

# THE GREAT OPPORTUNITY

## If not now, when?

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### ABSTRACT

For years we have witnessed, almost helplessly, the great wounds of the suburbs, the abandonment of entire historic centres, or entire urban settings, in favour of a sterile and unmotivated race for new constructions, occasionally or rarely of architectural and good technical quality. It is time to get to the root of the problem. To be clear, not everything can and must be recovered. We should clarify, we should use in an intelligent way this new sensitivity that is emerging and these enormous new economic resources that will be made available. The moment of recovery should be accompanied by a sharp reflection on how and what to recover. The Green New Deal should be seen not only as an opportunity for sustainable development, certainly important, but as a turning point on how to understand and how to imagine ‘new’ cities and consequently architectures that are their bodies. We should not fear modification and change which are inevitable for any urban fabric or reality. Knowing how to link modernity and tradition, with an authentically contemporary look.

### KEYWORDS

recovery, urban regeneration, modification, identity, opportunity

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The body of the city, and therefore its architecture, are affected by the passage of time in a very specific and particular way. It has been clear for some years now that the main road to pursue, in the coming decades, is certainly not to build in an indistinct and indiscriminate way, but to recovery, regenerate, reuse. For years, we have witnessed, almost helplessly, the great wounds of the suburbs, the abandonment of entire historic centres, or entire urban settings, in favour of a sterile and unmotivated race for new constructions, occasionally or rarely of architectural and good technical quality. It is time to get to the root of the problem. To be clear, not everything can and must be recovered. We should clarify, we should use in an intelligent way this new sensitivity that is emerging and these enormous new economic resources that will be made available. The moment of recovery should be accompanied by a sharp reflection on how and what to recover.

The Green New Deal and Renovation Wave (European Commission, 2019, 2020) should be seen not only as an opportunity for sustainable development, certainly important, but as a turning point on how to understand and how to imagine 'new' cities and consequently architectures that are their bodies. We should not be afraid of the modification and change that are inevitable for any urban structure or work of architecture, as has always occurred in history. Knowing how to link modernity and tradition, with an authentically contemporary look. The 'traces' of the past, the built environment, in this case, become the starting point for new ideas, also clearly not final. Rewriting on an already written text is not only possible but even inevitable. Modification, belonging, context, identity, specificity, are words that seem to presuppose a pre-existing reality to be preserved by transforming it, passing down its memory with the traces founded on the basis of the previous traces. A reality that appears in the physical form of a geography whose cult of knowledge and whose interpretation provide the backbone of the project (Gregotti, 1991, p. 36).

In my opinion, the goal is to work on some fundamental issues in order not to waste a great opportunity. On the one hand, to recover, in a massive way, also thanks to the latest incentives put in place by the State, the immense architectural quality heritage we have, both historical and contemporary, both public and private. Interventions that restore, in addition to greater a structural and energy efficiency, the deeper meaning, the identity, the soul of those architectures. On the other hand, having the courage to demolish everything that makes no sense, to recover both in terms of historical-urban identity and architectural quality. I refer also and above all to a series of neighbourhoods born in the various Italian urban suburbs in the period of maximum building speculation and which after a few years showed all their brutality. Operating in this way would bring several advantages. Portions of land would be definitively freed from 'bad construction', first of all, returning the land that has been taken away from nature over the years; and where the place and conditions require it, building new quality public and private works, without occupying new land. This methodology would allow to recover a sustainable urban quality, restoring the identity and the be-



**Fig. 1** | Green Belt by Gilles Clement  
– Coloco, Tripoli, 2006-2011 (source:  
jnc.be).

longing of places or areas of cities that are now ghost towns. «Raising the imageability of the urban environment means facilitating its visual identification and structuring» (Lynch, 1969, p. 48). This essay will suggest a possible way of investigation.

**Urban regeneration and sustainability** | The socio-economic transformations of recent decades encouraged not only the accentuation of inequalities, but also a progressive weakening of social and political activism, and therefore of the core element of the relationship between urban planning and the community. The experience gained with specific interventions like the Citizen Participation Contracts showed how the citizens' participation is essential to reach shared solutions. In this new world people are asked for private solutions to problems of social origin, instead of solutions of social origin to private problems (Bauman, 2011, p. 21). Solutions capable of identifying and developing sustainability policies where environmental, social and even economic interests find a balance. Urban regeneration represents an opportunity to solve problems such as the lack of identity of a neighbourhood, the total lack of public spaces and the high building density that makes it impossible to create green areas and even planting trees along the sidewalks.

