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# New Forms for Transitional Public Spaces

## On the Edge between the Historic City and Recent Expansions

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*ABSTRACT.* In the events of expansion of the European city, a particular relevance is held by the territories of margin between the historic city and new urban settlements. These hybrid spaces are suspended in the "intermediate" dimension between marginal and central: places on the edge of different realities assuming a very strategic position in relation to the conterminous urban parts. *Those spaces require an architecture of connections, of physical and perceptual relations, able to include multiple levels and scales of intervention in a continuous process of "fertile" contamination, becoming a "tool" to reshape interrupted relations, restore the meaning of lost or hidden urban centralities, and introduce a new awareness of the spatial factor weight for the definition of the public dimension in the contemporary changing city. In these processes of "re-signification", the first outposts of a "contemporaneity" may take place, recording from time to time unusual relations and unreleased connections.*

*KEYWORDS.* transitional spaces, edge territories, hybrid landscapes

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In the modern and contemporary events of expansion of the European city, a particular relevance is held by the territories of margin between the historic city and new urban settlements. That issue recurs in different ways and various situations, but keeps showing an extraordinary interest from the urban design point of view.

Several studies and projects have recently confirmed the peculiarities of the theme, related to specifically configured places, hybrid spaces in the "intermediate" dimension between open and closed, internal and external, public and semi-public. Those contexts are marginal and central at the same time: border spaces, places on the edge of different realities, that often take a very strategic position in relation to the urban parts which lap their margins.

Those "in-between" spaces, belonging to the connective tissue of the city, derive their strategic value in the very condition of "ambiguity" which characterizes them. The urban and architectural design is called to intervene on these discontinuities, on the disconnections in urban fabrics: the project acts on distances, on fragmentation, on the "porosity" of unfinished territories, revealing unexpected voids in the dense tissue of the compact city. Working on those regions of "uncertainty", it is possible to turn suspended spaces into places of "threshold", able to act as urban "hinge" at different scales and various levels of interpretation. Several years ago, Bernardo Secchi precisely outlined this theme, emphasizing the need of *"acting on the intermediate areas, inside the interstices, in the commissures among the hard parts, reinterpreting the malleable parts, reinventing somehow both of them and adding something that gives sense to the whole; establishing new ties, setting new physical, functional and social clots, as new gathering places (points of aggregation) that solicit new perspectives that gaze into the distance, overall outlooks with wider projects and the more compelling and truthful speeches within them"* (SECCHI, 1984. 8).

In the "hybrid" dimension of these spaces on the edge between historical city and recent expansions, *"the distinction between city and building begins to blur: once they were self-defined and even opposing entities, now they result merged into one image that discovers in the envelope a stress field in which the logics external to the territory and the city collide against the endogenous forces expressed by the single artifact"* (PURINI, 2000. 29).

The architecture of those spaces is an architecture of connections, of physical and perceptual relations, able to include multiple levels and scales of intervention in a continuous process of "fertile" contamination. Furthermore, the development system of those spaces introduces the territorial dimension through the "networks" that the project of architecture is able to weave. *"The contemporary city is by nature multiple, decentralized and fragmented in different networks: those networks depend on the relations among its systems. The structures of those relations challenge a unitary comprehension, as they are understood as unstable sets, able to change according to the tensions applied/put on them"* (DE SOLÀ MORALES, 2001).

Those connections work on a dual level: they are both continuous and intermittent, involving landscape elements even distant, introducing changes that affect on the character of places, and recovering identities which may appear confused, weak or denied in the present condition. The deriving inter-scale relations gains and losses are linked to the simultaneous presence of two main processes: *"extension and retraction in the urban dimension"* (BOERI, 2011. 71-72), able to dissolve and decompose "what is already there", and then regroup the fragments back together in a whole which is unified and articulated at the same time. This dual action, related to the complementary processes of implosion/explosion, driven by a double centrifugal/centripetal charge overcomes the boundaries of the intervention site involving parts which belong to a system of tangible and intangible references, material ones in a position of close proximity, or remote and virtual ones, "carrying" them in the inner spaces of each single building.

