural training. In this sense, I read with particular interest your chapter *Reform the School*. I fully agree with you on almost everything, but I found your reflections on interdisciplinarity particularly compelling. Not building requires multiple forms of expertise and genuine collaboration across various fields of knowledge, as we have already discussed about new, hybrid architectural professions. Yet in current architectural and planning discourse—at least in Italy—interdisciplinarity is more often invoked rhetorically than genuinely practiced. We constantly speak of it as a value, but is it truly valued? If one really attempts to pursue an inter- or even better transdisciplinary approach—and I note these terms require caution—the most predictable

26 About this lawsuit, see https://kamratalperiti.org/european-commission-opens-case-against-german-chamber-of-architects-on-tariffs/

critique is that such a stance, beyond the boundaries of the discipline, is not "pure" architecture or "pure" planning. The academic system needs this orientation, but it is not yet fully prepared to embrace it. As you point out, teaching *not to* build demands a genuine interdisciplinarity.

CMB: Of course. There are many hurdles. When it comes to reforming schools, we should remember that interdisciplinarity has its enemies—above all, the tenure process. I don't know about Italy, but typically, since one is expected to establish an independent intellectual authority, any deviation from a defined disciplinary track—or even too much collaboration—tends to be penalized or at least frowned upon. Early on in one's career, the obstacles are many, whereas later, once tenured, there is perhaps more freedom to explore. Much also depends on the institutional structure. My previous institution felt like a cruise ship headed straight for the iceberg: teaching architecture in isolation, with minimal contact to contemporary research and to other disciplines. Such institutions, I think, are in real trouble. By contrast, my current academic home,[27] while a techno-positivist polytechnic that relies heavily on quantitative data (and now on AI, as the latest technology which also promises to save us), paradoxically, is much more aware of the polycrisis. This allows reaching out to soil and material scientists, climatologists, and many colleagues in other fields for support. One needs to take that first step towards them, and it is not as easy as it sounds. Aside from the bias of expertise, there is something else: architects are often not good at reaching out, partly because of our Brunelleschian inheritance—the belief that we can do almost anything, an omniscience of architecture. One must let go of that assumption to work in a genuinely transdisciplinary way. Before asking for help, you must first acknowledge that you need it.

RLP: Exactly: jettisoning the formal expertise to undo the architect's own claim to omniscience. To me, this is one of the key aspects of cultivating an unproductive disposition in design.

CMB: Being interdisciplinary requires relinquishing expertise, which is absolutely necessary to address the challenges we face today. The truth is we do not know how to deal with many of them. There is so much we do not know. For this reason, the framework of my teaching often includes asking students, at some stage, to reach out and

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seek help from other disciplines or working environments. This also means finding the right interlocutors—people genuinely interested in collaborating—which is not always possible.

ED: Going back to what you were saying, this would mean identifying which legal experts are willing to engage in a conversation about architecture and construction.

CMB: Yes. I admit that I do not fully grasp urban regulations or environmental law. This inevitably requires additional work, at times when not everyone is prepared for it. You are right that there are real hurdles to interdisciplinarity and to surrendering expertise. Yet, I am quite hopeful: collaboration may be something more fundamental than transdisciplinarity—perhaps a lower threshold, but still a crucial entry point. Precisely because of the obstacles I mentioned, the willingness to collaborate with others is key. We ofetn work with groups from other schools. This form of interdisciplinarity is a constant struggle and an ongoing effort: it demands more time, patience, and knowledge. The benefits are rarely immediate. Still, it is a crucial step toward undoing some of the rigid structures that architectural education has imposed on us, as you noted earlier—not to mention the pushback it often provokes from colleagues!

RLP: Yes, so, as an answer to this pushback, we need to negotiate the inclusion of some formal, "concrete" skill within pedagogical programs.

CMB: Sometimes it is more a matter of how you frame things. You may need to present your work differently when you encounter resistance or pushback. There are tactics. For instance, while our studios are organized under the umbrella theme of a moratorium on new construction, we still allow students to build—provided their proposals are fully justified. We set a binding rule that any new construction must account for no more than 30% of existing built volume, that is, if they truly feel something needs to be added. Our teaching is not that dogmatic; it does not claim to offer a single truth. The students recognize this. They talk to each other and although there may have been an initial shock—when I taught the first studio at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, some experienced an existential crisis when asked not to build—the shock soon passes. The moratorium has come to be understood by students as a *tool* to think critically about whether building is necessary in the first place. I have since acquired the label of the professor who does not want to build. For

example, when a school official came to discuss a new student center for the architecture faculty, he was warned that I had written a book arguing against construction and to tread carefully! But of course, I am not opposed to *all* buildings. We must think much more carefully about why, how and what we build. The proposed student center, for example, was to occupy the only green patch on campus. First af all, can't the center fit into existing structures, through rearrangement? And if building we must, why not on a parking lot, which is already paved and polluted by decades of leaking engines? What matters is that we think harder about why and where we build what we build.