Recover abandoned spaces by production processes or restore a new environmental, economic and social quality in degraded neighbourhoods, perfectly responds to the concept of the sustainable city, limiting urban dispersion and reducing environmental impacts in the built environment (Musco, 2009, p. 12). Discouraging non-urbanised land consumption raises the question of direct and indirect out-of-pocket costs for the environment, which cannot be underestimated if we want to be sustainable: it is mandatory to manage the territory with appropriate urban planning tools, in order to stop new constructions using inadequate building stock regeneration programs. In fact, the State and local authorities hold real estate holdings valued at over 400 billion euros, more than 20 percent of Italian GDP: an extraordinary but poorly managed wealth, which seems to have moderate returns, because of management costs that are

twice as high as those of private citizens. Assets placed in strategic places no longer providing wealth or utility to the community but, if properly valued and managed, they can produce great social and economic benefits, representing an asset to be used as a strategic driver for attractive local and development opportunities.

The redevelopment of existing real estate assets is a priority to guarantee citizens the quality and safety of living and, in addition to promoting research and technological innovation, can establish the role of the architectural project as a tool for welfare policies and development of the cultural and social values of the Italian Territory. Architecture should respond to these new needs, returning to represent its natural ethical value which is to contribute to the civil development of the country, interpreting, through the quality of projects, the new needs of citizens, but bearing in mind that such a complex project requires different skills and functions. It requires synergy with institutions, universities, urban planners, builders, environmental and cultural associations. All believing that there is no other way to rebalance the city, the territory and the protection of the landscape, if not that of starting a large plan of requalification and renovation of the construction sector with is lacking quality, through an extraordinary process of urban regeneration. Everyone, especially in Italy, needs to overcome the taboo of demolition and reconstruction: the costs to refurbish buildings that are not adequate for the seismic risk and not sustainable in terms of energy conservation are higher than a full reconstruction. In specific cases, it is best to demolish some walls, also erasing the bad results of a non-specific planning of the 1960s, creating at the same time schools, kindergartens, sports facilities, and cultural centres.

In Europe there are many examples of bad suburbs demolished and rebuilt as new integrated urban neighbourhoods, spaces equipped with the latest technology but above all places where citizens gather and identify. The suburbs must no longer be seen as marginal places of the historic city, but should be considered as urban areas to be integrated into the building and social fabric of the city. There is now an awareness of the closure of a post-war historical cycle, lasted over sixty years, and characterised by a disorganised expansion that we can no longer allow. This is why it is necessary to focus on the renewal of the existing elements so as not to consume further and land, to solve energy problems, to protect the landscape and to boost the entire Italian economy.

According to Secchi (2013, p. 30), we need to go back to reflecting on the spatial structure of the city, recognising the importance of the shape of the territory while building on it. Give again urban spaces a greater and more widespread porosity, permeability and accessibility; design them with ambition, taking into account the quality of the cities that preceded us and think again about the size of the community. These above-mentioned initiatives are also to be implemented by replacing blocks, parts or entire neighbourhoods built after the Second World War, characterised by very poor-quality buildings, inadequate both for anti-seismic and hydrogeological standards, and for the quality of the facilities and for reducing consumption.



**Fig. 2** | Zeche Zollverein by Rem Koolhaas-Oma, Essen, 2010-2014 (credit: Zollverein Das Magazine).

**Fig. 3** | The High Line by Diller & Scofidio, New York, 2004-2011 (source: designcurial.com).

**Fig. 4** | South East Coastal Park by FOA, Barcelona, 2004 (source: mie-sarch.com).

**Fig. 5** | Tate Modern by Herzog & Meuron, London, 1995-2000 (source: archello.com).



This is an ambitious but inevitable project: in a future that can no longer be postponed, a heritage of about 90 million constructions built in the last 60 years (ArchWorldNetwork, 2018), will be inadequate and will have to be replaced by a planning for several decades ahead. The approximately 120 million constructions that make up our urban structure are made up of: a) about 30 million rooms, built in over 3,000 years of history and which constitute the very identity of Italian civilisation, to be considered as a 'unique and unreproducible' asset 'to be revitalised, re-functionalised and reequipped; b) about 90 million rooms, buildings that make up the urban and non-urban outskirts, characterised by very poor architectural and construction quality, generally not anti-seismic, also built in inadequate geo-environmental areas and with outdated systems and unsustainable materials, lacking primary services, which in the next few years will be – after exhausting their economic cycle – totally obsolete and will have to be replaced.

