The potential Roles of Design and Designers within a Time-based approach

Multiple temporalities: projects, processes, and communities at SS. Trinità delle Monache in Naples

Il contributo propone un'analisi critica circa una lunga ricerca che ha interessato l'ex convento della SS. Trinità delle Monache a Napoli. I molteplici contesti della ricerca hanno avuto tutti come obiettivo il recupero, la valorizzazione e l'apertura alla città dell'ex convento. Il contributo, incentrato su questo caso di studio, individua possibili ruoli per il progetto e il progettista nell'ambito di un approccio basato sul tempo. Partendo dal presupposto della complessità e della coesistenza di molteplici temporalità, si può ampliare lo spettro d'azione del progetto stesso. In questo senso, il contributo propone sei connotazioni del progetto, attraverso l'esame di altrettante esperienze progettuali, alle quali corrispondono finalità, comunità, scale e, soprattutto, temporalità diverse. Si ritiene che il caso di studio qui presentato fornisca un possibile esempio di progetto processuale e minore sviluppato secondo un approccio basato sul tempo, in cui il progettista-ricercatore svolge il ruolo di architetto corale. All'interno di questo quadro teorico, è dunque dimostrato il riconoscimento di temporalità multiple e interrelate come strumenti indispensabili per il progetto contemporaneo.

Considering the urgency of updating design disciplines in response to current time of transition, this paper proposes a critical analysis based on extensive research involving the former Convent of the SS. Trinità delle Monache in Naples. Multiple research contexts have been aimed at the recovery, valorization, and opening of the former convent to the city. Focusing on this case study, the contribution identifies possible roles for design and the designer within a time-based approach. Recognizing the complexity and coexistence of multiple temporalities, one can broaden the spectrum of the project’s actions. In this sense, the contribution proposes six connotations of the project through an examination of as many project experiences, each corresponding to different purposes, communities, scales, and, above all, temporalities. It is believed that the case study presented here provides a possible example of a minor and processual project developed within a time-based approach, where the designer-researcher plays the role of the choral architect. Within this theoretical framework, the recognition of multiple and interrelated temporalities as indispensable tools for contemporary design is shown to be urgent.
of the way in which we live, as it is capable of condensing the constant and progressive evolution with no temporary state. States of equilibrium; architectural design can no longer remain unaffected.

The global, liquid (Bauman, 2013) and polycritical (Morin, 2020) context in which we live, constantly imposes the need to reshape spaces, to rethink the relationships between architectures, and to renegotiate urban limits according to contextual conditions that are constantly in transition.

Indeed, what Kevin Lynch states when defining the environmental image of time-places as a central topic remains relevant to deal with both the structure of reality and the structure of our minds and bodies:

Our real task is not to prevent the world from changing but to cause it to change in a growth-conductive and life-enhancing direction.


As part of this necessary movement toward a future yet to be defined, contemporary heritage, subjected to dramatic processes of obsolescence (Abramson, 2016), is moving away from the idea of an everlasting architecture made to last but without compromise, without negotiating new forms of survival.

In this sense, although the times of design, construction, abandonment, ruin, and reconstruction were all previously considered as inoperative, i.e., times of stasis, today they have all become fundamental and structuring times of transition in a broader vision of an open project (De Carlo, 2013).

This is to the point where it is believed that: «the act of “letting be,” when performed intentionally and attentively, can perhaps form the foundation for a post-humanist heritage paradigm. [...] Attending to processes of decay and disintegration can be as productive of heritage values as acts of saving and securing, but these may be different values than we are used to identifying with heritage practice» (Deslivey 2017, 184).

1.3. Temporality, complexity and possible implications

The current complexity of planning and design processes, on the one hand, and the impoverished state of inherited heritage on the other, impose the need of dealing with multiple temporalities, whether very long or very short. The linearity of the city’s historical transformative processes is overcome by a constant interweaving of emergencies, funding channels, and potential actors. Within this complex context (Morin, Ciurana, Motta, 2009), the reuse of heritage is regarded both as a prerequisite and as a driver of the complex interplay of planning strategies, projects and processes.

In light of this, the paper intends to offer a critical analysis based on extensive research involving the former Convent of the SS. Trinità delle Monache in Naples. The multiple research contexts have all been focused on the restoration, valorization, and opening to the city, of the former Military Hospital, a monumental convent complex built in the early 17th century.

