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## Past and present "urban voids" as resources for the future. The case-study of Catania

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# PAST AND PRESENT “URBAN VOIDS” AS RESOURCES FOR THE FUTURE. THE CASE-STUDY OF CATANIA<sup>1</sup>

Paper presented at the  
42<sup>nd</sup> Congress of the European Regional Science Association  
Dortmund, August 27<sup>th</sup> - 31<sup>th</sup>, 2002

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## ABSTRACT

Since the end of the 1960s, the landscapes of major cities have been more and more characterized by the presence of *urban voids*. Today these voids, which are often heterogeneous in their manifestation, dominate the discussions about the transformation and the future of urban areas. The reclaiming and re-use of derelict sites and cultural heritage has the duty to assure for the next generation the knowledge of the cultural values of the past. In this paper we will focus our attention on a re-used cultural heritage: the Multifunctional Centre of Catania (Sicily, Objective 1 region). Thanks to the Urban Programme this *urban void* - abandoned for decades and deteriorated - was recovered and is now a library and lecture rooms complex of the University of Catania.

We will discuss the complex structural actions realized inside this building, which contains the memory of the values and culture of the harbour area of Catania, and its new functional aspects.

## 1. URBAN EMPTY SPACES

The concept of *reclamation* appears in the international, political and cultural debate at the end of sixties and imposed itself during the following decade. Indeed, in the seventies, there is a shift from a merely quantitative urban growth philosophy (which appeared during the second world war and was predominant over a period of twenty years), to a qualitative philosophy based on the transformation of the existent and its reuse<sup>2</sup> (Scaramella and Pollice, 2001, p.464). Up to that moment, the most important thing was to build, since it represented not only the drive behind the economical and occupational development, but it was also the core of strong speculative interests (Dematteis, 1978, p.191).

Unauthorized building, congestion, the prevailing of personal interests over public ones have damaged the quality of town centres and prevented their development. This wild urbanization caused a deep change in the aspect of towns, soon becoming a worrying event. That's why public administrations and people in general started a new approach to environmental problems and the quality of life.

During those years, following the post-industrial *issue*, the interest in *industrial archaeology* rose, as well as the interest in the reclaiming and reusing of the several abandoned buildings (Vitale, 2001, p.14).

In such a new context, the reclaiming of abandoned areas represents not only an alternative to the *blind* expansion of towns, but also the solution to several problems, such as housing problems and the deterioration of the historical and cultural heritage (Rivolin Yoccoz, 1994, p.169; Ruggiero, 1999, p.130).

This “young” philosophy of reclaiming has already undergone a remarkable change; there has been a shift from a static approach, based on the concept of historical memory, to a dynamic one, based on the adjusting of the historical heritage to the continual change of the urban landscape. Today, the words reclamation, re-conversion, reuse, renovation, re-qualification.....are synonyms of highly strategic interventions in the context of policy concerning the territory (Rodriguez Malta, 2001, p.321).

The ceasing of economical activities and, in general, the abandonment of urban spaces, is a phenomenon regarding several European towns. During the last thirty years, the urban landscape of these towns has been marked by more or less consistent empty areas, which once belonged to the suburbs, but have now become central<sup>3</sup> (Indovina, 1997, p.5).

Recently, many European towns have implemented reclaiming policies. They are

based on town planning schemes which aim at strengthening the economical and social basis of the towns. Among them, we can mention Barcelona, Genoa, Seville, Lisbon, which have taken advantage of important international celebrations, but also Bilbao, Glasgow, Marseille, Naples and others, which have implemented important policies of urban, social and cultural re-qualification<sup>4</sup> (Rodriguez Malta, 2001, p.322-323).

It is not easy to define the concept of *urban voids*. First of all, we can include those urban areas which are now empty but were once built-up: such areas are now (illegally) used as parking areas, seasonal amusement parks or, worse, dump. The concept of urban empty space also includes those industrialized areas which are now abandoned. These areas represent the most tangible aspect of urban decay for the citizens. They can't be easily used unless they are first reclaimed and then rebuilt and re-qualified. Lastly, we can include those areas occupied by decaying buildings which should be either demolished or reclaimed (Miani, 2001, p.69).

Apart from the bankrupts and the closures of industrial plants, urban empty spaces also result from the plants' delocalisation or the poor use of the obsolete ones; in fact, industrial plants, during their life are usually moved to the outskirts or to other towns, so as to facilitate their development or reorganization (Talia, 1990, p.155; Amato, 1994, pp.74-76). The industrial branches mostly involved in this kind of process are metallurgy, shipbuilding, steel and iron industry. They have played a major role during the first stages of the industrial boom after the II World War and have later undergone complex processes of reorganization as far as their production and policy of employment were concerned.

The plants delocalization (especially the medium and big ones') and the following reclamation and re-use of the vacant sites take a very long time; indeed, the plants delocalization and the re-use of the vacant sites involve many operators and local authorities (Region, Province, Municipality, *Soprintendenze*<sup>5</sup>, Trade Unions and so on) which make the decisional process slow and complex (Kloot *et al.*, 2000; Durrschmidt, 2001).

