

## Reflection

### ***On the method and the tools* | architecture as observation and narration**

The line that separates research and design in this project is blurred. It has been blurred from the beginning because I first approached the topic of commercial spaces in the dispersed city in 2014, as often happens after some time passes, I was not aware anymore of what I *learned* and what I *knew*. In a similar way has been blurry the transition between research and design phase, because I tried to see the research as an observation of the state of things with a constant projection to a future state. The usual questions of investigation – *who, what, when, where, why* – have always been linked to the questions *So? Therefore?*

During the important phase of study of the territory *in situ*, I tried to see the phenomena through the eyes of the different users. I talked to them, I interviewed them, I moved around by car, by train, by bicycle and by foot, I spent time in the crucial places (old and new) of the territory. I listened, I observed, I took photos, I wrote and I drew. Once I came back with my precious wealth of knowledge, I tried to trace possible future trajectories of the present: possible scenarios for the evolution of the territory based on the interaction between actors, the current use of space and of places, the change of customs and practices, national and international policies, etc. Thus, I translated my speculation in a research essay. I realized only during P2 presentation that writing was an excessively abstract tool to express such complexity and to imagine such changes in a tangible way. Nevertheless, I did not want to use mapping as a tool that in this case, I reckoned as too inflexible. During the delicate weeks after P2 I finally made the choice to draw a series of microstories as a tool to narrate future dynamics in a detailed way and at the same time expressing the broad view with the choice of the story and its point of observation. By drawing, I realized how microstories were such powerful tool to think and imagine very concretely how social relations can take place in space and that I was not only communicating a scenario previously thought, but that by drawing I was forced to think more, to imagine and, therefore, to design. Moreover, this method allowed the definition of a strong position towards the future, but at the same time safeguarded the possibility to account for the unpredictability of reality and the impossibility to dictate future.<sup>1</sup>

### ***On the role* | architecture as a collective act**

I see every architectural project as a collective act. From the observation of the territory to the design, the architect works connecting multiple disciplines, multiple scales and multiple actors. The role of the architect in this collaborative process is to gather the different positions and to mediate between actors, to ultimately understand the power of space in social relations. In this process, the intellectual role of the architect is necessary to link cross-disciplinary knowledge and the ability to work on different scales. In this project the attention to the different actors that play a role in the territory is crucial. The private, on one side, is funding, managing and benefitting from the creation of large shopping centres on the territory. The public, on the other

---

<sup>1</sup> On page 5: a few examples of microstories

side, that is instituting a common territorial identity, politically and economically, through the Federation of Municipalities of Camposampierese, and that is fighting the private investors of shopping malls to safeguard small business. Furthermore, the collective – the inhabitants of the dispersed city – and the importance of the customs and practices of the society in relation to space. The observation of the actors is never self-referential, but in a constant exchange with the world: the *in situ* experience of the field trip and the interviews have been a tool for this. For my project, the main goal has been imaging the best possible scenario of cooperation and mediation between these different actors and to study to which extent could architecture influence the balance of these relationships and solidify them into space.

### ***On the process and position* | contextuality, flexibility and cross-disciplinarity**

*In space:* from the research to the design, I tried to keep a constant focus on the need for contextuality. The idea of context has many different facets, I don't only refer to the physical context, but also to the socio-economic context, the political context, the historical context... One of the key points of the design phase of the project concerning contextuality has been the necessity of intervening on two existing buildings. The current economic condition of the Western European suburban areas demands strategic interventions that can make improvements in short time and with moderate economic resources. Especially in the Italian case where for decades concrete has been poured without regulations compromising the beauty of the landscape, I think it is important to trigger a requalification starting from what is already there, at hand to be reused.

*In time:* since the beginning of the project, I always tried to keep my observation broad to define the extent of the phenomenon. On each phase of the project I referred to case-studies to always double check if what I was working on was an exception or a common situation. From this came the choice of working on two different buildings. My project is meant to be a model for future interventions, therefore intervening on two cases makes sure that I am not talking about one specific exception, but gives guidelines on how to reuse currently unused spaces of shopping malls, to make space flexible and to root it into the territory it is in. Moreover, the two cases I am working on are in two different stages of the evolution of the shopping mall: one is the territorial centre, the other one is decadent and partly vacant. The one project keeps the commercial function, the other one tackled a change of use; the one project is a metaphor of the *villa urbana*, the other one of the *villa rustica*.

