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Public housing units and ruins: The case of Ponticelli in Naples

by Marilena Prisco

The need for sheltering as form of support to people in the urban environment has been globally acknowledged over time, and plans and policies for housing have been largely formulated to respond to this need in many countries. When we move from basic needs and rights to the complexity of the urban, interpretations of processes and how we learn from different places becomes central, as well as challenging¹. On that premise, this work aims to explore a relational approach to the ruins – material leftovers – applicable to different context, and their interaction with people, ideas, plans and accidental events.

In the long tradition of theorisation about the function of material ruins, George Simmel highlighted their role as a battlefield for two transformative energies, the human spirit and the natural forces acting on materiality². Theorists and scholars of neomaterialism enforced the debate about the role of nature as an active force³ and matter and objects as more than

¹ C. McFarlane, *Crossing Borders: Development, Learning and the North-South Divide*, in «Third World Quarterly», vol. 27, 2006, pp. 1413-1437.

² G. Simmel, *Two Essays*, in «The Hudson Review», vol. 11, n. 3, 1958, pp. 371-385 (originally published as G. Simmel, *Der Henkel and Die Ruine*, in Id., *Philosophische Kultur*, 1911). See also C. DeSilvey and T. Edensor, *Reckoning with Ruins*, in «Progress in Human Geography», vol. 37, n. 4, 2012, pp. 465-485; H.K. Göbel, *The Re-use of Urban Ruins: Atmospheric Inquiries of the City*, London, Routledge, 2015.

³ J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham-London, Duke University Press, 2010.

passive recipients of human will⁴. Ruination as a transformative process has been a topic of interest also of architects and planners, who have largely contributed to the debate on how human interests – economic, aesthetic, practical – participate in transformative processes resulting in the large-scale production of fragments in the urban space. According to the work of Berger, in this transformation human intentionality is part of complex processes, where norms and regulations can produce unexpected results, and fragments, buildings or spaces unfortunately become waste landscapes⁵.

The continuous interaction of daily human actions with fragments and material architecture was investigated in the city centre of Naples by Walter Benjamin during 1920s, and he spoke about buildings and actions creating «unforeseen constellations»⁶. I will here use the peripheric neighbourhood named Ponticelli to discuss *exempla* of contemporary constellations involving public housing buildings and actions in Naples, to highlight some categories of urban material leftovers based on the analysis of processes in which buildings are included. During the XXth century in Naples, as in other major Italian cities, much innovation occurred in the fields of law and tools, with the aim to orient or to reorganize settlements at the fringes of the major towns. The building sector was for a long time connected to the logic of expansion and economic development, guided at the beginning by public, and later by private, investments⁷. Ponticelli was once an agricultur-

⁴ B. Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*, Paris, La Découverte, 1991 (English transl. *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1993); Id., *Politiques de la nature: comment faire entrer les sciences en démocratie*, Paris, La Découverte, 1999 (English transl. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring Sciences into Democracy*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁵ A. Berger, *Drosscape: Wasting Land in Urban America*, New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2006.

⁶ Benjamin wrote about Naples as a place where building and actions «interpenetrate» in space and create «unforeseen constellations». W. Benjamin, *Naples*, in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, New York-London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1924/1978, pp. 163-173.

⁷ From the beginning of the XXth century, providing houses in the primary, growing Italian cities became a matter of concern, and from post-WWII this was an absolute necessity due to the rapidly increasing population. The building sector was also instrumental to creating jobs after prolonged

al fringe at the Eastern border of Naples, since the 1930s the East has been one of the main directions for the planned expansion of the primary urban settlement of the city centre. During the 1970s this intention was converted into planning tools⁸. Furthermore, after the earthquake – the Irpinia earthquake occurred 40 years ago in Central Italy, in November 1980, and wrought huge damage, collapsed buildings and human losses – a Special Programme for Housing (PSER) was approved in 1981 via national legislation. The same law allocated a budget for post-earthquake housing that should have included the completion of a well-equipped and self-sufficient town, connected to the city centre of Naples by highways and sub-regional railways. In the next paragraphs I will analyse two processes that linked buildings and ruins in this case, one about inhabited ruins, and the other about empty ruins.

Inhabited ruins

Ruination and habitation are often interpreted by architects and planners as opposing forces acting on buildings. National regulations such as in the Italian case, decree that a building can be inhabited if certified – and in some cases even tested following specific procedures – as «liveable». Especially for private property, when a building ends its lifecycle it is declared as «not liveable» and uses, tax regimes and applicable rules change according to the new status of the building. This procedure is associated with the formal city and does not apply to informal sheltering or to temporary cities for refugees, because both informal sheltering

unemployment and general stress due to the destructive war conflict, and priorities linked to the war. Between the end of the 1960s and during the 1970s large peripheries became places where planning experiments and social demand for welfare combined, during an era of economic and demographic growth.