RLP: In a way it's about going around it, rather than frontal opposition.

CMB: Resistance is constant, of course, but the notion that only by building one can be considered a "proper" architect really needs to be put to rest. But it's an uphill battle.

ED: It is not the only uphill battle. Your book may also be associated with a strand of theory and practice that has been present for some time but is arguably now gaining momentum—namely, *degrowth*. How should architectural and planning practices respond to degrowth imperatives (and shrinking populations) in Europe, while at the same time addressing the completely different needs of the so-called Global South? Beyond local mobilizations and grassroots organizations, even intergovernmental bodies now officially recognize the need to reduce land consumption and curb the pollution generated by the construction industry. Should this not compel us to question why we are still speaking of *urban development?* We have not even changed the words!

CMB: Absolutely. There has been a lot of pushback on the moratorium from this perspective. I agree: I haven't seen much of a deceleration either. There are arguments suggesting that in certain countries construction may slow down. Still, we must bear in mind that architecture, as both a profession and an industry, always lags behind recessions. If a recession occurs, construction will only halt a year and a half later, because capital has already been earmarked. Yet I still do not see any sign of things slowing down—demolition and construction sites surround us. Where I live, in Zurich and Lausanne, Swiss construction is certainly not decelerating. While teaching at the Politecnico in Milan, I asked students to "find a construction site and interrogate it"—and that was really not difficult. Demolitions are

equally ubiquitous. The point is that we could decelerate, but such a decision is ruled out from the start. Reversing this trend would require experts to deploy their expertise against it. Consider Egypt: the state is constructing a new administrative capital in the desert for 56 billion. It remains largely empty because it is unaffordable and there is no public transportation. Who could have predicted such an outcome? Certainly not the planners who promoted it, nor the army of architects working under the umbrella of large consortia and construction companies. Meanwhile, people who genuinely need housing continue to self-construct on agrarian land, where their families and jobs are located, while the state—effectively the military siphoning public funds—builds in the desert. The principle appears to be that building must continue at all costs. In this sense, degrowth positions face superficial counter-arguments, such as the refrain that "the Global South needs to urbanize." Yet, aside from Egypt, anyone who has spent time in China knows that much of what is built there remains uninhabited and inaccessible to those who need it. We must debunk these growth narratives and instead focus on reusing and re-equipping what is *already there*. Of course, this also raises the question of infrastructure in remote areas, which carries its own ecological costs. I am thinking of the highly contested French A69 motorway between Toulouse and Castres, or the even more conflictual high-speed rail line in the Italian Val di Susa, part of the Turin–Lyon corridor. What we do not need are such absurd infrastructural projects. What we do need is to rethink how we use what already exists and to stop relying on narratives of growth and production, as you rightly suggest.

RLP: Yes, ecological concerns are themselves a field of political conflict. Your stance on the moratorium, since it calls for a radical reform of the political economy of the construction industry, will certainly not appeal to those invested in preserving existing structures of exploitation and regulation. Yet, as you noted, it could also be taken up by unexpected political positions. What are your thoughts on this risk that moratoria on new construction might be instrumentalized—the possibility that not building might be appropriated by conservative agendas that oppose inclusive urbanisms in the name of a more traditional or symbolic conception of the urban? I must admit I was not expecting that.

CMB: I suppose this is one of the tensions that arise when the moratorium is viewed solely as a legal tool. Historically, moratoria have often been instrumentalized against low-income populations and against the construction of affordable housing, typically because surrounding communities—privileged and literate—have mobilized to block whatever was being proposed. There is clear precedent for communities invoking moratoria to prevent developments that would introduce "different" populations into their neighborhoods. Some also interpret the moratorium as a kind of semi-Malthusian project, reading it as an anti-human stance. In this view, opposing construction is equated with opposing people themselves—a conflation, or perhaps a subconscious assumption, that construction and housing are one and the same.

RLP: Like some kind of right-wing libertarian position?