In facing the issues of recovery and enhancement of outskirts with complex programs, it is necessary to pursue, also through the use of private resources, the objectives of widespread redevelopment of public spaces, rehabilitation and restoration of degraded areas, functions and activities for collective services and equipment, aimed at favouring the processes of inclusion and social development. Intervening in complicated contexts in the so-called 'abandoned places' to try to create an urban identity and consequently a social consequence is not at all easy.

The city is a plural city. It is a plural reality, par excellence. The social and urban identity that is locally constituted is actually multiple, the result of the interaction of different subjects and processes, each of them bearing different identities. The identity of an urban context, of a 'neighbourhood', is the stratification of different identities, including both 'locally sourced' and defined or imposed from outskirts identities. The very idea of 'neighbourhood' is extended here, as some urban sociologists tend to emphasise. A 'neighbourhood' is not a mere creation, but is a knot of stories, nodes of networks, spatial conformations, practices, etc. with a multiple and evanescent identity. For this reason, although it exists in the common sense, it is not easily identifiable as such, as a reified entity. Although some spatial conformations (the urban fabric, the prevailing building types, the historical phases that led to its construction, etc.) can also be clearly identified and defined, and are often the reference for the life of its citizens or its patrons, a 'neighbourhood' is still difficult to define.

The challenges posed by urban regeneration are actually more immaterial and more oriented towards generative social action. A good work of urban regeneration requires high costs and professionalism. Urban regeneration policies and programs do not only involve building actors, but require complex and long-lasting social projects, which should be designed to support, first of all, the most vulnerable sectors of the population, with specific interventions within wider plans. There is no regeneration without adaptation of public infrastructure and equipment, and subsequently without interventions capable of improving the living and working conditions, of citizens.



**Fig. 6** | Superkilen by Topotek 1 + BIG Architects + Superflex, Copenhagen, 2011 (source: detail-online.com).



**Fig. 7** | Guggenheim Museum by Frank O. Gehry, Bilbao, 1997 (source: guggenheim-bilbao.eus).



**Fig. 8** | Bridge Park by Michael Van Valkenburgh Ass., Brooklyn, New York State, 2009-2011 (source: city-parksalliance.org).

**Fig. 9** | Madrid – Rio by West 8, Madrid, 2006-2011 (source: archello.com).



**Fig. 10** | Portello Nord by Studio Valle, Milano, 2003-2005 (source: comune.milano.it).



**Fig. 11** | EWA Womans University by Dominique Perrault, Seoul, 2004 2008 (source: archdaily.com).







**Fig. 12** | Metropol Parasol by Jurgen Mayer H. Architects, Siviglia, 2004-2011 (source: architetturaresiliente.com).



**Fig. 13** | City of Arts and Sciences by Santiago Calatrava, Valencia, 2002 (source: architectureandlandscape.wordpress.com).



**Fig. 14** | Science and Innovation Park by Ratti Associati, 2018 (source: lifegate.it).

Consequently, there is no urban regeneration without huge public investments. The inadequacy of urban policies has often led to fail to achieve what are considered to be the two main objectives: economic growth and the achievement of equity and social integration conditions (Vicari Haddock and Moulaert, 2009, p. 19).

**The possibilities offered by NextGenerationEU** | This is the moment we have been waiting for thanks to a portentous instrument such as the NextGenerationEU. It is a temporary instrument for recovery of 750 billion euros, created within the Covid-19 pandemic and which will help to fix, among others, the economic, social damage, consequences of the coronavirus pandemic to create a post-pandemic Europe that is more sustainable, digital, resilient and better suited to face present and future challenges. The mechanism for recovery and resilience, at the heart of NextGenerationEU, and will provide 672.5 billion euros in loans and grants to support reforms and investments made by Member States. The goal is to mitigate the economic and social impact of the coronavirus pandemic and make the economies and societies of European countries more sustainable, resilient and prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the ecological and digital transitions. Member States are currently preparing their Recovery and Resilience Plans, which will allow them to receive funds within the Recovery and Resilience instrument.

Specifically, the Italian Plan allocated 191.5 billion euros investments, financed through the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the main instrument of the NGEU. But

it should be specified that further 30.6 billion euros are expected to be part of a complementary fund, financed through the multi-year budget variance approved by the Council of Ministers on 15 April 2021. Among the objectives to be achieved there is the renovation of public and private buildings, improving their energy efficiency through thermal insulation, heating and cooling systems and self-generation of electricity, as well as monitoring consumption by users. The target set by the EU is to double the efficiency rate of buildings by 2025. A process started with the Italian Superbonus, a measure that, as stated in the PNRR document, is intended to be extended from 2021 to 2023. For the first time after decades, we are faced with truly impressive figures which, if well managed, as we all hope, will entail the necessary and by now unavoidable ecological change.

