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Editors
Paul Sanders
Mirko Guaralda
Linda Carroli

THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND
NEW ZEALAND
Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau

Griffith UNIVERSITY

Creative Industries Faculty
School of Design

QUT

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Introduction

Urban morphology as a field of study has developed primarily in Europe and North America, and more recently emerging as a recurrent topic in China and South America. As a counterpoint to this centric view, the ISUF 2013 conference explored aspects of 'urban form at the edge'. In particular the conference examined 'off centre areas' such as India, Africa, Middle East, Central Asia and Australasia which require innovative approaches to the study of traditional, as well as post-colonial and contemporary, morphologies. Broader interpretations of urban form at the edge focus on minor centres and suburbia, with their developing and transilient character; edge cities and regional centres; and new technologies and approaches that are developing alongside established methods, tools and theories of urban morphology.

Sub-themes for the conference, which comprise the sections of volumes 1 and 2 of the ISUF2013 proceedings, were:

- Cities on the Edge – cities on edge conditions, such as natural limits or political boundaries
- Off centre – urban form in emerging economies and postcolonial countries
- On the Edge of the City – peripheral areas and urban form in suburbia
- Edge Cities – new urban conditions
- Regional centres – cities and towns with local importance, but at the edge of national or regional urban networks
- Pushing the Edge – new technologies and new techniques.

Although Australia has historically been considered at the edge of the world due to its location, the conference will take advantage of its relative proximity to Africa, India and South East Asia, especially targeting the seminar to these geographical areas, and directly addressing the challenge for ISUF to develop into these continents.

The South East Queensland region incorporates both Brisbane and its neighbour the Gold Coast City. It is the fastest growing metropolitan region in Australia. The rapid processes of urban transformation have brought about challenges that are comparable with the experience of many developing nations.

We would like to thank QUT students and staff who volunteered their time before and during the conference; without their support the event would not have been possible.

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Conference Organising Committee
Paul Sanders, QUT
Mirko Guaralda, QUT
Kai Gu, University of Auckland
Tony Hall, Griffith University
Leigh Shutter, Griffith University

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OFF CENTRE

Urban form in emerging economies and postcolonial countries

The Denied City: How the crisis is leading cities to the edge

Nicola Marzot

Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, Department of Architecture, TU Delft, The Netherlands.
Email: N.Marzot@tudelft.nl

Abstract. *Urban form has always been the historical evidence of any process of civilisation, recording its driving forces – at political, social, economic and cultural levels – in relation to the inertia to modification of the existing built conditions. If the* Territory *defines the dynamics internal to this process, the* Landscape *identifies its immediate output and aesthetic dimension of where it is experienced. Since the second half of the 1980s, the increased widening of the market at a global scale abruptly changed the traditional relation between the Territory and the Landscape, based on spatial continuity. The overwhelming mobility of people, information, goods and finances interfered with local conditions and affected the related urban form. If not necessarily designed, the new international strategy was clear in its own ambitions. It multiplied differences and discontinuities within the consolidated territorial framework, by favoring locations characterised by a high level of intermodal accessibility. Since 2007, the global financial crisis resulted in an unpredictable direction to the aforementioned ongoing process. The immediate real estate shrinkage saw multiplied building vacancies and waiting lands. This phenomenon has continued to escalate and offers the opportunity to retroactively think about a completely new urban configuration, where the unconventional use of edge areas can trigger new kind of urbanities and subjectivities. This paper aims to describe the phenomenon, tracing its history and showing its potential, with broad reference to Europe and specific focus on Rotterdam, the Netherlands and Bologna, Italy as case studies.*

Keywords: vacant buildings, waiting lands, temporary use, urban practice, building type

A political definition of the urban form

The Territory is defined by the perennial dynamics internal to any process of civilisation among its driving forces at social, economic and cultural levels (Conzen 1960). The Landscape identifies the output and aesthetic dimension of where these dynamics are experienced. Its historical relation to Territory has always accounted for the inertia to modification of existing natural and built conditions, reciprocally arranged according to different levels of complexity, or "scale", as an implicit limitation to any strategy of change. This implies that the definitions of Territory and Landscape inevitably tend to Idealism to the extent that their actor intentionality is forced to face the original conditions they aim to overcome as an undeniable objective basis for any attempt of corresponding reform (Muratori, 1959). Nonetheless, they are indispensable parameters to understand the transformation of the built environment. Furthermore, the same drivers of change need time to reach a fully developed self-awareness and to start claiming a subsequent leading role within a new phase of the civilisation process.