Situated just north of the densely populated Quartieri Spagnoli (Fig. 1), near the transportation interchange between the Cumaena railway station and the Montesanto funicular, the SS. Trinità delle Monache complex is located in a historic part of the city that is densely inhabited by residents, students, and tourists. Following the suppression of the monastery in the early 19th century, the complex served as a military hospital until 1997 when it was transferred to the City of Naples on a concession basis, while still remaining state property.

The 17th-century convent was located on the edge of the urban system, close to the San Martino hill, and established a margin where nature and architecture converged within the cloistered space. This monument consists of several buildings arranged on two main terraces, which adapt to the varying elevations of the surrounding urban areas. Due to the close relationship between architecture and geography, the monastery exemplifies an ‘open cloister’ design that interacts with the landscape. The original typological layout included three buildings arranged in a U-shape around the open cloister, oriented toward the landscape (D’Agostino, 2017).

This contribution, through the case study, seeks to identify potential roles for design and the designer who grounds their actions in a time-based approach. In fact, by acknowledging the complexity and coexistence of multiple temporalities, one can broaden the scope of the project itself. In this regard, the contribution introduces six connotations of the project, examining as many project experiences, each aligning with different purposes, communities, scales, and above all temporalities.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Aim: the reuse of abandoned heritage

By imagining the project as a research project (Amirante, 2018) and as the primary tool of investigation for the designer-researcher, this contribution presents a case study of the former convent of SS. Trinità delle Monache as an exemplary case that showcases the potential roles and temporalities of the project when defining strategies for the transformation of the territory, particularly in the context of built heritage.

The research, conducted in various phases, primarily aimed at the valorization of an under-used asset of significant value, employing research-by-design as the common methodology. The approach involved updating knowledge about the complex and formulating strategies for its reactivation.

Within this framework, political actors, academic institutions, and residents played different roles in the multiple phases, yet a complex and multi-stakeholder process remained a constant feature of the research. The ultimate objective was to reintroduce an active design perspective to a wreck (Antoniadis, Stendardo, 2018) that appeared to have reached the end of its life cycle for the second time from a traditional consumerist perspective (Bocchi, Marini, 2015).

Over time, particularly during its use as a military hospital, the SS. Trinità delle Monache complex underwent a series of extensive transformations. Nevertheless, due to its typological and morphological characteristics, the monastery remained a closed space inaccessible to the city for many years. Following the transfer from a convent to a military hospital resulted in various architectural alterations – demolitions, new constructions, and replacements – but it retained the ‘exclusive’ nature of the site. These transformations contributed to a persistent sense of marginalization and otherness, which ultimately leading to the current state of abandonment and deterioration. Today, the former complex retains its essence in the character of a tree-lined area; its current configuration has lost its original visual definition and become a singular entity with the space of the bastion upon which it was built.
2.2. The phases: institutional and community contexts

The current exceptional diversity of agents of transformation – projects, actors, actions, and funding – concerning the former Military Hospital of Naples well exemplifies the complexity of the transitions we are currently experiencing. Considerable institutional fundings and interventions by associations operating with different temporalities are simultaneously directed toward this place. As a result, it becomes a kind of ‘loom’ where multiple threads are interwoven, occasionally producing patterns with unexpected geometries.

This condition, expressed through different timescapes and combinations of different intervention, consistently aims at reactivating this heritage. Recent projects all share the awareness that more or less permanent initiatives should become instruments of knowledge and experimentation in this place that holds enormous unexpressed potential from which the city of Naples could benefit.

The current fervor has its roots in the URBACT project, a European exchange and learning program that promotes sustainable urban development. This initiative fosters cooperation between cities and the sharing of best practices to address major urban challenges, integrating economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

In 2016, an important moment of collaborative planning was marked by the selection of the complex as a case study within the European URBACT III project titled ‘2nd Chance program – Waking up the sleeping giants’. This program involved 11 European cities, including the Municipality of Naples serving as the project leader. The primary challenge of this Action Planning Network was the activation of vacant buildings and complexes for sustainable urban development by self-organized groups. Indeed, in most European cities undergoing gentrification, a common issue is the need to encourage the revitalization and redevelopment of urban areas with limited resources, power, and control to implement formal masterplans (Bishop, Williams, 2012).

To awaken the Neapolitan ‘sleeping giant,’ a participatory process was initiated, involving various stakeholders, including the Department of Architecture at the University of Naples Federico II. Over two years, from 2016 to 2018, citizens, associations, and institutions collaborated on the development of a Local Action Plan (LAP). This plan includes a range of material and immaterial actions proposing interventions to be implemented in different phases and timescales. These interventions pertain to various aspects, including the built heritage, the vegetation heritage, the cultural heritage, and the economic heritage, all of which require contemporary reinterpretations of the concept of patrimony. The initiative seeks to highlight its value as a public space accessible to various citizens. As mentioned, has not been concluded and is currently characterized by the presence of multiple agents and stakeholders.