CMB: Really! I was attacked on those grounds. But I think it is useful to reflect on what such critiques might actually mean. On the one hand, they highlight the tension between short-term and long-term temporalities. Are we thinking only of the here and now—the immediate demand for housing—and therefore falling back on the shortsighted assumption that providing housing necessarily means building more? (Which is a flawed premise, since housing can be secured *without* new construction; what is lacking is political courage.) On the other hand, not building is cast as an antihuman project. In this sense, I found it productive to open up a conversation about how one might advocate for a moratorium—or for more moderate forms of construction—without supposedly being antihuman. At the same time, this question inevitably intersects with anti-density positions that tend to slide into eco-fascist arguments—what I call the "bees not migrants" position. Here, the refusal of construction is welcomed not out of ecological concern but because new housing would mean accommodating populations deemed undesirable. By the way, when I was working on the book, I was even contacted by a notorious far-right newspaper in France requesting an interview. I declined, of course, but thought to myself: "this is getting serious!" That is also why it matters that the French edition of the book will be published with a very left-wing press, whereas the current English edition appeared with a more liberal art publisher. And, of course, the fact that

Markus and Nikolaus[28] edit the *Critical Spatial Practice* series provides the book with a certain shield against being easily co-opted as a right-wing project, despite the risks inherent in its content.

> **RLP**: I find the last two questions highlight the issue of political action from within academic institutions—and, more broadly, the question of institutions themselves. Urbanists often hark back to the welfare state or, rather, to the idea of rebuilding it through urbanism. But leaving aside the question of whether that is feasible today, how do you see the relationship between architects, urbanists, and planners with institutions?[29]

CMB: I would approach this from my experience in institutional activism with the *Parity Group*,[30] which, at its core, is really about survival. Just today I met with Khenzani de Klerk, co-founder of *Matri-Archi*[31] and, at one point, also a member of the Parity Group. We were reflecting on how, in very hostile institutions where you are essentially searching for kinship, much depends on luck—on finding like-minded, angry people with whom you can organize. Many of these initiatives emerge organically and only later are they post-rationalized as designed movements. Much of the work began out of anger, frustration, and a need for community, but eventually snowballed into something larger. Looking back, I see it as a matter of carving out space within institutions that are structurally hostile. Of course, this is experienced very differently by foreign women, Black women, or queer people. Solidarity in struggle also comes with the awareness that institutions often play out the clock: through inertia, they can agree to demands while doing nothing. At the same time, populations within academic institutions are transient: students graduate, precarious staff contracts expire. Only tenured faculty have the potential to effect change. But by then, self-interest often dominates. Again, for me, institutional activism has always been tied to survival. But now, as an assistant professor on a different payroll, I miss the solidarity among doctoral students or teaching assistants—that has completely evaporated. You are on your own—survival of the fittest!

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28 Nikolaus Hirsch and Markus Miessen are the editors of the "Critical Spatial Practice" book series for Sternberg Press. See https://www.sternberg-press.com/series/critical-spatial-practice-series/

29 See chapter I, section 5 *The "Red Line". The Nihilism of Unproduction*

30 The *Parity Group* is a grassroot association committed to improving gender equality and diversity in architecture. See https://aaa.arch.ethz.ch/parity-html/

31 The reference is to the association *Matri-Archi(tecture)*. See https://www.matri-archi.ch/about

ED: What kind of organization do you pursue, for instance, in the *Parity Group*?

CMB: Well, textbook organization is not something I really believe in. Some strategies work in certain institutions, others do not. Together with Dubravka Sekulić, I co-authored a short piece for ARCH+ titled *Frameworks for Curriculum Revisions or Revolutions*,[32] which attempts to assemble ideas that might be mobilized to change institutions from within, drawing on our experience as founding members of the Parity Group. This is less about the welfare state, or how one feels towards institutions, and more about carving out spaces of resistance within them. The relationship with the state is something different once you are in practice. We have an ongoing conversation with my students about what it means to be moving, teaching, learning in these hostile institutions. We frequently discuss whose mission it is to house humanity. We also talk about the demise of the welfare state and the continuing assault on its modernist estates as a war on affordable housing, the very housing once provided by the state which is now systematically being dismantled. We talk about union and workers solidarity, and our agency as architects. As you mentioned, I am part of *House Europe!* which, in relation to your question about reforming or rebuilding the welfare state, is an initiative that maintains a belief in the capacity of institutions to act. Design by architects, the project aims to gather one million signatures in support of renovation by January 30, 2026, and then to pressure the European Union to legislate accordingly.

32 Charlotte Malterre-Barthes and Dubravka Sekulić, "Frameworks for Curriculum Repair," in *The Great Repair – Politics for the Repair Society*, eds. Florian Hertweck *et al.* (Berlin: Arch+, 2022): 182–187.

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