Often, strong conflicts of interest among these different subjects arise: the industry demands financial support for the plants delocalization; the Trade Unions defend workers to keep employment high; the citizens and local authorities claim for the reclamation and re-qualification of the vacant sites. Other contrasts may arise when trying to define the new functions of these areas.

Paradoxically, the decay of these areas can represent, nowadays, an opportunity

for improvement in the quality of life of the town. On the one side, indeed, vacant sites can be related to hard life conditions and risks for the citizens, and decay, which in a long term perspective may result in widespread hardships, services impoverishment and the consequent demographical and occupational decline; on the other side, such areas must be considered as real *environment resources* which can start a process of re-qualification of the urban territory. They can also be seen as something of value to preserve and hand down to future generations, after a process of reclamation aiming at keeping their identity unaltered (Arca Petrucci and Dansero, 1998, p. 278).

The decay must be considered as an essential resource, in a perspective of multi-functional reclaiming of the town, which is respectful of the socio-historical identity of certain areas (Marchetti and Nobili, 1988, p.581).

The extension of urban empty spaces is not often relevant for the reclaiming interventions; in fact, some small or medium vacant sites can be made into important areas, which is the case of the so-called *intensive action* areas (Campos Venuti, 1986, p.34). Urban empty spaces, therefore, can be considered as highly profitable, as they attract investments in building and reclaiming, which results in an economical growth even of the surroundings (Indovina, 1997, p.5).

The re-use of urban empty spaces, the creation of highly technological activities, the setting up of high-tech service industries, are to be seen as factors contrasting urban decay, especially if they occur synergically. Urban empty spaces offer opportunity to develop several projects concerning the protection of the environment and become a useful resource in order to satisfy the need for space. Therefore, urban decay is paradoxically referred to as a source of opportunity for the next generation (Lynch, 1992).

## 2. THE POLICY OF URBAN EMPTY SPACES RECLAIMING IN CATANIA

A modern town doesn't need to expand, it rather needs to improve its quality of life and to fill its empty spaces. Catania has already started the process of urban re-qualification, thanks to local policies which have different goals. The process aims at giving the town a new aspect and a more relevant role in the national context.

The new perspective of this programme consists in the reclaiming and the re-qualification of the town and its territory.

The research of a new urban layout, as a necessary action in order to improve the

quality of life, has led to a new concept of town. The idea of undifferentiated development, which has so far resulted in chaotic growth of the town, has been replaced by the awareness of the development limits and the strategical role played by culture, identity and history. This can be achieved as long as all the resources are used, the vacant sites and the decaying heritage are reclaimed, and the planning concerns the metropolitan area as a whole.

Starting from the existent urban layout, the re-qualification process aims not only at redefining it and improving its liveability, but also at creating new opportunities of development. In other words, this process should improve the quality, strengthen the identity and revive the economy of the town.

The process relies on the commitment of public authorities, the efficiency of the town-planning scheme, the Territorial Agreements, and the funds of the EC Urban Programme, but also on the synergic co-operation of private and public sectors.<sup>6</sup>

## **2.1 The *Urban Programme***

Urban reclaiming must be accompanied by the socio-economical re-qualification of the town. In this respect, the Urban Programme gives the essential guidelines. This is, indeed, an integrated programme, characterised by the synergic use of different urban re-qualification instruments. It focuses not only on the structural reclaiming of the town, but also on its social re-qualification, through interventions which aim at helping people who live in poverty and squalor, children, young people, old people, and those immigrants who live in very decaying parts of the town centre<sup>7</sup> (Dato, 1990, pp.92-96; Cirelli, 1997).

The Urban Programme aims at achieving a socio-cultural reclamation through a series of interventions which range from support to the crafts to the re-use of several buildings. It also pursues the development of the educational system and technological innovation, in synergy with the University, the socio-cultural integration of immigrants, the reclamation of the architectonic heritage (in order to make it usable), the public parks and gardens, accomodation and recreation facilities.

All these heterogeneous interventions have in common the ambitious goal of providing a new aspect to an area of Catania which is by far the most needy<sup>8</sup> (Cirelli, 2001, pp.567-583).

The town has also started an Integrated Intervention Programme which aims at the environment and houses reclamation of southern S. Cristoforo area. Such programme,

synergetically integrated to the Urban Programme, will be partly financed with funds of the Sicilian Region. Its main objective is the complete re-qualification of the area through the creation of housing and service facilities, in order to improve the quality of life (SDA Bocconi, 1998).

The European Community has been contributing to carrying out urban programmes (both on regional and national basis) for years. With its Framework Programmes, it has given support to innovative actions, such as pilot projects and cooperation networks (Cirelli, 2001).

In order to enlarge and better coordinate the interventions during the period 1994-1999, on 15<sup>th</sup> of June, 1994, the European Commission decided to launch a Community Programme (or Pic) concerning urban areas, which was later called Urban.

Such programme provides for a financial support, through the granting of loans, technical support in favour of those measures and regions included in the projects of the member countries. These programmes are previously approved by the same Commission<sup>9</sup> (Delbos, 1994, p.25; Laino, 1999, p.70).

116 European towns, 16 of which are Italian (Figure 1), have been involved in the programme<sup>10</sup>. The Urban Programme aims at providing solutions to the serious social problems of many urban quarters, by stimulating measures to achieve socio-economical development, encouraging the renewal of plants and infrastructures, and improving the environment (Trono, 1996, p.133).