2.3. The project: a tool and possible connotations

After clarifying the objectives and contexts of the research conducted, this contribution proceeds to provide a critique of the activities carried out. It does so by referring to a variety of projects that served as a continuous tool of the research throughout various phases and in relation to different actors.

Starting with the complex process involving the SS. Trinità delle Monache convent, the contribution highlights six projects. Furthermore, within each scenario, the University institution operated with different potential roles for the designer-researcher are proposed.

Throughout all phases, the fundamental research issue has always been the formulation of potential project requirements needed to reactive the underused monument. In other words, echoing Koolhaas, the goal has been to identify effective strategies for keeping the heritage alive, preserving it, while allowing it to evolve rather than confining it to its history.

The projects that will be referred to later – as products of research – have a significant impact that can be quantified more in the questions they have generated and the processes they have activated rather than in the answers they present. In fact, the project – in the sense of the direct execution of work – did not directly embody the scope of the research conducted. The project was understood as a valorization strategy, a vision, a didactic activity, a dialogue device, a manifesto, or even a text. The project was definitively perceived as a trigger for multiple temporalities.

Thus, the project is separately understood as a tool for demonstrating, for unleashing, for dialoguing, for competing, for convening, and for verifying.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. The project as a tool for demonstrating

The project as a tool for demonstrating is inferred from the ‘A catalogue of possibilities’ project (Fig. 3), which, together with the proposals developed by the other designers involved, aimed to demonstrate the potential of the complex by outlining possible strategies for its valorization.
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The project coordinated by Angela D’Agostino and Giovanni Multari, aimed to define potential walk-through scenarios for the monument by reusing both indoor and outdoor areas of the monastery as public spaces, serving as a common good. Consequently, this project turned into a manifesto for the theme of ‘bridging,’ which has now become central in the current investment planning for the complex.

Thus, the project aimed to demonstrate the specific potential of the convent, addressing a long-term perspective while also influencing more immediate short-term decisions.

3.2. The project as a tool for unveiling

The ‘project as a tool for unveiling’ is the connotation derived from the ‘NaScala’ project (Fig. 4), which aimed to reveal possible imageries that could reconnect the city to this place, employing the design paradigm of the ‘event’.

The temporality investigated through this project is mid-term. It is a reactivation strategy aimed at creating a spectacular effect almost a performance – in order on spotlight on what is good, to seduce and invite, and to stimulate desire. In contrast to the previous proposal, which was developed through a top-down approach by the universities involved and directed towards the community driving the participatory process, ‘NaScala’ presents a bottom-up vision created within the student community and directed towards institutions and stakeholders.

The ‘NaScala – Stairway to Heaven’ proposal is situated within this context and aims to provide physical and symbolic, mediatric and temporary accessibility, designed to draw attention, raise interest, and reveal the potential of a beauty that has remained unexpressed, hidden, and veiled.

The ‘Gradini Paradiso’ connect the Montesanto station with the lower entrance to the complex, and they have been inaccessible for many years due to regulatory concerns. In this regard, ‘NaScala’ is a proposal for ephemeral architecture that utilizes elements typical of event staging in order to create an access to the SS. Trinità delle Monache complex ascending from Piazza Montesanto.

The new stairway, being visible to the large number of people crossing Piazza Montesanto every day, extends over the Gradini Paradiso until it reaches the lowest level of the convent. At certain points, the stairway widens, forming terraces that offer a privileged and previously unseen point of view overlooking the historical center of Naples.

Once accessibility was established as a priority – thus signaling the need for a more comprehensive redevelopment of the entire complex – and while awaiting the top-down project, the heritage community took the initiative to participate in calls for proposals aimed at funding place-based and community-oriented cultural activities. With reference to this temporality, residents expressed the need for a representative place, a community hub. In this regard, temporary architecture was identified as a viable solution for a transitional phase that would span several years. Consequently, the establishment of a community hub became a key strategic action for the project, which eventually emerged as the winner in the ‘IQ - i quartieri dell’innovazione’ program.

However, what is the project to be built? And how can the project itself help individuals gain awareness of the multidimensionality of the process in which it plays a part? These were the questions that guided the establishment of the subsequent course, where an effort was made to offer potential interpretations of the concept of participation, the role of the university, and, above all, the project and its educational aspects.