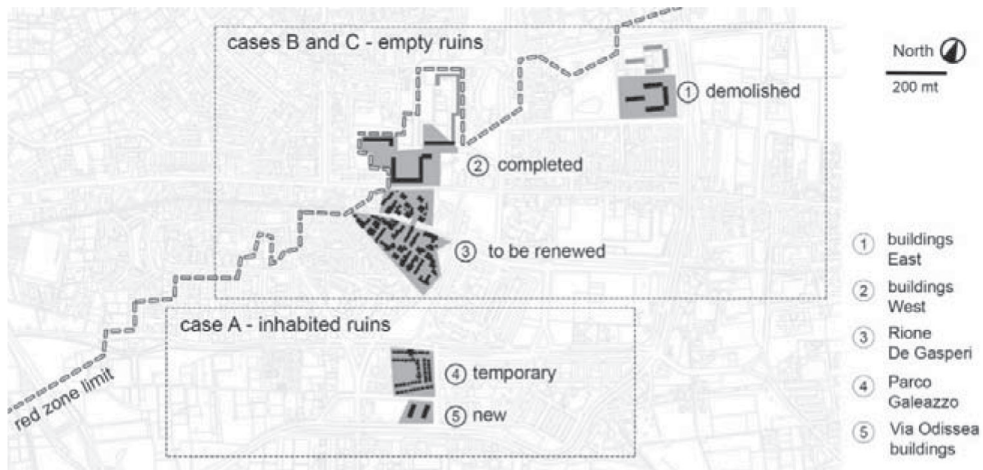
⁸ The entire East area was once a rural and marshy land only partly converted for agriculture, and inhabited by farmers. For decades two main steps directly influenced human appropriation of the area. First, in 1972 the zoning plan (PRG of Naples) was approved targeting the area as a zone for a satellite settlement of the main town. At that time only few post-war public housing units had been built up around Ponticelli's old farmers' houses. The PRG was coupled a few years later with the Zone Plan, a town planning tool to increase the available housing stock at the city level.

and refugee camps are considered exceptions to ordinary regulations. The example of Parco Galeazzo (case A, in Figure 1), which is a formal temporary settlement built almost forty years ago in Naples after the disruptive earthquake of 1980, shows how the distinction between different forms of regulations of buildings – ordinary, exceptional or temporary – can overlap and collide. In December 2019 local media announced the beginning of the relocation process of the 60 families of the so called Parco Galeazzo Evangelic settlement, an *exemplum* of an existing modern ruin originally created via an agreement between the State and philanthropic associations.

This settlement and its twin settlement located nearby, have repeatedly been under the attention of the media not only for their long existence and the extreme living conditions of their «guests», but also for the presence of asbestos in the houses' rooves, which is a carcinogenic material currently prohibited in most countries. During the last months of 2019 the process of relocation of part of the Galeazzo settlers took place. The municipality of Naples assigned an apartment in one of the freshly completed buildings of the adjacent Via Odissea to each of the qualifying families of Parco Galeazzo. The two new buildings of Via Odissea are also the result of a recent renovation of abandoned ruins of the post-earthquake intervention. It is worth noting that only one group of the 60 families was relocated⁹ and that over time, the residents of Parco Galeazzo had changed several times. Immediately after the first families moved to the new houses the empty shacks were illegally occupied by other people in need from the nearby neighbourhoods. Previous settlers, who are not currently entitled to a definitive or temporary accommodation are now involved in a new negotiation with both material objects and people as part of a temporary life. Parco Galeaz-

⁹ Parco Galeazzo's inhabitants were divided into three groups: entitled to public housing, temporarily entitled (for three years) and not entitled. Specific criteria were established by the Housing Department in September 2019 such as income, characteristics of families and documents to prove residency in Parco Galeazzo. Most notably, people with connections to organised crimes (crimes of Camorra) were excluded.

Figure 1. Map of the analysed buildings of Ponticelli involved in processes of ruination/habitation between 1980 and 2019.



zo confirmed its role as a long-term camp for people for whom the need for shelter is a priority, compared to the right to a «healthy» house.

Parco Galeazzo, even if produced by a formal act during 1980s, remains a «gray space» – to use Yiftachel’s words¹⁰ – where the process of destruction after relocation of its inhabitants was not completed. In fact, both the temporary shelters turned to a long-term housing place, and the turnover of occupation by new inhabitants participated in the construction of a «gray zone» where formal public actions over time produced contradictory results.