**Figure 1: The Urban Programme in Italy**

The project deals with the towns problems in an integrated way, combining the

development of economy with the improvement of the infrastructures and the environment; matching training with the different measures of the programme and with the social services.

The programme, however, is based on the assumption that it is not possible to face the complex problems of contemporary society in an exhaustive way. Therefore, it is only a part of a wider project and its specific purpose is to improve the living conditions of towns inhabitants, especially those living in the poorest and most decaying quarters.

This is the reason why the Urban Programme aims at helping the local authorities in their efforts to provide the necessary services to the citizens, encourage economy, make people more confident, and include in the socio-economical life all those people that may be marginalized.

The integrated approach of the Urban Programme implies that the socio-economical and environmental problems of decaying areas are faced globally. The measures which may receive the necessary funds concern the development of economy, the social integration, and the protection of the environment. These measures are based on the co-operation of local bodies. The priority is, of course, given to those innovative and integrated programmes aiming at promoting employment. For this purpose, every member Country has to submit a synthetic list of projects, in co-operation with local authorities and other bodies that may be interested (partnership).<sup>11</sup>

<b>Measures and Steps</b>	<b>Total cost in MECUs</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Measure I: New businesses</b>	4.001	16.1
- Integrated services for small and medium industries and crafts		
<b>Measure II: Training, Employment and Social Services</b>	5.000	20.2
- Local Mission for Employment – Counselling Centres		
- Social and Educational Activities for the Youth		
- Recreational Centres for Young People		
- Multiethnic Service Centre		
<b>Measure III: Infrastructures and Environment</b>	13.996	56.5
- Reclamation of buildings and public spaces which are meant to become premises for the services included in the project		
- Mobility		
<b>Measure IV: Support to local authorities</b>	1.311	5.3
- Decentralisation		
<b>Measure V: Implementation and spread of the results</b>	0.460	1.9
- Implementation		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>24.768</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 1: measures of procedure no. 11 and related costs in MECUs. Source: Municipality of Catania**



Many interventions have already been carried out in Catania, and others are being carried out or completed. The cultural heritage involved in the reclaiming is mainly located in the I District, that is the old town centre of Catania.<sup>12</sup>

## **2.2 The role of the University**

In these years, the University has been playing a more and more important role in the national political decisions; it can be considered as a real political subject which, on a local basis, takes part in urban re-qualification policies; its structures are becoming more and more articulated and complex (de-localisation of some faculties, creation of new courses, partnership with local and national private firms, stages...); it is also becoming more and more evident with its strong presence inside the town.

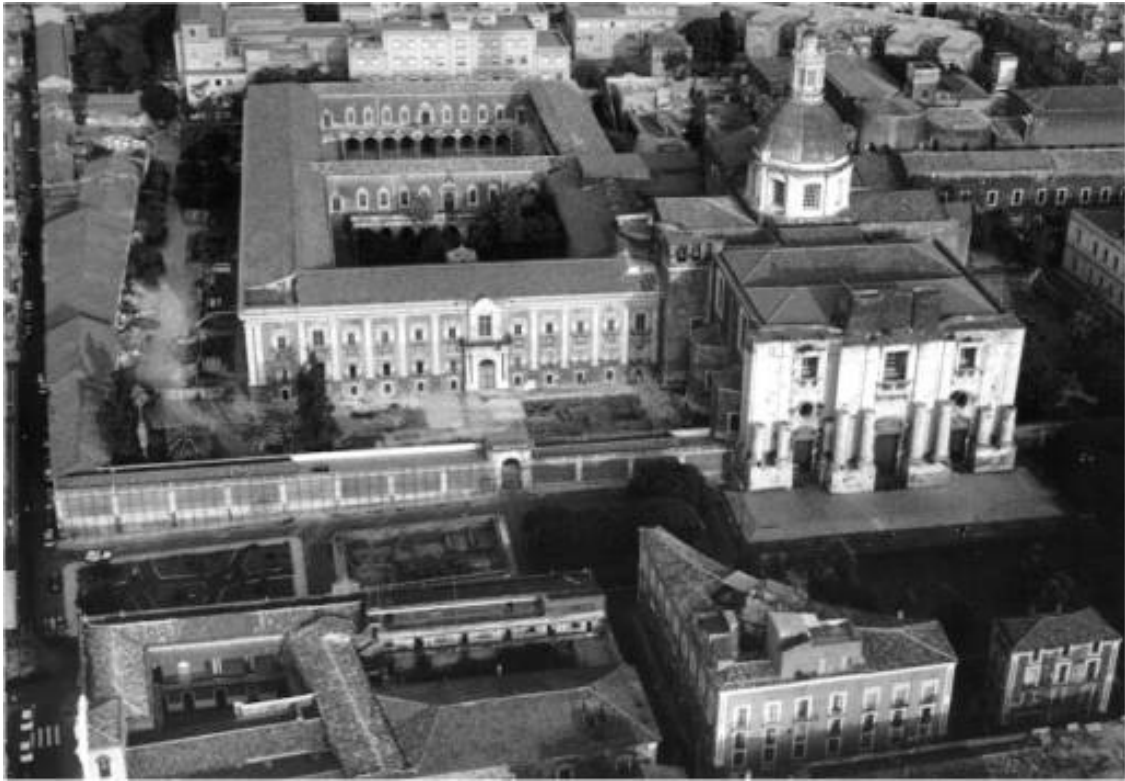
Employing the cultural heritage as University premises is not the result of a casual decision, since the importance of this Institution confers prestige to the historical place itself. There are indeed many known benefits deriving from this use: an increase in the place rent, better safeguard, creation of new businesses in the surroundings and, in the medium and long term, a higher educational level in the area. Therefore, the reclaiming is not limited to the cultural and architectonic heritage only, but it also involves the whole area (Indovina, 1997-98, pp.104-105; Savino, 1997-98, pp.7-9). Through the de-localisation of some of its faculties, the University is trying to obtain new consensus, more students and new spaces. The University is indeed a more and more qualifying element for the territory.