Under these conditions, urban form therefore implies a collective will, considered as a clear expression of a political intention performed by the abovementioned leading forces, to be translated through the Project of the City as the utmost result of a new territorial vision. This explains how, since its inception, the project was meant to act as an *instrumentum regni* through which it was possible to conceive, project, realise and control a social reality coherent to the power relations performed by all those claiming an active role in the transformation and management of the existing territory. Consequently, any kind of set

of rules related to land subdivision, settlement location and definition of building, just to mention few among all aspects of the anthropic process, was more than a mere technical act, and identified itself with the foundation of the same political order prompted by any phenomenon of civilisation. Vitruvius Pollio (80 B.C-15 BC), commonly considered the Father of western building civilisation, was fully aware of it, and symbolically addressed its treatise on Architecture as the Art of Construction to the young Emperor Augusto, to make the related framework clear and transmissible over the centuries up to the contemporary era (Vitruvius Pollio, 1999 ed.). His statements were particularly effective and incisive in the field of Monuments, but are applicable to any artificial output.

All Public buildings always required a high level of complexity to set a building site, to select, move and prepare on site materials, to coordinate the different implied labour force skills, to prepare one-to-one partial samples and even to build appropriate machineries. Every architect involved in institutional duties was, and still is, first of all, a job manager, without a clear distinction in term of responsibilities from an engineer. The more challenging the task, the more impressive the required ability to control all aspects of it through space and time. This inevitably leads to saying that any Architectural Order embodied within the project reflects a civil order through its physical realisation, according to a sort of *ante litteram* conscious panoptical relation between society and the related material culture. In different terms, one can say that for every public building, for its own implicit complexity, its inception establishes a power relation: through its project principles, through its set of rules for realisation and through its shared use behaviour, it becomes an *instumentum regni*. This capacity increases and consolidates whenever the character of the building is endlessly repeated. The widespread diffusion of the law implicit in any architectural performance, which institutes a sort of social ritual, therefore defines a historical norm that echoes far beyond the specificity of architectural discipline boundaries. If the phenomenon is evident within the production of public buildings, it also manifests whenever the body of knowledge implied by any private building, like a simple house, is repeated so many times that it translates into a shared set of values, contributing to the process of civilisation development. Consequently, the type concept expresses the collective will embodied within the repetition of individual building acts. These share the same order, identifying at each level of complexity of the built environment, i.e. the "scale", the enduring persistence of a political project, being the Project of the City within its Territory. To fully exploit its potential, that required will must run through the subsequent stages of intentionality expression (the Project), physical evidence (the Realisation) and shared use (the Behaviour). The technique itself cannot ever overwhelm the Project because it is instrumental in its deployment and embodiment, and it has to be rooted into the general framework of the social reality.

Urban form change and politics

When the conditions under which the urban form acts as a political device are assumed, together with the crucial role played by the concept of the building type within the related framework, it becomes very interesting to focus on the deep meaning of "urban change". Regardless of the fact that it occurs at the level of the Project, the Realisation and/or the Behaviour, urban changes always reveal a transformation process within the existing social reality and related drivers. The social reality defines an unstable equilibrium among all those forces that claim a specific and distinct role in its inception, establishment and persistence, and one may assume it as conventionally stated within specific historical conditions. However, the power relations established and prompted by any process of civilisation do not have the same effectiveness even within a supposed period of internal societal stability. They manifest differently, according to their proximity to institutional centres, where the effects mostly reverberate. The dialectical relation between central and peripheral urban locations therefore assumes an unexpected value once highlighted by a political perspective: it emphasises the limitless conflict between the leading agents of transformation and the supposed emergence of new ones. This is why the edge condition always plays a crucial role within any subversion of the existing urban and territorial *status quo*. The term "edge", better than any other, expresses the existence of a situation which manifests a weaker degree of control with respect to a centre, independent of any kind of topographical relation.

