

Isola, an Italian urban history

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An island [*isola*, in Italian] can only really be perceived from above. To understand its form, you at least have to look at it from the sea.¹ But geography is not a precise science, and islands are not always surrounded by a void. It may happen that due to a whim of nature, of man, or both, islands become interruptions of a whole, gaps in a web that otherwise extends in all directions.

This is the case of Isola in Milan, a neighborhood just to the north of the city center. It is closed off between the Naviglio Martesana, a canal routed under ground in the 1960s and now topped by a large traffic artery,² and the railroad tracks that have separated this part of Milan from the rest of the city since 1865.

The myth of Isola is born elsewhere, because inside it there is little time for such musings. At the start of the 1900s it is a working class, popular or, in other terms, proletarian zone. A marginal district like many others, whose paradox lies in the fact that it is anything but marginal when seen on the map of the city.

There are many factories in Isola. Since 1899 there was the Gadda&C plant on via De Castillia, the industrial maker of electrical machinery founded by a pioneer in this sector, Ettore Conti, an idea of whose stature is conveyed by the fact that he is buried at Santa Maria delle Grazie. Of course to be laid to rest near Leonardo's Last Supper he paid *aere suo*, as his tombstone reports, but in any case he was a leading figure in the world of research at the turn of the century. When he retired and the company decided to leave the market, the plant on via De Castillia represented a chance not to be missed for his competitors TIBB (Tecnomasio Italiano Brown-Bovery), who bought the place in 1906 and began many decades of operation in the neighborhood. Small and medium machinery was produced, as well as traction motors. If anyone has told you that they made locomotives in Isola, they were exaggerating, because the plant never made large things. That was done in a more suitable facility, at Piazzale Lodi.

Among the other factories in the neighborhood, we should mention the Janecke comb production facility and the Heinemann soap factory, both on via De Castillia. The grouping of these plants and other smaller ones formed an industrial complex of no little importance for a medium-sized neighborhood, which relied almost entirely on their presence for work and sustenance.

Labor, then. Labor and Resistance, because a war broke out, and then another war, and in the second Isola became a Partisan stronghold. This was because of widespread anti-fascist sentiment, and because the zone offered ideal places for hiding, for basement meetings and ambushes. Isola is full of plaques commemorating executed or deported Partisans, some still proudly displayed, others requiring some searching since they have been moved, defaced or become illegible³. Subjected to the implacable action of time, which wears down reality and spares myth. The legend of Partisan Isola is easier to imagine than to illustrate with verifiable facts. Those who were there have but blurry memories, and those who came later – understandably enough – have accepted the legend without reservations.

Fascism was also the time in which Isola was subjected to its first architectural attacks, which were not destructive in material terms, but on a social level. Typically bourgeois buildings were designed for this working class neighborhood of the initial Milanese periphery, in conscious conflict with the surrounding types of housing. The residences in question were designed by the famous architects of Milanese rationalism Pietro Lingeri and Giuseppe Terragni, and constituted three singular and hotly debated episodes:⁴ on the one hand, they are the only examples of signature architecture in Isola, while on the other they are the first noteworthy and externally imposed elements of an urban fabric that had previously developed in a spontaneous way.

Then World War II came to an end, and Milan was in a state of anarchy. The priority was to reconstruct, and the potential to keep things legal was lacking. This is the period of the great criminals. Young people of humble origin, for whom the time had come to grab their own piece of the pie.

They were idealistic criminals, who referred to their actions as “proletarian expropriations”, since the loot would be split up on the counter at the café, and lots of people would dine on the results. This was the so-called *ligera*, a term of unclear origin⁵ but mythical in its own right, because its ranks produced personalities that are part of the

¹ “It's only an island if you look at it from the water” is the phrase with which the police chief of Amity Island, Martin Brody, responds to the oceanographer Matthew Hooper when asked how he can live on an island if he hates the water. *Jaws*, Steven Spielberg, 1975.

² Via Melchiorre Gioia.

³ It should be noted that in 2012 the collective of precarious workers and students Piano Terra has cleaned the plaques in the neighborhood.

⁴ Casa Ghiringhelli on piazzale Lagosta, Casa Rustici-Comolli on via Cola Montano and Casa Toninello on via Perasto.

⁵ It might refer to the “leggera” (light) character of the crimes, to the “lightness” of the wallets of these criminals (hence their humble origins) or to the “lightening” of the wallets of others.

collective imagination of Italy, like Renato Vallanzasca, Francis Turatello or the “machine gun soloist” Luciano Lutring. The latter, whose nickname comes from his habit of hiding the machine gun in a violin case, was a regular presence in Isola, a place used by the *ligera* as a hideout because of its limited points of access⁶.

But the “boss of Isola” was Ezio Barbieri, a local celebrity. From April 1945 to February 1946 he was the protagonist of a series of spectacular holdups, done without any disguise. The procedure was always the same. A black Lancia Aprilia was parked across a street to force the car behind it to stop. The boss and one of his henchmen would emerge from the Aprilia, armed, and politely relieve their victims of all their valuables. Then back to the neighborhood, to split the take and celebrate.

Barbieri was everybody’s friend, including the police, but Milan was getting reorganized month by month, and law and order became a priority. Barbieri was arrested on 26 February 1946, though in his biography there was still room for one last, historic theatrical caper.