In contrast to the NaScala project, which was proposed with the hope of realization, the Backyard project was developed without such ambition. It serves as a visual narrative designed to stimulate discussion, conceived as a means of establishing a common ground for dialogue and formulating more specific project demands.
3.4. The project as a tool for competing

The 'project as a tool for competing' is the connotation drawn this time not from a visual project but from a textual project: a call for competition that represents a shared demand for a project.

The initially planned self-construction activity, as proposed in the project accepted for funding, was replaced by a more complex, multi-phased process that engaged various stakeholders. This approach interpreted and integrated into the transformative processes associated with the former convent, all of which are notably influenced by necessary the variation in scale and multiple temporalities of ongoing or planned actions, and the cooperative involvement of diverse communities.

As part of this Public Engagement Action - run with others by the author - the Department of Architecture conducted cultural and scientific outreach activities in addition to academic and non-academic training, to support one of the multiple temporalities that make up the complex regeneration process of the Parco dei Quartieri Spagnoli. In particular, the Department curated the drafting of the call for proposals, organized and managed the subsequent co-design phase, and held a Summer School for the self-construction of temporary architecture to serve as a venue for the Community Hub.

In fact, an ideas competition directed at architecture students was employed as a means to determine which project to build. To 'compete' - the Italian 'concorrere,' interpreted here as 'running together' ('con-corriere'), rather than against – was seen as the most democratic, inclusive, and community-oriented action that could generate unexpected implementations from the initial visions.

Conceiving the drafting of the call for proposals as a design action means repositioning a central value on the 'prescription' (Armando, Durbiano, 2017). Significant effort was put into bringing forth a project demand from a community of non-technical individuals. In fact, the Parco dei Quartieri Spagnoli Community acted as the 'client,' and the Department worked to structure the project demand by engaging in negotiation and translating the desires of a diverse range of stakeholders.

The objective of the 'International Ideas Competition' was to acquire proposals for equipping the Parco dei Quartieri Spagnoli, with a particular focus on the bastion area at the upper terrace of the complex. 'The Backyard SoS Trinità delle Monache' was promoted by the Parco dei Quartieri Spagnoli Association, in collaboration with the Department of Architecture at the University of Naples Federico II, and with the support of the City of Naples. The community's request revolved around the creation of a dynamic and adaptable public space, specifically designed to serve as a venue for the Community Hub.

The call for proposals, 'The Backyard SoS Trinità delle Monache,' served a dual purpose. On one hand, it was a valuable tool for introducing a specific yet diverse community, primarily comprised of future architects-in-training, to the characteristics, potentials, and visions associated with the former convent. On the other hand, it provided a means to receive design interpretations of the ideas put forth by the community. In this regard, the interaction between the Parco dei Quartieri Spagnoli Community and the students who participated in the competition was highly beneficial. Community members guided participants on several days of site visits, fostering a two-way knowledge transfer. The awareness of the hidden potential within the large, underused complex and the feeling of care, symbolically expressed through the project, served as common ground for both communities during this collaboration.

3.5. The project as a tool for convening

The 'project as a tool for convening' is the connotation drawn from the winning projects of the competition (Fig. 6), specifically the co-design activity (Fig. 7) that was based on these projects.

The temporalities called into question in this phase encompass both the contingent time of the teaching activity and the expected lifespan of the artifact being conceived. Additionally, a third temporality can be added because of the incremental phases and transformative scenarios that are now more frequently generating genuine project opportunities, and also to actively engage in them.
Determination of the project as the most complex aspect, as it heavily relies on the nature of the intervention and its potential socio-cultural as well as economic impacts. The project developed during the co-design phase represents a synthesis of experiences and ideas. Here, students engaged in continuous dialogue with the community, tutors, and professors, offering their interpretation of the contextual conditions that represented the basis for the small, temporary, and ephemeral architecture. Both the learning-by-doing process and the public engagement process proved beneficial for Summer School participants, as they gained an understanding of the importance of a design action, even when it is small and temporary within the larger framework of urban regeneration.