Within a well established social reality, conventionally assumed as homogeneously distributed, the edge/centre relation expresses a different quality of corresponding social, economic, cultural and political constraints as well as obligations to respect. As a consequence, an edge condition always offers fertile ground to cultivate unexpected forms of demand at all levels. The weaker institutional coercion, the stronger the capacity for experimenting about new possibilities. This basic distinction becomes fundamental to understand the important changes that occurred within the western civilisation process over the last decades. Almost all European countries witnessed, since the second half of the 1970s onward, a major transformation of their own territories due to an overall redistribution of former manufacturing locations, usually within the body of the consolidated urban tissue. The process of change tended to favour new locations, very close to intermodal hubs, as an immediate response by the leading production forces to the increasing widening of the demand/offer market. As a consequence of this relocation phenomenon, major urban centres quickly and increasingly have become porous, offering a wide spectrum of waiting lands and vacant buildings in strategic positions to the real estate market. Impressive refurbishment programs were launched by Paris, London, Barcelona, Amsterdam and Berlin, among the most highly rated urban centres, that systematically made use of master plans to fix the vision of the new growth perspective and called international competitions to develop it on a broader cultural framework. The corresponding diffusion of capital investments by local and state institutions pulled the transformation process, making use of the available territorial labor force. The newly accessible emptiness was almost immediately filled, and assimilated to the existing residential city, coherently to the 19th century bourgeois model, even if differently interpreted according to local constraints and traditions.

A decade later, the overall situation had already changed. Originally fostered by new international manufacturing chains, the industrial relocation process in close proximity to highly congested intermodal junctions was soon followed by retail and service markets. Logistics proved its importance, while systematic use of territorial marketing strategies succeeded to attract private capital to the new urban locations, which aimed at competing with the existing ones in order to multiply business opportunities. Lille soon become the leading example of a new territorial vision, witnessing the progressive rise of urban networks, a new unstable constellation of polarities claiming increasing importance with respect to traditional metropolitan entities (Castells, 1996). These configurations triggered extreme consequences through a silent but pervasive process that started at the very edge of the former stable situation. The multiplication of territorial entities – each of which expressed different power relations and interests – occurred within the same civil framework originally assumed as internally coherent and homogeneous. The related landscape fragmentation, once recognised and mapped, becomes clear evidence of the so-called globalisation phenomenon with its deep political implications (Koolhaas, Boeri, Sanford, Tazi, and Obrist, 2000). From this moment onward, the edge/centre relation was overwhelmed by the local/global one, and traditional politics were threatened by new international driving forces at an unknown level (Bauman, 2000). As a side effect of this phenomenon, urban networks progressively attracted, within their impressive gravitational system, the most charming international metropolis, already characterised by a high level of intermodal accessibility.

Private equity investments carefully selecting locations, coherently positioning themselves to guarantee the most profitable conditions. This repeated strategy of "impatient capitalism" (Merotra, 2011) introduced evident distortions within the edge/centre dialectical relation as it occurred before. This new process of civilisation was not negative and often broke through local power relations established in Europe since the consolidation of the Welfare State, after the Second World War, which was progressively substituted and impoverished by the rise of Bureaucracy (namely the Power of the Office). This was systematically prompted and controlled by political parties, without any care of existing State democratic institutions which were expected to safeguard and interpret, especially in the Mediterranean area. However, the main consequence of the globalisation process was an overall redistribution of forces and related competencies at different scales, where the original reciprocal coherence was lost, although carrying a different inertia to modification. This dilemma, which is well represented by the contemporary strife between European and national institutions – at political, social, economical an even cultural level – is still acting at a deep level and represents a crucial topic to face.