Even the University of Catania plays a fundamental role in the reclamation process. In fact, it benefits from important interventions aiming at reclaiming some of its historical buildings (the former Benedictine Monastery, the building situated in Via Cardinale Dusmet, and the former Purità Convent, in Via Santa Maddalena). Moreover, the University is bound for a decade to assign some of its premises to specific services (included in the Urban programme), which are typical of its high rank function, such as vocational training and social assistance.<sup>13</sup>

## **2.3 The Monastery: from *Cult* to *Culture***

In the context of the reclamation programme for the vacant sites of Catania old town centre, the interventions concerning the Benedictine Monastery of San Nicolò l'Arena (Photo 1) are worth mentioning. The present building, which is the result of different styles stratification, has its foundations on the remains of a Roman villa,

recently discovered.<sup>14</sup>



**Photo 1: The Benedictine Monastery. Source: Giuseppe Leone**

The monastic complex was built on the Monte Vergine and Cipriana hills, next to the poorest part of the medieval town, where once the temple of Venus and the Nymphaeum were. With its 100,000 square metres it was second only to Mafra monastery in Portugal. Its history, which extends over more than six centuries, follows the town's ups and downs. The grand building, started in 1558, was opened in 1578.

The building was designed by the Benedictine Father Valeriano De Franchis from Catania and the works were supervised by the engineer Bartolomeo Guascone. It was completed in February 1578, though not well-finished in its details, it included the church (probably built on the area which is today occupied by the apse and the sacristy) and the monastery. The square building included, all around the cloister, also not well-finished, the dormitories which were grouped as follows: fifty rooms for the monks, ten for the novices, twenty rooms, along to corridors, for the use of visiting guests and the infirmary; there were also workshops, a library in the north wing of the building and, lastly, a garden with orange and cider trees destined to silence and meditation.

During the following years, the different abbots continued to embellish the place but when the magnificent work was about to be accomplished, the tremendous eruption of 1669 took place. The lava reached the building, surrounded it and swallowed the

external gardens, the stalls, the cellars and the church. Soon after the beginning of the works of reconstruction in 1687, another catastrophic event, the violent earthquake of 11<sup>th</sup> January, 1693, forced the monks to stop again. In 1702, the few surviving monks stubbornly started the reconstruction in the area called *Le Verginelle*. New lands were also bought to build that grand series of buildings which would be later considered as one of the wonders of Europe (Gaudioso, 1930, pp.35-41).

The reconstruction of the monastery is part of that huge economical and financial programme which led to the reconstruction of the whole town. Among the religious order involved, the Benedictines stand out for their initiative and availability of capital.

Like many other religious people, however, they didn't always follow the town-planning scheme, since they rebuilt their buildings not only on their old properties, but even on fortifications. The fact that the building was reconstructed on the same site, in the western part of the old town (traditionally the poorest area) made it an *oasis in the desert*. Indeed, while the eastern part of town was conceived and reconstructed as a modern town, the western part, in particular the *Lumacari* quarters, *Piazza Machiavelli*, *Vicolo Maura*, maintained the same road network of the medieval town, which is still visible (Dato, 1983, pp.23-33). The urban renewal programme devised by Sebastiano Ittar, in the second part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century for the area in front of the monastery didn't improve the general situation. As a matter of fact, the creation of the present Piazza Dante, through the demolition of the small houses situated in front the church and the convent, and the construction of a series of symmetric buildings, arranged in form of exhedra, led to a remarkable architectonic achievement. However, as the programme didn't solve the socio-economic problems, the people who lived in the small houses occupied a vast area to the north and south of the building, thus forming the two quarters called *Antico Corso* and *Lumacari*, which still represent a problem for the socio-economical reclamation of the town (Boscarino, 1976, pp.129-130).