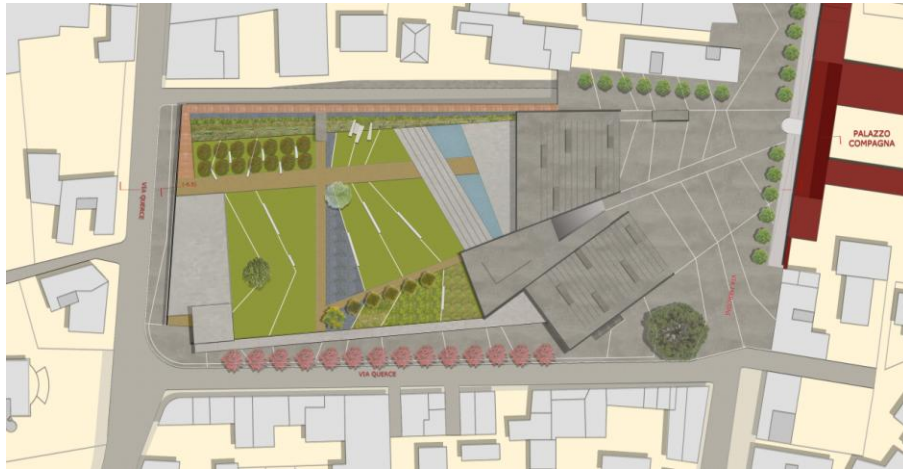


Fig.1

As a counterpart, the dual force "exports" outside the new linkages introduced by the added parties, opening towards the city to incorporate whole urban portions in the transformation processes. The results of those processes consist in *"maps programmatically incomplete and eclectic, since they are interested in setting themselves in a plural interpretation of the European contemporary space. According to these readings, that kind of space is not chaotic, but rather it records the action of the large three-dimensional currents that shape its physical geography. That geography is constantly redefined by upheavals that take form in the physical space as overturning, eruptions, intensifications, thickenings, disseminations, transplants, pulsations, punctuations, hailstorms, exfoliations"* (BOERI, 2011. 72).

The new urban transitional spaces may work as a tool to rebuild interrupted relations, restore the sense of lost or hidden centralities, and introduce a new awareness of the weight of the spatial factor in the definition of the public dimension of the contemporary city in transformation.

The project designed for Palma Campania, winner in the International Design Competition launched by the municipal administration, is a significant example for the purpose of reading in design terms the urban role of transitional public spaces, in relation to a context full of interesting implications of territorial nature, a stratified centre of the hinterland of Naples, that only recently has been subjected to significant urban extensions.

In this regard, the project assumes an emblematic significance in relation to the theme of the formation of "a central place in a marginal position". This particular dimension is only seemingly an oxymoronic, and it is a very peculiar feature of the contemporary condition of public space. Therefore, the feature of centrality becomes no longer tied to the physical and geographical position of urban elements, but rather to their attractiveness, to the "magnetic" vocation of sites. By this point of view, the positional dimension absolutely assumes a primary role. That spatial quality is no longer due to the coincidence with the historical centre, or the city centre in general, but rather it is related to the strategic value of places, as linked to a complex of intrinsic and extrinsic data.

The potential new central places of Palma Campania contain vocationally those qualities, since they stand "between" things, in the zones of hybrid identity and undefined morphology, suitable to be manipulated through urban and architectural design.



Fig.2

In this area of Palma Campania, which is today inhomogeneous and fragmented, the project aims to meet several objectives:

- to retrieve the value of the area as a complete urban unit, with a specific identity, as a wide open space on the edge of the historic city, strongly related to the most important orographical elements (the Vesuvius volcano, the hills above the ancient core of Palma Campania) and architectural ones (Palazzo Compagna, via Marconi, Piazza De Martino);
- to introduce an interpretation of the entire project-area as part of a broader system of open spaces, located between the central areas and the zones of urban expansion of Palma Campania (from Piazza De Martino up to the new directional and commercial sites), which branch out into the open territory and into the flatter areas;
- to work on the morphological specificities, on the existing differences in height, properly recalibrated, so as to include new functional loads, without building new emerging constructions that would give a negative impact for the open views that the project site offers;
- to reinterpret and redraw the themes of the square and the park, going beyond the traditional interpretation of them as two separate fundamental urban elements, and developing the idea of the construction of a new urban centrality, intended as the articulated expression of the multiple spatial and functional requirements;
- to ensure the development of the ordinary functions, as entertainment, fruition of the green, use of exhibition spaces, together with meeting and commercial ones, but also the conduct of wide public and collective initiatives, such as the Carnival of Palma Campania, providing all the solutions necessary to make the event and further important ones to take place in the area, emphasizing the characteristics of spectacularity;
- to use technical and plants-design solutions, as well as materials able to ensure containment of costs in the deadlines fixed by the call for entries, but also to obtain the lowering of energy consumption and the achievement of optimal conditions of maintenance and management of the works.

In reference to these objectives and with a deep reasoning on the specificity of the urban and architectural characters of the area, the project has been set up taking into account numerous aspects: historical features, urban position, relations with the borders, linkages with a broader system of open spaces, perspective views at different scales, morphological articulation of the intervention site.