The Denied City as new edge evidence

Within the framework described in the previous section, the 2007 global financial crisis has impacted worldwide and enhanced the consequences of the global/local tension to the extreme. From that moment, any kind of vacancy prompted by the multiplication of new territorial orders within a supposedly well established former social reality becomes a dramatic unresolved *vulnus* in the existing Project of the City and its Territory – its legacy and eventually its right to existence is questioned. In fact, neither private nor public interest could afford the investments required to process any kind of possible transformation, both on a local and/or on a global scale. The Brownfield was not anymore a temporary condition within the ongoing process of urban transformation, regardless from the related driving forces. In fact, the latter, which are of course responsible for having conceived and constructed the "world" we have inhabited and inherited up to now, are not any longer in the condition to perform it.

The almost embarrassing endurance of the vacancy phenomenon simply witnesses that the leading force which acted over the last decade have completely exhausted their commitment to civilisation and cannot make step ahead. Notwithstanding the dramatic evidence of facts, they are simply postponing solutions, or taking time, threatened by the implicit menace of a prolonged inactive interval without proposals. None is taking seriously the possibility that they should "leave space" to new forces to drive the change and to experiment new policies. This radical solution of course would imply two conditions to come into existence: first, the Project of the City "moratorium" and, second, the search for new edge conditions. The former aspect is implicit in the same definition of the Project as the rational result of a collective will. This will implies a self-consciousness, which is expressed by the new driving forces, and is still very far from being self-aware.

Without a new idea of the collective, the Project should be suspended, and not founding social actors to be performed, paradoxically confirming the brilliant provocative solution offered by the Nobel Prize winning Italian dramaturge Luigi Pirandello in his masterpiece, *Six characters in search of an author* (Pirandello, 1921). The latter aspect should cater to increasing vacancies, spread throughout European cities, as the uncontestable evidence of a lost world without any possibility of resurgence. The critical mass of vacancies ultimately defines a forgetful "city within the city". They are not filled as if according to a non-existing project, and can be left available for the unexpected and the unpredictable. They comprise an unrequested urban capacity to make space for experimental practices, involving individuals to free their creativity from social constraints and obligations, to pour it into those "condemned to void" areas, and to simply observe reactions without any specific expectation of durable traces heralding a new beginning. Or, maybe, it would be wise to take advantage of this new condition and survey a new possible blossoming of social reality. This would entail working in the informality which spontaneously spans in between the "not yet" and the "not any more"; the exceeded codification and the potential one. Loosing the challenge offered by the overwhelming urban vacancy implies condemnation to a "Denied city" with its potential inhabitants behaving as if they were its unconscious prisoners.

Some Intellectuals, sharing a compelling adhesion toward a romantic vision of life, applaud this landscape of ruins as the ultimate evidence of Capitalist decay. They plead to preserve it untouched as the working Monument to its incapacity to face contemporary problems and drive the change, and enthusiastically proclaim it to be engulfed by an unplanned gorgeous nature (Clément, 2003). Many planning Technicians, not accepting the idea of the Project as a political *instrumentum regni* and irresolutely claiming for its neutrality and independence from any historical expression of collective will, simply avoid facing the problem. They adduce the impossibility of founding a solution based on the existing set of rules and their legality, as if it was neutral too, to implicitly save the Plan as a sort of imperfectible Monument to a supposed Absolute rationality (Aureli, 2008). But within the social reality nothing occurs without reason or, in other terms, there is no space for any form of Negative Thinking (Cacciari, 1976). The Denied City is not accessible to anyone, not observable by anyone, and not attemptable by anyone. It is already a working reality, the ultimate counter project of the extinct drivers of civilisation which deliberately, by erasing the vacancy existence and memory and softening the debate on it, declare it as "out of our time reach". The implication is no to surrender to the vacancy threat. The acquired privileges are deliberately

defended and not left to others for chance claims. To completely understand the implication of the abovementioned scenario it is helpful to compare two different European case studies which both face the new real appearance.