At the same time, they will make it possible to recover all the architecture of historical and artistic value of the many historical centres that could be repopulated and become again the beating heart of the cities. Too often abandoned and degraded by an unbearable ignorance. At the same time, we could recover a series of smaller towns, especially inland areas which, with their peculiarities, are part of that Italian cultural identity known all over the world. A delicate issue, but of great importance, will be the recovery of the former urban suburbs, which over the years have become the new centres of large cities, but where often there still are the usual problems of lack of services, picnic areas, places for sport and free time.

Another fundamental issue will be the recovery in terms of sustainability of former abandoned industrial areas: once in the outskirts of the cities, they have now become an active part of the cities, even if very often left to complete neglect and abandonment. The European resources of the Recovery Fund will be a very rare opportunity to finally recover these abandoned areas and compensate, even if partially and with a long delay, the population living near these complicated places and that over the years has paid a very high price in terms of quality of life and deaths deriving from the often harmful emissions of these places. Very often the industrial areas are closely linked to the territory in which they are located, making these places even more important and absolutely deserving of being able to have a new life, even better if at the service of that same territory. When a large factory is decommissioned, it is an opportunity to transform that place and give it a new identity, so that it can offer experiences, services, spaces for free time or, even, new residences. Regenerating a former industrial area means reviving an entire area, enriching the city in which it is located and giving new value to the territory.

There are many virtuous examples around the world of sustainable recovery of these areas. From places associated with death and suffering have been transformed into places associated with vitality and well-being, or from spaces of strong social degradation to places of culture, becoming a driving force for economies and sustainable territorial development. There is nothing that cannot be changed by conscious and informed social action, endowed with purpose and legitimacy. If people are in-



**Fig. 15** | Toyota Woven City by BIG Bjarke Ingels Group, 2020 (source: big.dk).

formed and active and can communicate from one part of the world to another; if the contractor assumes its social responsibilities; if the media becomes the messenger rather than the message; if political actors react to cynicism and restore the confidence in democracy; if culture is rebuilt starting from experience; if humanity feels intergenerational solidarity by living in harmony with nature. In fact, the rapid urbanisation process of recent decades has emphasised a series of problems that affect the quality of life of the citizens: the decrease of public spaces, the deterioration of infrastructure, the difficulty in organising public transport. For this reason, public participation is essential. ‘Stabilising’ and ‘controlling’ the expansion of the cities is one of the objectives that must be pursued to reduce the environmental impact on the area surrounding urban agglomerations. The land is a limited resource that should not be wasted, and, above all, its balance should be respected. The city needs its territory as an ‘ecological support’, it can draw resources from it and release its residues in it (waste, products resulting from energy transformations and different types of production). Without a context that fulfils this function, the city could self-sustain like any other ecosystem.

**Conclusions** | Participation between public and private is not achieved only through the organisation of thematic commissions, exhibitions and the production of graphic and audiovisual materials to be distributed to the community, but through a broader action to support and encourage initiatives such as partnerships and collaborations. International experience has shown that urban regeneration is possible thanks to the combination of all local factors and the involvement of the community. The relationships between city and territory encourage interaction between different subjects, such as urban planning, economics, ecology, environmental sustainability. Thanks to the integrated approach, the European and international planning systems have adopted tools that combine environmental policies with government action. The subject is to think of new construction systems in the city, to improve the quality of urban living, making choices

of sustainability and continuity with the history and identity of the places, designing the ‘city of tomorrow’: a sustainable, intelligent, inclusive city that is also able to bring values linked to personal and collective memory. When Zumthor (2003, p. 42) thinks of architecture, images spring up inside him; many are related to his training and his practice as an architect; others have to do with his childhood; he still seems to feel the door handle in his hand, that portion of metal configured like the back of a spoon.

Then the question is ‘if not now when’? The attached images (Figg. 1-15) illustrate possible scenarios. They refer to projects and architectures, even very different from each other, and starting from a bold urban regeneration often linked to the recovery of abandoned industrial sites rather than degraded marginal areas of large metropolises quickly became an iconic element of the cities, generating places for sharing and social well-being. From these few examples it is easy to understand how a good urban regeneration, also made of modifications and replacements or a good and critical building renovation carried out in continuity with the history and identity of the places can only generate enormous opportunities for every citizen, in terms of usability of new spaces, they are an economic driver. We are facing a portentous convergence, there are ideas, technologies, sensitivities, and perhaps as never before, even great financial resources. Great opportunities lay ahead both for resources and for new sensibilities that were unthinkable only a few years ago and must absolutely be grasped with great foresight and intelligence.

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