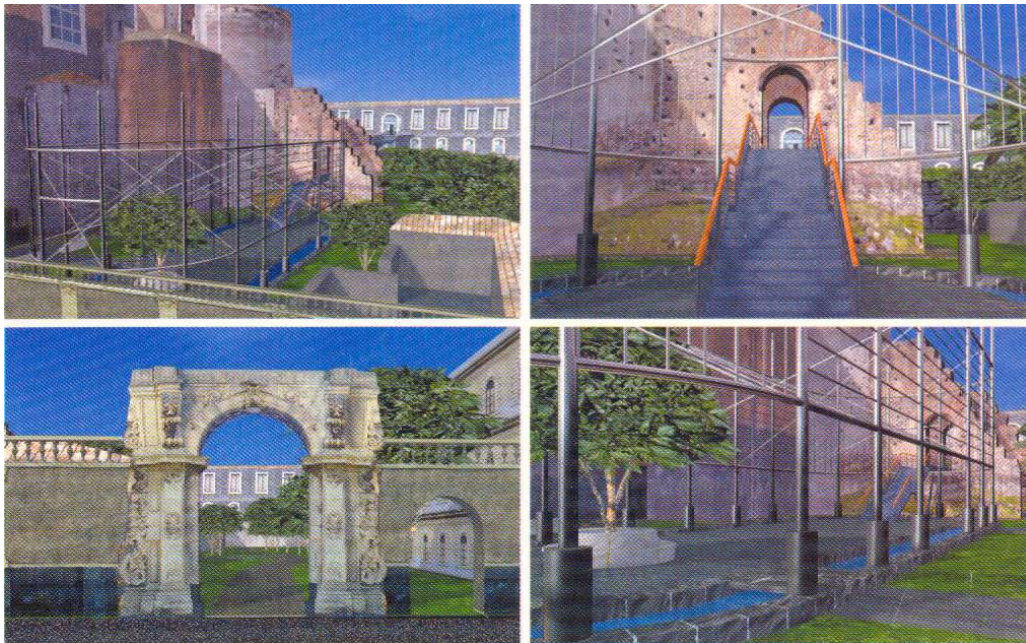
Some great artists, like Alonzo Di Benedetto, Tommaso Amato, Carmelo Battaglia Santangelo and Giovan Battista Vaccarini took part in the design and building of the monastery. In particular, Vaccarini is thought to have designed the big isolated building in the eastern area, including the refectory, the library and the museum. In spite of the efforts, this building remained unfinished not because of lack of money but because of a new attitude of the monks who slowly became more involved in good works rather than the ostentation of temporal powers (Colonna, 1994, pp.19-22).

The enormous columns of the imposing structure of the church (whose internal

plan reminds of St. Peter's basilica and is unequalled in Sicily) are a clear sign of a change in the aesthetic values and, in particular, of the scepticism invading Europe at the end of the century. The columns also suggest the slow change in the spiritual values and the slow disappearing of faith even in those few monks left, who are reported to be lazy, corrupted and lascivious (Byron).

The last Abbot, G.B. Dusmet (1862), a simple but very charismatic man, tried to improve the reputation of the monastery, through a series of good works, but the historical events put an end to his activity (Gaudio, 1930, p.46-47).

In 1977, after decades of total neglect (during which the monastery was first turned into barracks and hospital and then into a school, causing serious damage to all its artistic works) the building was given to the University of Catania and became the premises of the Humanities. This faculty started a restoration programme, which is still in progress, based on the project of the architect Giancarlo De Carlo. The programme aims not only at reclaiming the complex, but also at giving it an important role in the cultural life of the town and the surrounding urban context (Photo 2).



**Photo 2: Gardens in Via Biblioteca. Source: Investiacatania**

In particular, all the rooms, including the *Abbot rooms*, have been appropriately adapted and are today occupied by the various departments and offices of the Faculty. The large refectory, a room of imposing dimensions, is now used as Great Hall.

A wing of the Monastery is occupied by the joined Libraries called *Civica* and *Ursino Recupero*, one of the town richest and most important cultural institutions

(Giarrizzo, 1990, pp.103-105).<sup>15</sup>

The parts of the building which have already been restored and re-opened, can be visited unless they are being used for lessons. The citizens can therefore admire the magnificence and grandeur of the place. Once the site of a slightly profane temple, the area is now occupied by one of the highest expressions of Catania precious culture.

Only the church, which was given to a small group of Benedictines in 1989 and restored, still has its original function. Though, on particular occasions, it is used as an auditorium for concerts of classical and symphonic music, being suitable to this particular use both for its width and for its acoustics. The fact that it has become a generator of *Culture*, still remaining a work of art which can be enjoyed by tourists, has increased the value of the complex. That's why its reclamation, more than all the other cases, can represent a model to export.

#### **2.4 The Multi-functional Centre**

In May 1998, in its effort to improve its own premises, the University started a restoration programme in order to reclaim an old decaying building situated in the harbour area of Catania, in Via Cardinale Dusmet (Photo 3). The programme aimed at turning the building into the library and language laboratory of the Faculty of Political Science. The works were completed in November 2000.



**Photo 3: the Multifunctional Centre**



The result represents an opportunity of development and economical renewal for the town. It is also remarkable because the reclaimed building, which was an abandoned factory, is situated in a particular area, i.e. an old quarter of Catania called *Civita*, which is, like many harbour areas of other towns, poor and decaying (Ruggiero, 1999, pp.131-132).

Such area, at the end of the XIX century, was described as a chaotic gathering of modest little houses with one, two or three floors, badly leaning against each other, which make up the quarter called *Civita*, well-known for its poor living conditions (Gentile Cusa 1888, in Vittorio, 1994, p.243).