From paternalism to conservatism: Rotterdam, the Netherlands vs Bologna, Italy

The Dutch policy on vacancy has endured since the 1970s when, in order to counteract illegal occupation of unused or abandoned buildings, the State officially introduced the anti-kraak (i.e. anti-squatting) procedure. To find a solution between the apparently diverging expectations of the owner and the potential occupier, it legalised the temporary use of vacant buildings, waiting to be refurbished without a definite schedule, after a 12 month vacancy. Such occupancy is under obligation to leave it as soon as officially required by the owner for their own unquestionable purpose, simply affording expenses for ordinary maintenance. This compromise, in political terms, fitted in the long social-democratic tradition of Dutch Paternalism, which is a subtle blend of Protestantism, mercantile Pragmatism and humanistic cooperation, which avoids any kind of conflict for the sake and maintenance of social stability. By accepting the deal which guarantees security from undesired illegal occupation and limits any process of additional building decay, the user could temporarily have an interesting space for their own needs at an incredibly favorable rate. The owner could temporarily profit from implicit control. The decision was so successfully applied that it was Constitutional Law until 2010 and it is still used as a standard procedure to fill vacancy gaps. This means that the Dutch were not unprepared in facing the new worldwide crisis when it dramatically affected the local building market. Previous to the crisis, this procedure was intended as a temporary stage within the ordinary building value production cycle, with the implicit role of informally triggering it. Now it is systematically used to face vacancy as a specific way of experimenting with new urban practices, and improving participatory approaches with respect to more exclusive and standardised protocols.

Making use of not yet codified drivers – at social, economic and cultural levels – seems non-threatening to both public institutions and private partners. It is considered as an *en plein air* and very successful laboratory to develop new tendencies that cannot spontaneously spring from well-established procedures, and used during periods of stability, with their own implicit obligations. A politically "guided radicalism" is therefore the Dutch recipe for facing the crisis, where Mauss's social science distinction between the Individual and the Person become instrumental to overcome the economic shortage, once deprived of any political implication (Mauss, 1938). Rotterdam, among the most important urban centres in the Netherlands, shows an incredible dynamism that counteracts the vacancy phenomenon. The local Municipality, immediately after the crisis outbreak, started mapping the new reality, recognising the impossibility of proceeding further with the great re-densification program. This program was officially launched at the beginning of 2000 within the city centre to improve tax income, and granted by astonishing master plans negotiated during times of abundance between the private partners and the public authorities. As an additional result, it accepted the advisorship by a local well known architect, Henk Hartzema, to record vacancies on a systematic basis (Fig.1) and integrated the municipality dense database with deep on-site analysis, to size and investigate the phenomenon entity (Hartzena, 2012). Afterward, it officially launched a website called *Plug Rotterdam* (http://www.plugrotterdam.nl), under the auspice of AIR (Architecture International Rotterdam), where the use proposals for any specific site and the ongoing process could be judged. The website also publically marked their popularity and shared a bottom-up vision of the city within an enduring period of standstill.

The Italian situation seems to be completely different. Occupation of unused building started at the very end of the 1960s as a radical declaration, not necessarily political, against building speculation, which resulted in empty spaces within the most crowded central locations, to artificially increase real estate pressures on new peripheral areas in order to transform them. Due to the general lack of independence of Parties from local political conveniences, it was impossible to guarantee a limit in the legality of the occupation in favor of the owners, who were forced to address endless and often unsuccessful protests to the National Court. The situation matured as a widespread distrust about the process. Under these conditions, it has never been possible to face the matter at an institutional level, except in very specific

situations. The Milan Metropolitan area is one of these. In recent times, the Municipality of Sesto San Giovanni, which owns the ex Officine Falk steelwork area, an important brownfield, which is waiting for a major transformation after the financial crisis blocked Renzo Piano Building Workshop's very ambitious high rise proposal. A public competition was launched to find temporary occupiers involved in the broad field of creativity. Under a contract of three years at no rent, they are now obliged to offer monthly public facilities to the local community. These facilities deal with their own business body of knowledge through the legal form of a supposedly convenient barter for both the involved parties. However, nothing has ever been officially offered to private owners facing increasing vacancies through a systematic legalised framework.