As Manuel Gausa points out, *"in architecture, the between focuses its interest on what is able to mediate, the architecture of relations and tangency. It is the urbanism of open spaces, architecture without limits, without proportions, but also architecture of the conjunction, the minimum and the uninteresting. The between is a landscape always on the run, it originates where the conditions are not precise, but ambiguous, confused, mistreated, hybrid, uncertain"* (GAUSA, 2003).



Fig.3

So the starting point of the setting has been the choice of working on the construction of a urban design, recognizable and autonomous, finite and focused on a specific area, but able to modify the existing relations, to impact on the overall organization of Palma Campania, recalibrating the loads and defining new balances between the historical parts and the new ones.

From this interpretation of the area as an element of relation, is derived the choice to design the project as urban composition of distinguishable elements, endowed with formal autonomy, even if inside a mechanism of close correlations with the environment.

The variations of the elements, in direction and disposition, allow to establish new relations with the different urban situations located on the edge of the design-site, involving not only the ancient axial components related to Palazzo Compagna, but also diagonal paths towards the recently formed areas of Palma Campania.

Therefore, the intervention has been guided by some sort of "topological" approach, which finds its development in the constant interaction among the "layers" that meet and collide in this delicate portion of the territory, giving rise to a new complexity. In fact, in Palma Campania, the hybrid dimension is sought through the contamination between the inside and the outside.

That process takes place as an "architecture of the soil", a design of tectonic movements in which the boundary between territory and architectural artifact is fluid, dynamic, complex and deliberately ambiguous.

In the soil-building *"the work on the artificial landscape and that one on its interior space is no longer distinguishable"* (BOCCHI, 2001). Consequently, it is the modeling of the soil to build the internal space. At the same time, it is the city itself that "flows" inside the sponge-tissues of those transitional spaces to define a continuous system that operates through the overlapping of smooth surfaces (LYNN, 1993. 8-15).

The widening-square at the height of Via Marconi has been conceived as the place of confluence of several paths, real foreshortening of Palma Campania, where history and contemporaneity strongly interact.

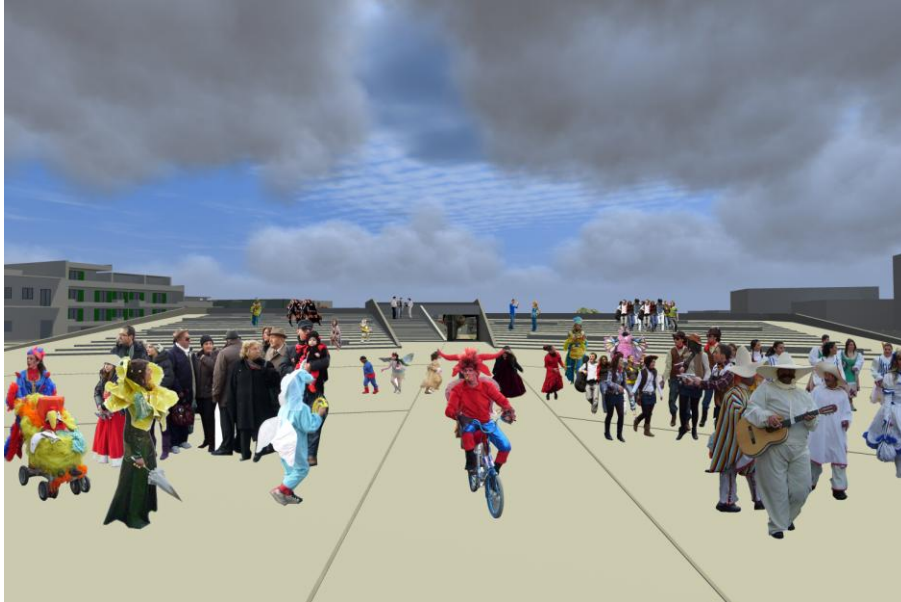


Fig.4

On its borders, the only new front is the museum, which is very slight, lightweight, totally different from Palazzo Compagna. The new structure is conceived, rather than as a building, as a redoubling of the crossing-ramp, which goes directly into the paths of the park below, and passing through the commercial area located on the lower limit of the lot, reaches Via Querce (parallel stretch to Via Marconi).

Even the internal distribution plan appears as inclined: it is a flexible space, intended to the exhibition of the costumes and the history of Palma Campania Carnival. The particular morphology of the area made it possible to start an interesting experimentation, by building an articulated section and obtaining basement floors and staggered levels, able to interact with open spaces, designed with the same principles.