The reclamation project was co-financed by the European Community (European Social Fund and European Fund for Regional Development) and is included in the Community Programme called Urban (Measure III: Infrastructures and Environment).

The date of the building is uncertain, but it is usually believed to date back to the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX.<sup>16</sup>

In the past, the building was in such a decaying state that it was not possible to use it in any way. In an attempt to reclaim all the architectonic, environmental and cultural heritage of the town, local authorities realized that “what remains unused will be lost”. So they decided that the old heritage should be given a new function.

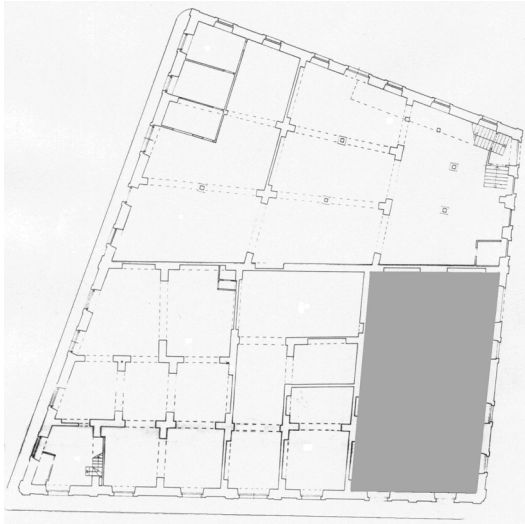
Before being completely abandoned, the building (once a storehouse) was used for different purposes. During the months immediately preceding the restoration works, some clothes and personal objects were found inside the building, which made people think that it had been used as a dormitory and temporary shelter by immigrants and homeless. Moreover, another part had been turned into a joiner’s shop.

The building<sup>17</sup>, though decaying, still showed an architectonic value, thanks to its richly decorated façade made of lava stone and mortar, according to Catania building tradition during the XIX century. But inside it was in utter decay and squalor. The roof was completely destroyed, the internal walls were crumbling, the windows and doors deteriorated, the sanitary fittings, plumbing, waterworks and electric installation were inexistent.

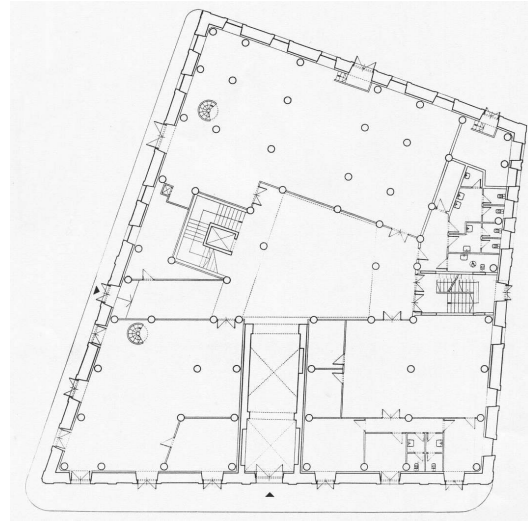
Rather than completely demolish the structure to build a new one, it was decided, after a deep analysis of costs and benefits, to reclaim it. Indeed, this was believed to be the most sensible thing to do.

The project, made by the engineer Salvatore Boscarino, provided that all the crumbling internal structures, from the roof to the ground floor, were demolished, apart

from what could be saved. In particular, the scrapers saved the four external façades (Figure 2a and 2b), a part of the roof and the main entrance corridor. It is this corridor that nowadays links the ancient external part of the building with the modern internal one.



**Figure 2a: first level before intervention**



**Figure 2b: after intervention**

Inside the building, a delicate and difficult work of restructuring and refunctionalizing was carried out, in order to create suitable structures for the new use.

The new carrying structure of the building is made up of imposing architectonic elements, sixty-four great pillars and metal girders which are appropriately covered with fireproof paint. Today the building consists of a ground floor, the so-called *first level*, a mezzanine with a balcony, and a first floor with a balcony too, called *second level*.

Moreover, considering the future use of the structure as University premises, a large corridor-gallery has been carried out in the centre of the building, all along the walls. The gallery has been thought to become a meeting point for the students. Such solution reflects a recent trend of all Universities, especially at the Humanities, which create gathering areas for the students. In order to provide such corridor-gallery with an adequate lighting and airing during the day, a large window was opened on the roof. It has the shape of a pyramid and a metal structure (Photo 4), but it's not visible from the outside, according to a correct urban reclamation. The large central space also functions as a linking area between the first and the second level, thanks to the two balconies running all along the four walls.



**Photo 4: the new roof, invisible from the outside**

The building was also provided with very good facilities, such as an adequate air conditioning system; the building was also set for the most modern telematic and satellite connections. Moreover, particular attention was paid to acoustic insulation of the two levels and the different rooms, to allow an optimal use of the language laboratories.

The fact that the external walls were not demolished made it possible to keep the original architectonic structure, the aesthetic impact of this building and its historical value.

The works were finished nearly two years ago. Since then, structure, once decaying and crumbling, is frequented by hundreds of students every day. Besides, this peculiar kind of users has induced the development of many economic activities in the surrounding area, such as stationer's shops, photocopy shops...and it also has led to an increase in the rents.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

What has been achieved so far should be only a starting point, since the reclaiming process should not involve a single building but the area and the whole town as well. Indeed, the reclamation and re-use of some vacant sites of the town was a remarkable achievement for the town. However, the process will not be completed unless it also includes the expected positive results of the Urban Programme.