The new architectural intervention provides the bastard space with an unprecedented shape, reevaluating the proportions and interpreting the relationships among its components. The three covered areas are organized to define a community space, a hub—a network of spaces available for multiple uses and many communities. In an initiative marked by its complex multidimensionality, communication and dissemination issues assumed a central role. Even the construction site, as an event, served as an opportunity and a tool for unveiling both the project and the process, promoting the inclusion of additional communities and projects. Therefore, temporary strategies and participatory processes for reactivating public historical heritage can serve as measures for preserving and caring for public assets, potentially leading to new and more enduring planning initiatives. "The Backyard SoS Summer School" provided an opportunity to ponder about the project’s ability to adapt to the temporal constraints, attempting to interpret and sometimes even anticipate them.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The realization of the ‘Community Hub Parco dei Quartieri Spagnoli’ project represents a significant milestone in a lengthy process that has spanned more than twenty years. This process has aimed at the restoration and integration of a large monumental complex into the city. Throughout this process, there has been a consistent thread of collaboration involving the local administration, public institutions, associations, and resident communities in various capacities.

The new temporary architectural structure serves as a shell that reconfigures various spaces within the bastard area and also stands as a fragment, awaiting a broader process of incremental development. This process, characterized by its multiple temporalities, engages with the sites and issues that connect the convenant and the city.

In this regard, the case study presents a potential example of a minor and process-oriented project developed within a time-based framework. It exemplifies a contemporary design action that is shaped by multiple and interconnected temporalities. These temporalities encompass both long-term, medium-term, and short-term projects, and are conceived in the context of long-lasting interventions, temporary architectures, and even ephemeral objects. As such, the foreseen life cycle of these proposals ranges from permanence to potentiality and even conceptual identity to the indeterminacy of the final project, depending on the caring relationship the community chooses to establish with it.

Hence, advocating for a necessary time-based approach in design—beyond the existing interpretation of time-based architecture (Leupen, Vawter, van Zwol, 2020) not only designing while considering time as an unavoidable component of the project but also attributing variable roles and times to the project within a broader vision of the designer-researcher’s work. This approach requires designers to deal with very long-term temporalities and at the same time with the short-term temporalities of the event: both must be interwoven in a complex vision of the place.

The projects discussed here and the six connotations exemplified exemplify a possible way to understand the third mission within faculties of architecture and the potential role of the designer-researcher who, working in the field, serves as a mediator, translator, and builder. Therefore, the material and temporal values of projects can be acknowledged within the context of a ‘processual’ project that embraces transformations and maintaining interventions, gradual adaptations of transformations, and employs ‘narrative’ strategies of informal permanence. These movements, changing behaviours, and perceptions. This approach is far removed from the idea of crystallizing projects in ‘Cartesian’ geometries (Bocchi 2014, 19).

The one developed for the former Military Hospital in Naples is precisely a processual project. The ‘2nd Chance’ program, the ‘Community Emotions’ project. The ‘Backyard’ competition, and the subsequent Summer School represent the various fragments of the complex temporalities of a strategy aligned with a time-based approach aimed at adding value to the Parco dei Quartieri Spagnoli. In fact, even while the realization of the project funded by CIS funds, the Parco dei Quartieri Spagnoli Community is actively working to recontextualize the potentialities of an otherwise inactive space during its long period of disuse. The design category of the temporary is distributed and reassembled in a more complex vision of variable temporalities that interweave to craft new narratives for the spaces of the city in transition.

In this context, a design paradigm strongly emerges; the approach proposed by Camillo Boano regarding the concept of ‘minority’ as an alternative to ‘major design’ emerges as a valuable reference: the tone of the project, taking it from whichever side you want, always seems to be major, majoritarian and arrogant, at least in its modernist Western branch, in its solutionist drift, in its selfishness of action and pursuit of impact. A greater gesture because it accomplishes itself by complimenting itself, by fixing reality, by embodying itself in it, in its language, in its codes of representation, and so on, in the thoughts that generated it. It becomes greater because it is univocal, capable of producing only itself, in its singularity. Sterile because without voids, uncertainties and cracks (Boano 2020, 21). In this sense, all the projects that tackle the above-mentioned voids, uncertainties, and cracks that promise possibilities for the future. Indeed, in all connotations, the project is continuously articulated for its ability to generate scenarios—both immediate and futuristic—while always working with variations in terms of space and time.

In conclusion, the role of the designer in such a context evolves towards the concept of the ‘choral architect,’ as proposed by Carlo Ratti: “a designer emmeshed in networked communities who will make harmonies. The architect will not be anonymous, but plural and compositional. Authorship will not be erased, but contextualized as it is woven into a relational fabric. The new architect is situated towards bottom-up and bottom-up, channeling the realization of the latter through the targeted framework of the former. The responsibility of the Choral Architect is less oriented toward majoritarian building than orchestrating process. She is not a soloist, not a conductor, not an anonymous voice in the crowd. The Choral Architect weaves together the creative and harmonic ensemble” (Ratti, Claudel 2015, 108).