*In scale:* I have been very attentive on the process of the project besides the final result. One of the key points of the process was the cross-disciplinary knowledge as background for the architectural project. This cross-disciplinary, broad view of the architect has been reflected also on the design applied to different scales. I tried to be extremely flexible in moving – and jumping – from a scale to another and I can state that the architectonical project was actually generated from the convergence of the territorial project (mobility, circularity and the future view for the dispersed city) and the detail scale. For example, once I defined the role of the shopping mall from a territorial view, I had few key-concepts (flexibility in space and time, multifunctionality, sustainability) that brought me directly to the definition of a set of key-details (moving walls, openable roof, permeable façade) to finally define the project on the middle ground of the architectural scale. I realized retrospectively that the definition of this approach had a very clear root: during the field trip, I visited for the first time Carlo Scarpa's Tomba Brion and it was probably the strongest impact a building had on my way to conceive architecture. I was astonished by how every detail has such an incredible power on its own and at the same time all these elements are coming together so harmoniously in the building as a whole. I always worked conceiving the building as one unit where all the elements were coherent with the unit, but I see now

how space can be much more interesting when the design starts from the identity of the element to come together into one.<sup>2</sup>

### ***On the relevance | the social role of architecture***

Social relevance:

I find my interest in architecture in its social resonance. To me, even the most private building – the house - is never merely private, but it's an interior for the city or the territory and plays a role for the collectivity. Therefore, the primary relevance of the project concerns the territory and consists of investigating new species of spaces where social relations can be fulfilled at their best. For this reason, "The suburban commons" is the title of the project. "Commons" as the Latin "res publica" intended not only in the metaphoric acceptance, but also, and primarily, in the physical one: the common space. Indeed, the ultimate goal of the project has been to shape the future common places of the dispersed city which are coherent with the general vision for the territory and the mediation between actors.

Scientific relevance:

*On the evolution of shopping centres:* The history of the shopping centre – and more specifically suburban shopping centre – is relatively young, but it is already possible to trace a complex evolution of its system in less than a century. When suburban shopping mall arose, and still today when a new mall is built, the system of town squares and small public spaces succumbs and the local commercial fabric perishes. It became the main attractor, socially and commercially, and the collective centre of the territory. Nevertheless, the recent evolution shows how in Western Europe economic recessions and online shopping are currently reshaping the shopping centre, turning them into entertaining centres. Providing a model to intervene on the space of the shopping mall today means grasping the opportunity of rethinking the whole mall system, acknowledge the social importance they play in a suburban territory and at the same time mediating between the private, the public and the collective. It is important to underline that today the existing literature on shopping mall shows either projects that act with a tabula rasa method or projects that implicitly condescend with the mall as a homogeneous capitalistic interior. I believe it is relevant to give a model that is critical in a productive way and that mediate between the different actors of the territory.

*On the dispersed city:* The research departs from the definition of the *città diffusa* by Italian theorists Francesco Indovina and Bernardo Secchi and its relevance lays in the acknowledgment of the dispersed city as a common Western European urban phenomenon. The project focuses on the fragile environment that characterize this type of territories today and on the importance to develop possible future scenarios, in order to understand how these areas can survive the challenges of climate change and how they will confront with it. I reckon it is also relevant how in the end my interpretation of the territory diverges from the initial models of Indovina and Secchi and defines a new interpretation of the dispersed city. It differs from Indovina's view about the genesis of the territory (according to me, strictly connected to the American influence in European economy after the second World War) and from Secchi's perspective criticizing the prominent idea of

---

<sup>2</sup> On page 6: drawing of Carlo Scarpa's Tomba Brion I made during my visit in october 2017.

“isotropy” to intervene on the area and pointing out an important system of spatial hierarchies and centralities that inhabitants established the territory.

### ***On the values | love, hate and empathy***

During the last formal presentation, I have been asked if my fascination towards the social role of the suburban shopping mall was moved by love or hate. None of the two: my fascination is moved by empathy. I remember well the first impressions I had of the dispersed urbanization between Padua and Venice: the melancholy greengrocer was sitting on a plastic chair outside his shop on the main square of Piombino Dese, staring at the forecourt of the Church full of parked cars; a few children were playing on the sidewalk of a shut cinema of another town centre; the beautiful flat green landscape that you can only observe from the asphalt as parceled out into private properties. I perfectly remember the uncanny feeling in asking: “Where is everyone?” I had an answer arriving to the central shopping mall: the parking was overflowing of cars, the interior space was full due to a kids’ fashion show. Nevertheless, the uncanny feeling was still there: teenagers were meeting in the parking because “we don’t want to buy, we just want to walk around and meet people”, a woman was trying to cross the busy road that is dividing the mall from the way to the station, the security checked twice that I deleted all the photos of the shopping centre on my camera and walked me away from the parking for chatting with clients. I collected the experiences of all the people I met, and I started asking myself if architecture can actually intervene on space to provide a better background for social relations to flourish. Today, in the final phase of the project, I am aware that it can.

To answer the question, my fascination corresponds to admiration for the mall as a social construct: when in 2018 relationship are widely virtual and the population is physically isolated and fragmented, the shopping centre still brings people together. At the same time, I am critical towards a capitalist globalized system which is the one of the malls, that widens the separation between different classes of society, segregating and strengthening racial stereotypes and irretrievably links the gathering space (the old public space, the piazza) and the capitalistic need to buy.

# *Microstories*