The result is a sort of inseparability between building and ground, through design operations which assign a key-role to the ground connection, intended as a "hinge", a "joint", and that are configured through actions that concern *"both the ground and the built form" at the same time*" (FRAMPTON, 1999. 45).

Below the slanting planes with different angles, which constitute the new central space and establish visual relations from time to time with the outer key-elements (the Palazzo Compagna and the Vesuvius, the fragmented building-curtains and the compact ones), are located the auditorium and the parking, with some service areas. In this way not only the void is not filled, invading it with disturbing elements, but it is possible to enhance its underlying values, its broken connections, its own specificity as a foreshortening of territory which makes perceptible the different phases of construction of the whole city of Palma Campania. The access ramp of Palazzo Compagna and the roofings of the auditorium and parking define a very particular space, a reservoir bounded by the various movements of the soil, which corresponds to a reinterpretation of the concept of the square. It is no longer a static space, but a dynamic place that lends itself to multiple uses and houses variable inner scenographies, first of all the great Dance of the Quadrilles.

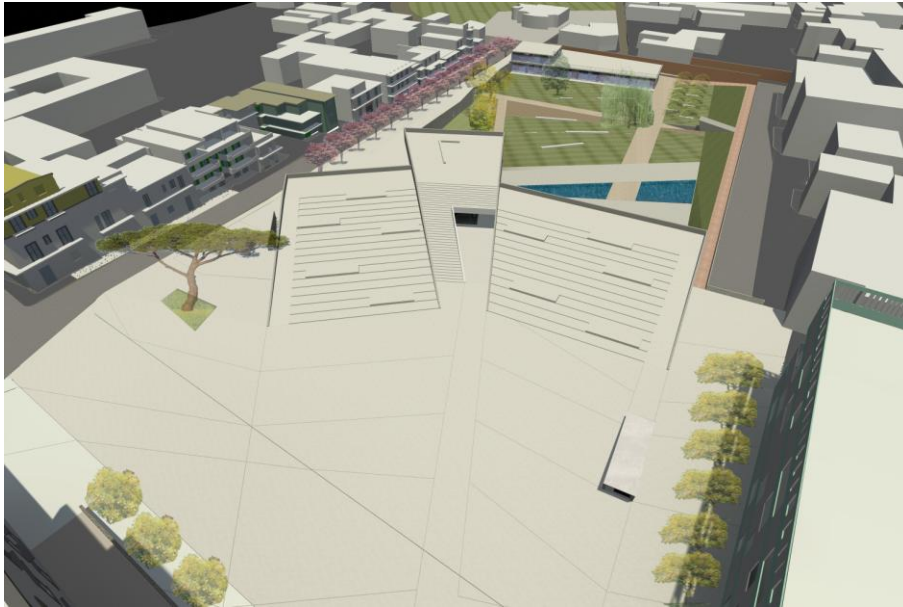


Fig.5

At the same time it is also a place crossed by a path (as the very suggestive Carnival parade), which goes from the historic centre toward the new market and the other directional services that will be located to the West.

On the other hand, the same conception of the parking, articulated into two parts (the semi-open linear element and the underground one), gives the possibility to provide a major facility for the whole area and especially for the historical centre, which is particularly lacking of it in the current situation.

The new open spaces of the square-park are closely connected to the inner spaces of the auditorium, museum, and parking.

Below the most pronounced flight of steps is housed the auditorium of about 340 seats, so that it does not emerge as an autonomous volume and which becomes an extremely important service for the entire city.

The idea is to build a complete system of external and internal spaces, perfectly suitable to the functional needs, but at the same time continuously adaptable to different uses, without losing its original connotations. It even interprets the themes of superimposition and addition as an asset: the central stage in the square, the outdoor shows and displays, even with exhibition mountings in the various areas of the park, the exhibits inside the museum, the multiplicity of commercial spaces. The mutability and variability are essential characteristics of the "contemporary" interpretation of the theme of the square.

Furthermore, a great importance is held by the possibility of the pedestrianization of the square and Via Marconi, at least at particular times and occasions, in order to ensure the installation of the stage in a central location, emphasizing its scenographic character.

It should be noted that the main diagonal path enters the park from via Querce, and reaches the square through small bounding alleys and across the museum-ramp, taking shape as a new entrance to the historic city.

In the most artificial part of the park stands the bar-restaurant, looking out on a sheet of water.

Again the only glass front becomes a fundamental background element, which deeply affects on the character of the park.

The organization of the green areas of the park obtains the unity of the whole through a balanced and varied presence of different elements: the flat and sloping lawns, the groups of trees that shade the playground areas, the themed gardens.