Figure 1. *Klein and Fijn Rotterdam. Map of the city vacancies within the bombardment fracture line*
Source: Studio HARTZEMA copyright

The City of Bologna, over the last decade, has been confirmed as an extraordinarily potent Laboratory of social participation and related practices. It appeared for the first time during the 1960s under a unique combination of well-prepared local technicians, a diffused sense of political participation via the

administrative reform of Quarters, and a subtle equilibrium between social welfare and economic solidarism. Under the auspices of both the Communist and Christian Democrat Parties, the well known Program for the Historical Centre Restoration was launched to re-inhabit it after years of abandonment and decay according to a shared political vision of architecture (Cervellati, Scannavini, and De Angelis, 1977). The so called "Golden Age" of Bologna's urbanism, internationally well known, was unsuccessful because it ultimately failed to guarantee the old occupants movement back to their homes once transformed coherently and to the quality standard fixed parameters. However, it had indisputably re-established the civil capacity of architecture to fully activate society after a period of episodic uncertainties. More recently, the city had a new opportunity to reaffirm its legacy, but local authorities are not reacting as they should. The city hosts an important real estate compendium belonging to the State, whose components are mostly scattered in a profitable position within and around the edge of the historical centre (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. *Bologna North West Sector vacancy map*
Source: Studio Performa A+U copyright

It is strategic and highly qualified for its intrinsic monumental value that the city was selected in 2007 by the Italian Ministry of Economics to launch the first national *Piano Unitario di Valorizzazione* (Unitary Valorisation Plan), to activate public-private partnership for its improvements and use. The overlaps with the financial crisis almost immediately revealed the plan was based on the old principles, set of rules and expected behaviours. Notwithstanding the crude evidence of reality, local authorities insisted on following its protocol. Meanwhile, the overall amount of urban vacancies was incremented because all the brownfield introduced within Bologna's Structural Plan – mainly old manufacturing areas and freight

terminals – where not in any condition to be transformed to address the changing conditions already discussed (Fig. 3). Other vacancies arrived, and still improve, due to the current building private market's dramatic asphyxia.

Figure 3. *Ravone Area. Dismissed freight terminal. Survey of the existing vacancies and waiting lands*
Source: Studio Performa A+U copyright

As an immediate consequence of this increasing phenomenon, the local authority is today facing a building recession without precedents, where edge conditions multiply to trigger a unique possibility for the near future. But this high potential cannot be tackled within the existing procedure and protocol framework because the latter has been built according to a society which does not exist anymore, and the unstoppable diffusion of vacancies constitutes its doubtful continuation. To exit this paradoxical situation it is necessary to suspend the Plan – or its principles, its set of rules and its behaviours – at least within the brand new Vacant City. This would imply leaving a space and making room for a season of experimentation within a building heritage which often presents a surprising intrinsic quality (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). But this is not going to happen. To confirm suspicious interpretations, the matter of vacancy has been addressed by the Department of Culture and its Alderman, depriving the Department of Urbanism its institutional authority and its capacity to adopt it as a new vehicle of civilisation. The aim is even more evident: to soften the public discussion on it and weaken it. Making the issue of vacancy a mere cultural aspect of the existing reality in fact equals not recognising that it is still hidden evidence of a new reality which is being recognised at an institutional level for its intrinsic political, social, economic and cultural potential. This inevitably leads to an additional aspect: by implicitly supporting the policy of not acting in the direction of the Vacant City, the local municipality is explicitly fostering a new *tabula rasa* attitude, which is consolidating the Denied City phenomenon. This favours those who are interested in developing greenfield areas, because they have been heavily granted by the local credit system. Business and bank companies, coming into crisis too, are claiming back their financial resource loan and not observing any investment revenue from them. It is a surrealistic chess play between a non-existent leader, the local authority, and a non-existent troop, the local traditional developers and their supporting forces.

