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SUMMER SCHOOL
from landscape to exterior design

ARCHITECTURE
FOR A CREATIVE CITY

Guya Bertelli, Carlos García Vázquez
Paola Bracchi, Pasquale Mei



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Architecture for a creative city. Piacenza towards Expo

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INTERNATIONAL
SUMMER SCHOOL

Piacenza 2014

*from ecological landscape
to architectural design*

ARCHITECTURE
FOR A CREATIVE CITY
Piacenza towards Expo

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MAGGI ISLAND ENTROPIC PLACE

Caterina Padoa Schioppa



Piacenza - Spiaggia sul Po

The phenomenological reading

Land-Water-Air, the manifesto tern launched by the Summer School general brief can be interpreted as the most classical cosmological categories, rather than as aesthetics or functional architectural components. According to the complex system theory, the related tern of Solid-Liquid-Ethereal has been adopted as a tool that can measure the *entropy* of places. In this way, radically different yet overlapping urban matters can be understood as states in which an order, an implicit order or a full chaos seems to prevail. The *dynamic mixture* of Solid-Liquid-Ethereal describes indeed the paradigmatic conditions of contemporary cities, both in spatial and temporal terms, where transitions of states may occur with sudden operations, or temporary devices, affecting simultaneously the physical, the cultural and the economical environment.

While in metropolitan regions this mixture most often forms an indistinguishable complex mosaics, a rizhomatic landscape, where the three states overlap in time and are juxtaposed in space, in a medium city such as Piacenza, with a few exceptions, it may draw a centrifugal conformation. Roughly, the solidity belongs to the inner walled city, the ethereal to the open fields and wild river landscape, passing by a wide middle, hybrid environment, mostly characterized by the large infrastructures for the production, the logistics and the public facilities installed by the modern society since the late nineteenth century. This classical progression can also happen with abrupt ruptures, such as the transition from the iconic building of Palazzo Farnese, representing the symbol of power of Men *par excellence*, to the Isolotto Maggi, the island at the confluence of the River Po and the River Trebbia, at the northern side of Piacenza.

Adopting the aforementioned categories of Solid-Liquid-Ethereal, Maggi island can be depicted as a highly entropic environment, a wild, rarefied, permanently "isolated" territory. A magnificent reserve of nature, a rich habitat occupying a surface of about 45 hectares, engraved with the legacy of continuous variations, as only river landscapes, with seasonal and daily flooding regimes, may represent. The historical cartographies show indeed a moving river morphology, leaving loose yet resistant footprints. Such character of *continuous variability* of the environment is a crucial step in the phenomenological reading of the site, since it challenges the very notion of "permanence" and "temporariness" in contemporary urban and architectural design, to which was given much emphasis in the Summer School general brief.

atelier 1

AIR WATER LAND

Figures and uses: the “learning from” process

Until the late 60s, when the massive pollution of the river waters due to the intensive industrialization and the agricultural soil exploitation has occurred, Isolotto Maggi has been an important touristic attraction, destination of day trips for its bathing beaches. The so-called “Spiaggia di Piacenza” was a typical scenario of that *vitality* of the river Po, which became also inspiration for many filmmakers, such as Michelangelo Antonioni, Luchino Visconti, Roberto Rossellini, Luigi Comencini and others. A scenario of an equilibrated co-habitation Man Nature. Up to 10 thousand people per day were transported by sand barges readapted with benches for passengers. Occasionally a floating temporary bridge, made of boats carrying a wooden deck, was also disposed.

The iconography of the river Po is indeed the other material of a deep, collective investigation, evoking the Venturi principle of the “learning from”, in which *figures and uses* may become models for the design generation process. The river Po is in fact the stage of archetypical forms, such as the chimneys of the Centrale Elettrica, mimicking the other towers characterizing the city skyline. As well as the bridges, such as the temporary floating structure of tied boat already mentioned, or the Railway Brigde, typical lattice work of engineering.

Thus, a landscape populated by stretched pure vertical and horizontal forms, opposing to wilderness, that is the dynamic natural landscape of the river, an idea of *“firmitas”*. Observing this landscape the question emerges, if and in which way architectural disposals may or may not change the entropy of places, namely enforcing order where chaos has taken over, or introducing disturbance where a static and rusted condition seems to lead towards a decaying fate. The answer to this fundamental question resonates in the very meaning of Architecture as the medium that by *opposition* to Nature creates the artificial, anthropic space.