Empty ruins

We are all used to seeing ruins with no specific artistic value, uninhabited buildings because they are exhausted or never completed. We are also used to different temporalities involving those buildings. Some of them

¹⁰ O. Yiftachel, *Theoretical Notes on «Gray Cities»: The Coming of Urban Apartheid?*, in «Planning Theory», vol. 8, n. 1, pp. 88-100.

are replaced to give space to redevelopment actions, while some belong to the group of buildings that stand for decades. When they have not been assigned any formal function, most of the time this could be because there is a lack of interest in transforming them into new formal liveable buildings. I will now discuss some of the meanings of the word «interest» when we refer to the action of transforming abandoned and empty buildings into liveable buildings or buildings to be destroyed. In Ponticelli and in other areas of Naples, this process was not driven by market forces as occurred elsewhere¹¹. For instance, in the case of the two apartment buildings in Via Odissea the Municipality – a public actor – was the main protagonist.

I will consider now two buildings conceived as housing units in Ponticelli at the beginning of the 1980s, less than one kilometre from one another, which I will call buildings West (case B in Figure 1) and buildings East (case C in Figure 1). In 2009 buildings East were demolished while buildings West – partially constructed by a private building enterprise in the 1990s – became public housing apartment buildings in 2015, like the relocation site of Via Odissea in case A. In fact, the decision to renovate the ruins of buildings West was very much influenced by the need to relocate people from a nearby apartment lot called Rione De Gasperi, selected since the 1970s as a target for redevelopment¹². After the earthquake the transformation of Rione De Gasperi – rooted in the pre-earthquake decision of the Municipality to improve living conditions in the old peripheries of the town – was confirmed but the physical context changed completely during the post-earthquake years. The Rione's inhabitants probably would not have been relocated specifically in the West buildings without the event of the earthquake, which accelerated the development of the entire area of Ponticelli with new constructions

¹¹ D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.

¹² The decision was due both to the poor quality of the buildings and to the role of Camorra in controlling the area. About Rione De Gasperi see also E. Esposito and F. Chiodelli, *Juggling Legality and Illegality: The Regulative Environment of the Occupation of Public Housing in Naples*, Geoforum (forthcoming).

(unfortunately left incomplete in many cases). Furthermore, the interest of the Municipality in the reuse of ruins became much higher with the new Red Zone in 2014, a planning tool that from 2001 has introduced specific limitations in areas that are at high risk from eruptions of Vesuvius. In areas close the volcano, the construction of new residential buildings cannot be authorized after the date of approval of the 2014 Red Zone. The Red Zone made previously-approved but incomplete residential buildings very attractive for redevelopment by the Municipality as a way to solve the long-postponed issue of the relocation of people. In 2015, during the process of using and reusing the material leftover at Ponticelli, the apartments of the West buildings were completed and assigned after an inter-institutional agreement.

The last *exemplum* – the destroyed buildings East (case C) – is crucial in highlighting some of the factors that determined the future of ruins of residential buildings in the direction of renovation or demolition. As in most of the cases of Ponticelli, this building was located very close to other buildings that are currently inhabited, and it was very visible from the street and relatively easy to enter. In 2005 a fourteen-year old boy accidentally died while he was playing with some friends inside the ruined building. Between 2009 and 2010 the building was demolished, but now the area where buildings East was located is still abandoned, and is used as an illegal dumping site. The demolition of the building had a purely symbolic meaning that did not lead to any renovation of the area, neither in the direction of new development nor in the direction of a re-naturalisation. The death of the boy in the building accelerated its end, and bulldozers started to demolish it within four years of the sad episode.

Conclusions

The complex legal and planning framework in which Ponticelli was transformed from a rural area to a suburban housing settlement is relevant here to give a sense of multiple causes – and I have mentioned only few – that can intervene during the planning and construction of buildings to satisfy a massive

need for housing¹³. As many leftover buildings testify, in Ponticelli not all the construction processes had a happy ending, and there were also important collateral effects like pervasive land sealing and massive building projects.

In the presented *exempla* buildings and fragments were part of processes of habitation and ruination that give an account of the complexity of the construction of public housing units and the relocation of people. Here my attempt was to overcome the description of ruins as de-contextualised fragments and I dealt with them in favour of a relational analysis that aimed at focussing on how ruins do not disappear from the public realm, and can be involved in what I call «processes of habitation» in a post-welfare era of not-for-granted rights. I used «habitation» in a broader sense that expanded the meaning of this word to combine and interrelate many types of sheltering, temporary units, «unhealthy» shacks, apartment buildings to be demolished etc., to say that new, renewed buildings or ruins are not static objects but in a process depending on the stakes of public actors, and of the demographic pressure of poor people looking for shelter.

A process-oriented analysis of habitation in relation to ruins and ruination and sensitive to materiality – which I presented as exploration of contemporary constellations – could be further expanded to intervention of housing for low-income families to prevent unsuccessful housing construction in very different context, and their larger impact on the transformation of cities.

¹³ Other authors have investigated the consequences of ruination and collapse of residential buildings in Naples, e.g. see the work of G. Berruti, *The Pedestrianization of the Naples Seafront: Assemblage Thinking as a Planning Tool*, in L. Lieto and R.A. Beauregard, *Planning for a Material World*, London, Routledge, 2016, pp. 42-55.

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