The reclaiming interventions, we described, both those preceding the Urban programme (such the former sulphur refinery area which was turned into the exhibition centre *Le Ciminiere*) and those included in the programme, will be useless if they don't



induce a process of socio-economic and cultural development. This can be achieved only through all the programme's measures accomplishment. In other words, a concrete support should be given to the businesses and crafts which are present in the reclaimed areas. Not only should the existent activities and new initiatives be encouraged but even a new kind of policy should be implemented in order to plan in advance all economic activities, and to develop education and technology innovations, synergically with the University. In fact, the University, as we have already said, plays an important role in all requalification process. Moreover, some projects are needed for the cultural and social integration of immigrants who nowadays represent a relevant part of the population.

We should avoid, therefore, that the re-qualification process causes new social and economic conflicts, like it did in many other towns. Indeed, the return of the richest social classes in the old town centre could cause the present inhabitants to move away, consequently resulting in social upset (Smith and Williams, 1986; Martinotti, 1993; Butler, 1997; Oatley, 1998; Trono, 1998, p.130; Emmanuel, 1999, pp.172-178).<sup>18</sup>

During the last years, a lot of pubs, cultural centres and so on, have opened in the old town centre. Moreover, all those people who had in the past decided to move to the new quarters, are now slowly returning to the centre. This is a strong signal of a socio-cultural change of the old town centre which has become again the living heart of Catania.

We can state that the town possesses a natural vocation to change. Its urban *milieu* is the result of the town long and troubled history, the peculiarity of the natural environment, the rich architectonic and historical heritage, and a lively cultural and economic tradition. These elements together with coherent and co-ordinated requalification programmes can help the town change its aspect, also through the re-use of its several vacant sites. Moreover they could represent a starting point to improve the town living conditions and to encourage the town to implement new programmes. These programmes, like in other European towns, will give back to Catania its identity and will result in new opportunities for the lasting economic sustainable-development.

## NOTES

1. While the paper is the result of common reflections, Cirelli has written sections 1, 2 and 2.1, Porto 2.2 and 2.3, Mercatanti 2.4 and 3.
2. The law no. 765 of 1967 for the first time deals with the reclaiming of the historical town centres and modifies the previous town planning legislation tracing back to 1942. In 1978, thanks to the law no. 457, the debate on the reclaiming of the housing heritage started and the so-called Reclaiming Schemes (Art.28). These are town planning instruments concerning the reuse of public and private houses.
3. It is the case of Catania exhibition and cultural centre *Le Ciminiere*.
4. In Italy, which is not characterized by an excessive verticalization of the spaces, reclaiming and re-using are a must (Leone, 2001, p.4).
5. *Soprintendenze* are peripheral institutions responsible for culture and heritage. In Sicily there are nine *Soprintendenze*, one for every province in the region.
6. The EC *partnership* programmes are becoming more and more widespread. The word has many possible interpretations. That's why this programme includes different forms of agreement: the Territorial Agreements, the Integrated Urban Reclaiming Programmes, the Programme Agreement, the District Agreement, the Services Conference, the Network Projects and so on (Fazzi, 1998, p.161).  
We can consider partnership as a set of rules which can be interpreted in different ways and give rise to a wide body of agreements, often made between parallel decisional arenas, involving private and public subjects. Sometimes, the parties involved play several roles (often incoherent) at once while dealing with the town questions.  
One of the main questions is the way in which the partnership is built up, that is the existence of the conditions that could make agreement effective (Rodriguez Malta, 2001, pp.324-325).  
A solid local partnership is not only desirable, but also necessary in order to define challenges, strategies, priorities, allocations of funds (WWW.genercom.it/schede\_prcom/pc\_urban.htm, 2002).  
For the policies to be effective, it is more convenient to create a partnership focusing on the exact relevance, experience and roles of the subjects deeply involved in the specific questions (Laino, 1999, p.79). In this regard, the European Commission has suggested to towns to adopt a bottom-up approach.  
As far as the Italian Urban Pic are concerned, different partners have been involved since the beginning. Sometimes, the partners themselves have taken the initiative (different associations and a District Council in Naples, a Research Centre in Bari, the Industrialists Association in Foggia, the University of Catania).
7. Catania has a population of about 330,000 inhabitants. Being in one of the Objective 1 regions defined by the EC in order to allocate its Structural Funds, it qualified, together with other 15 Italian towns, for these funds.  
The Town Council, through its act no. 39 of 17<sup>th</sup>/01/1995, approved a programme of interventions to be submitted to the European Community (Italy Urban Pic, Procedure No. 11 – Catania, p.1), which defined some particularly decaying town areas: *Cappuccini-Antico Corso* (formerly III District), *Civita-Angeli Custodi* (formerly V District) and *San Cristoforo* (formerly VI District) (Cirelli, 2000).  
After about fifteen months, the European Community, through its act of 30<sup>th</sup>/04/1996, approved the *Italy Urban Programme*, and in particular, the Procedure No.11 concerning the town of Catania.  
Three target areas were singled out, which have about 53,000 inhabitants, that is 16% of the whole town population. The *Cappuccini-Antico Corso* area has a commercial vocation (Cassar, 2000, p.81); some school and university buildings are located in it (The Humanities – former Benedictine Monastery). In the other two areas the crafts prevail (24% of the town crafts), though they are going through a period of serious crisis. The people who live there are facing serious problems as well; indeed, these areas are full of immigrants from outside the European Community, who live in houses that are particularly squalid from a hygienic point of view. Also relevant is the presence of petty crime and mafia in these areas, which make their conditions even worse.
8. Considering the long term perspective of these interventions, they can be seen as pilot projects which can become a model for future more extensive interventions.  
The total cost of the intervention concerning the town of Catania adds up to 24.768 MECUs, 56,5% of which are allocated to Measure III (Infrastructures and Environment) and 20,2% to Measure II (Education, Employment and Social Services) (see Table 1). The procedure concerning Catania is co-financed by the Public Expenditure (62% of the total), by the European Community (37% of the total) and by private concerns (less than 1% of the total).
9. The objectives of the Urban Programme regard those urban areas where some of the most serious problems concentrate. These problems are caused by lack of work opportunities, low income, and poor life conditions. One of the most serious of these problems is social marginalization, which occurs ever