Figure 4. *(L) Ravone Area. Vacant building available for temporary uses*
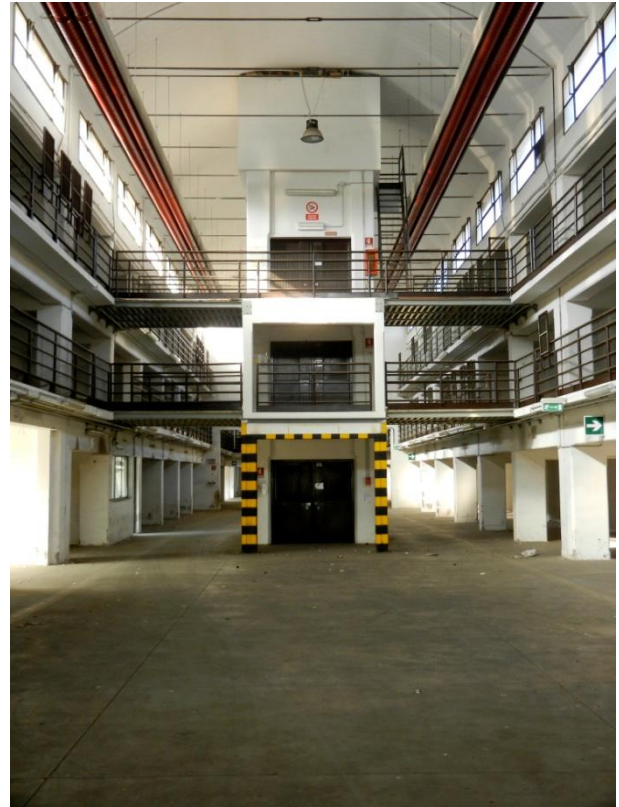*Source: Studio Performa A+U copyright*

Figure 5. *(R) Ravone Area. Dismissed freight terminal. Vacant building available for temporary uses*
Source: Studio Performa A+U copyright

Conclusion

The Denied City is the ultimate result of the edge condition when the latter is not strategically recognised as the most powerful chance any society has in order to subvert a previously existing and well established civic order. When it is no longer capable of driving change, room is left for the other.

This statement confirms that the urban form is not simply a representation of a civilisation process, but its preliminary and necessary condition, i.e. its legitimising infrastructure. The principles, set of rules and rituals, upon which its inception, realisation and use are based, are instrumental to the development of its political, social, economic and cultural contents. Referring to the original Roman terms, which still convey their timeless significance, the *Urbs*, i.e. the physical structure of the city, brings the *Civitas*, i.e. its civic institutions, to come into existence, and not vice versa. The building type expresses the collective project – or the system of values and expectations shared by all the forces claiming a role within a process of civilisation – embodied by any built aspect of society through the different plan tool degree application. To define this project a high level of stability is required. This is why the contemporary lacks it and it fails to achieve its basic requirement condition, i.e. the self-recognition of its drivers of change. However, stability always nurtures itself through that informality and spontaneity to express a state of critical awareness, which solely flourishes through the unexpected. Consequently, to focus on the survival of the edge condition, where the new hides itself, brings contemporary focus on the Denied City (so called because it is not accessible to anyone), where the struggle between the old world, which is desperately aiming at its survival, and the new one, which is claiming its coming into existence, urgently flourishes. Ultimately, within the dialectic between established and informal, codified and latent, critical and unconscious, urban form always performs its political role, and prompts the crucial function of Urban Morphology and Building Typology, i.e. the study of it and its project, to be recognised as a fundamental interdisciplinary field to understand the change.

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