The notion of *tension* is an interesting conceptual premise for both spatial and metaphorical investigations. Through tension contradictions and paradoxes can be explored, enhancing as well architectural discovery.

Relation and isolation

Besides the phenomenological reading and the “learning from” process, at the large territorial scale, Isolotto Maggi embodies the very notion of *limes*, since not only it corresponds to the physical and administrative boundary of the city of Piacenza, but also it represents an “intermediate space” with an open, diverse, dynamic identity. With the modern infrastructures built in the last century, such as the highway and the railway, the island was visually and physically further disconnected from the mainland, augmenting its isolation.

At the same time, the relation to the city cannot be avoided, especially considering the symbolic function of the island as “gate”, both from the River Po and from Milano. Actually, the path connecting the station of Piacenza to the island is the initial assumption of the Studio common strategy. The Railway Station is indeed the major gate from Milano, hosting the Expo in 2015, and may become the hint of a city regeneration process, expanding along three directions – the Isolotto Maggi to the north, the Consorzio Agrario to the east and the Cavallerizza to the south – to reconfigure a system of urban leftovers, forgotten places, enchainning paths of architectural episodes.

Isolation and relation become physical and metaphysical conditions that can suggest alternative strategies, such as the *preservation* of the untouched natural environment through architectural devices embodying the very idea of “performance”, that is responding to categories such as the transitory, the provisional and the resilient. Or, conversely, the *colonization* in order to permanently transforming the island and the riverfront in a new, remediated public space. The latter strategy, albeit “gentle”, always implies a radical operation, leading the argument in favor of visible, outstanding architectural artifacts, capable to reinventing and valorizing the landscape.

Those alternatives, preserving and/or colonizing the island, that is exaggerating either its isolation or its relation to the mainland – referring to different ideological attitudes and different understanding of the word “ecology” within architectural disciplines – have indeed opposite substantial and material implications, such as scattering vs densifying, suspension vs gravity, tectonics vs stereotomy. However, the challenge here is precisely to find the possible negotiation or the combination between the two attitudes. Consistently with an idea of sustainability related to the evolutionary vision of the project, this combination is indeed associated to different temporal layering.

atelier 1

AIR WATER LAND

Temporal and programmatic scenario

In the short-term scenario the project of architecture may respond to the Summer School general brief, that is to provoke a regeneration process by intervening with an Architecture Manifesto, a pavilion acting as the foundation of a new urban identity. This scenario is framed within the event of the Milano Expo 2015, event which, thanks to its geographical proximity, represents an economical and cultural opportunity for the city of Piacenza. In this perspective, Piacenza should “specialized” on those facilities and services that Milano does not have, such as the small scale touristic industry, as well as the local production of traditional Italian food and the contact to the “native” environment of the plain and the wetland of the River Po. For, Isolotto Maggi is a great deal. However, in the “recycling” process it is ambiguous whether a new identity is needed, or the very identity of the island, that is its wilderness and its *natural congestion*, should be enhanced and intensified.

For the Piacenza Expo 2015, the formula “temporary architecture producing long-lasting effects” has been challenged by *colonizing* the island with several little pavilions, vanishing devices differently framing the sky for a sensory, almost cinematographic experience of the changing morphologies and the living landscapes – the dry, the maquis, the aquatic – thus *preserving* the nature as the main protagonist.

If the Expo 2015 is a celebration of the sense and the artifice, the “EXpost 2030”, as Francesco Garofalo calls the project working with the urban legacy post-Expo, in Piacenza envisions a robust program of riverfront new infrastructures. Those infrastructures should permanently modify not only the perception but also the morphology of the island, in order to recover the former function of city beach and to enable new public facilities related to a River Terminal.

In this complex node, where material and immaterial exchanges take place, where past and future identities are bridging, where Solid-Liquid-Ethereal matters are crossing, the Architecture can affirm its monumentality and its symbolic impact by *competing* with the other major architectural presences.

While the pavilions deal with the idea of morphing, in which the boundary between the path and the pavilions, between the exterior and the interior may disappear, the new Gate from the Po River is the manifesto of a new iconic symbol for the city, made even stronger by the reflecting power of the water.