more frequently in old town centres or in the suburbs. In particular, the actions suggested to face some of the most serious problems are the following:

- a) support to the already existent businesses and incentives to create new ones; services for small and medium concerns (in particular, transfer of technology); creation of experimental yards, business centres, consulting firms (management and marketing); forms of co-operation between private and public sectors (especially for the management of the integrated programmes for the economical development);
  - b) development of employment for the local population: vocational training (minorities' needs; new technologies, for example information technology applied to financial or commercial services); mobile consulting units; projects to help long term unemployed people to find a job; labour-intensive projects;
  - c) the offer of new services and infrastructures, and of course the improvement of those already existent; social services, health, public order: nursery schools; hospitals; rehabilitation centres for drug-addicts; improvement of security and precautionary measures against crime; better street lighting; people participation in the quarter surveillance;
  - d) re-qualification of urban spaces. Improvement of the environment and the infrastructures through the following measures: restoration of buildings for social and economical purposes; reclamation of public spaces, including public parks and gardens; improvement of energetic output; re-use of vacant sites and reclamation of contaminated soils; creation of cultural, recreational and sports centres; measures aiming at improving the local population mobility; availability of telecommunication services; seminars aiming at enabling the tenants of council houses to deal with the upkeep of the buildings; measures aiming at improving the ability to solve local problems, also through the mutual co-operation among citizens, as long as the support hasn't already been given through other measures or community programmes; and
  - e) the improvement of transport facilities.
10. At first, there were 33 candidate towns, 13 of which qualified in April 1996 (Bari, Cagliari, Catania, Catanzaro, Cosenza, Foggia, Genoa, Naples, Reggio Calabria, Rome, Palermo, Salerno, Venice) and 3 in December 1997 (Lecce, Syracuse, Trieste) (Laino, 1999, p.70).
11. The total funds of the Urban Programme amount to 600 millions ECUs, 400 of which are for the Objective 1 Regions and 200 for the other Regions (Wishlade, 2000, pp.266-267). The estimated amount for Italy is 150 MECUs (25% of the total funds), which add up to the national allocations. The Community funds are allocated without security by the European Fund for Regional Development and the European Social Fund. The areas which qualify for these funds are parts of towns with more than 100,000 inhabitants. As an exception, they can be also given to urban areas belonging to smaller towns (in Italy, the town of Cosenza).
12. They are: the multi-functional centre (Via Cardinale Dusmet); the auditorium and the service centre for immigrants (Via St. Maddalena); the public gardens (Via Biblioteca); the social services area extending for 3,600 square metres; the local Mission for employment; the Integrated Service Centre for Business (Via Plebiscito, former Town Transport Premises).
13. In other towns as well the University uses those buildings which have lost their original functions (palaces, convents, barracks and factories) becoming vacant sites (Indovina, 1997-98, p.105).
14. The Monastery is a concrete example of how the word heritage's meaning has changed during the time, according to the laws in force; in fact, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century a building was considered as historical heritage if it dated back to times before Constantine. Therefore it was possible to demolish Roman buildings or melt medieval coins (Rizzo, 2001, pp.4-5).
15. The Town Hall Library (Civica), former Benedicene Library, which became Non-Profit Corporation in 1931, included the library of the bibliophile Antonio Ursino Recupero. Further enlarged during the years, it recently specialised in Sicilian and Catania history and culture. The books and documents (both old and new) it contains amount to over 180,000 units.
16. It is certain that the building did not exist in 1888, which is the year of the town-planning scheme conceived by the engineer B. Gentile Cusa, since it doesn't appear on the map of the scheme.
17. The total area of the building was (and still is) of 1,260 square metres, while the cubage is around 14,600 cubic metres. Before the works it was made up of a basement (4.7 metres high), a ground floor, a mezzanine, with only few rooms, and a first floor.
18. Up to the present days, Catania old town centre represents the business centre not only for the town but also for the other villages of its province. It's biggest problem is road traffic, which during rush hours becomes unberable.

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