It thus establishes a close correspondence between the morphological system of the staggered-levels, which dictates the design of the park, and the functional contents of the various areas.

The deriving spaces avoid the traditional classifications linked *"to the form of the urban space, intended as the square and the street. Somehow this makes possible to review in this field the modernist dogmas that demonized the spaces of the historic city, and instead to raise the aggregative values of the configured spaces"* (BOCCHI, 2001).

In this mechanism, a crucial role is played by the system of the edges, which emphasizes the idea of diversity that characterizes the park.

To the West on Via Querce, the park is marked by a continuous front which constitutes a filter from the road and indicates the entrance to the areas of new expansion. A sloped ramp reaches the level of the commercial workshops, backward from the facing continuous wall featured as an a unique uninterrupted cut.

Along the southern long side of the park, a paved ramp follows the slope of Via Querce. A wall and a roof mark the ascending direction to the square, defining a partially enclosed front towards the street, as a filter that makes the park feasible even from the outside.

This widening converges to the acces to the auditorium, with a broadening of perspective that gradually increases towards the square. The heads of the wall along Via Querce become: on the West side, the bar building, emerging above the volume of the stores; and on the East side, on the square, the terraced roof of the auditorium.

On the opposite long side, facing an irregular building-curtain, a sloped roof covered by a lawn surface has been introduced. Below it, there is a first linear parking area and the access road to the covered parking below the square.

In the project for Palma Campania the public space "doubles" itself, articulating in architectural elements and open space, merged into a single entity. On the one hand the relation with the morphology of the site, the orographic elements and the territorial preexistences; on the other hand the specificity of the interfaces between the monumental preexistences and the design of the new elements, introduce interscale relations able to overcome the physical boundaries of the intervention site.

The plural interpretation of the space of Palma Campania, reflected itself in the design choices that have been tackled from different points of view: from the edge that changes depending on the different elements with whom it comes in contact, to the "dual" façade which assumes diverse characterizations towards the city and towards the expansion space. The margin constitutes one of the key issues in the definition of the identity of a space which occupies a position so delicate and strategic, firstly because the perimeter becomes the primary element through which the intervention becomes recognizable. This model demands that *"its boundary forms itself as a morphologically complex episode, an episode that requires to be observed under predetermined conditions, such as through controlled architectural distances (...). This margin is conceived as a built border, an edge architecture that reveals itself in a topographic pattern whose character is clear and definitive. The architecture of the edge activates the limits of the plate turning it into a kind of magnetized strip, along which the volumes are arranged according to accurately calibrated distances, in a play of forces that attract and repel each other. The limit of the sod is an active factor: in relation to what the clod*



*contains, it acts as the frame towards the picture*" (PURINI, 2011. 316). Then the edge becomes the spatial device suitable directly to "calibrate" the relations with the outside, to determine what to include and what to exclude, to dose the "streams" that flow in these porous spaces. Some similar considerations regard the issues of the façades, too. Through the theme of the "dual façade", the changing relation between architecture and territory is further specified. Alongside the monumental preexistence of Palazzo Compagna, the architecture remains silent, with no front, appearing as the natural continuation of the ground. On the opposite side, towards the city in expansion, the architecture clearly expresses its presence by defining a proper façade, looking from the distance as a sort of "base" for the historical building on the background. Far from being a "unhierarchical" space, the new public space is characterized by hierarchical relations, though no longer conceived in the traditional sense of square, street, park, building. This architecture of connections is not nearly isotropic: it moves in various directions, but with different weights and diverse intensity.

On these hybrid forms of public space, traditional connotations and new terminologies intertwine, even from the point of view of the definition. They were designed as architectural parts whose peculiarity is established right from the role of relational and connective elements for the contemporary architectures in the historic city.

The search for new forms of transitional public spaces, turns towards a sort of "reversion" to the hybrid, revised and transformed: its essential evolution, in view of a hoped "spatial turn".

The hybrid spaces, involved in those processes of "re-signification" in which the public dimension takes on new and unexplored meanings, may act as the first outposts of a "contemporary" which starts from the consolidated urban system, overhauled and amended, and penetrates into the territories of new formation establishing from time to time inedited relations and unprecedented connections.

## **Legends**

Fig.1 General plan of the intervention for Palma Campania

Fig.2 The section of the new volumes with the Vesuvius on the background

Fig.3 An overall view of the new public space related to the Palazzo Compagna

Fig.4 A possible configuration of the square in case of temporary events

Fig.5 The articulation of the square-park towards the historical centre

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