On Easter Sunday, that same year, the boss of Isola triggered the biggest uprising in the history of the San Vittore prison, which was packed with three times the number of inmates it had been designed to hold. The prisoners took about thirty guards hostage during the course of a theater performance, and took over the prison, indulging in every kind of devastation. Only after three days of havoc, with five dead and 37 men seriously wounded, did the police manage to take back control. Barbieri’s combined sentences punished him with thirty years of incarceration⁷. It was the end of an extraordinary tale, distant by now, that together with other similar stories has left Isola with a burdensome legacy. That of a criminal enclave, a hostile zone. The classic place parents warn their children not to enter. A place that is interesting to gossip about, but better not to see firsthand.

The postwar era was in full swing and Isola had to stand up to new threats from the outside world. Milan was starting to realize that there was space for new construction in the zone, that Isola could become part of the new city. Projects to reconnect the “island” to the mainland began to appear.

In 1953 the new PRG (Piano Regolatore Generale, or master plan) inserts the zone in an imaginary “Centro Direzionale”⁸. No one knows exactly what that means, but the name bodes no good and Isola starts to mobilize. After all, it is a leftwing neighborhood and everyone knows it. It is no coincidence that in 1964 Palmiro Togliatti and Armando Cossutta, amidst festive crowds, open the regional headquarters of the PCI [the Italian Communist Party] here, the historic reference point for the Milanese left. Legends abound. There are rumors of secret archives, links to Moscow and the KGB, but the “Botteghino” (the facility’s nickname) contains something quite different. It is a true, old-school political center. The discussion covers not only internal party issues, but also the city and the neighborhood, also in debate with exponents of the Liberal and Christian Democratic parties.

The PCI is joined (and at times opposed) by a mixed bag of local movements, including the groups of the extra-parliamentary left and committees of local residents. These realities have roots in the neighborhood and conduct their action from below, supported by the newspaper “per la città” and by a group of young architects at the Polytechnic⁹. One of the most interesting committees is that of Volta-Garibaldi, which in 1969 is transformed into the “Comitato di quartiere Isola” and forcefully opposes the Cannarella variant to the master plan, an abridged version of the “Centro Direzionale” that calls for the eviction of 8000 inhabitants from Isola to make room for the facilities of the Bourse, the offices of the metropolitan rail system, and other buildings for the public administration. Four hundred families are relocated to new housing zones, and the former convent of the Missionary Sisters (Suore d’Egitto) is even expropriated, with its daycare center, orphanage and girls’ recreation center. The local residents react, and in 1973 the Committee occupies the former convent, together with other buildings on via Borsieri that are supposed to be demolished. The construction of the Cannarella variant is stopped, and the former convent becomes the Centro Sociale Isola (Isola Community Center). This is the first victory of collective mobilization in the neighborhood, and in practice it manages to protect Isola from invasive intervention for the rest of the 20th century.

In the meantime Milan is growing, along with the economic boom, and Isola can truly no longer be just an industrial zone. The spaces are small, the highway is far away and the nearby rail facilities are not suitable for freight. The 1960s are the decade of closures. TIBB, after having provided jobs for most of the neighborhood for many years, closes its doors in 1965 and moves to Vittuone, a town in the suburbs that has everything that Isola

⁶ At the time the neighborhood was accessed only by means of the “sottopasso dei fontanili”, and underpass positioned where the bridge of via Farini now stands.

⁷ He served 25 years, and was released in 1971 at the age of 49. He now lives in Messina.

⁸ Conceived as a cluster of buildings for offices and administrative functions, connected to the rest of the city by a system of new streets and parking areas.

⁹ Daniele Vitale, Giancarlo Motta, Massimo Fortis. An example of these practices of mobilization from below is self-reduction of rent. The tenants who believe their dwellings are too expensive with respect to the services provided begin paying a reduced rental rate. If the landlord does not accept the initiative and takes legal action, they can then rely on the expert opinion provided by the architects of the Polytechnic.

lacks. It leaves behind a ghost: a gigantic empty factory, at the center of the zone. No one wants it. No one sees to its dismantling. The most daring boys organize indoor soccer matches there, other people use the empty spaces to take drugs or for sexual trysts. Nothing else happens.

Some time later, artists realize the void is there. The first is an artist who has since found his way into high school art textbooks, though his operation in Isola has mysteriously been overlooked by most experts in the sector: the American artist Gordon Matta-Clark.

Everyone remembers the house in New Jersey the artist cut in half in 1974, just as they recall the conical incision he made one year later, in two Parisian houses¹⁰. But the start of this series of “cutting” works happened with *Infraform*, an unaccredited work Matta-Clark did in 1973, precisely on the walls of the abandoned Brown Boveri factory. This was a simple triangular cut made at the meeting point of the walls of two rooms, opening up an original situation of simultaneous viewing.

No collective art action happens until about a decade later. In the fall of 1984, about forty artists occupy the abandoned TIBB facility, led by Corrado Levi. Levi, an architect, was an inspirational force for the 1980s generation of art in Milan. In the two years prior to the occupation he was in New York, where he became familiar with a new art that was springing up in a clandestine way in the warehouses along the Hudson River, making use of abandoned places to experiment with unofficial modes of operation.

Back in Italy, Levi decides to propose similar operations, and organizes the occupation of the Brown Boveri factory. The goal is to create things with materials found on site, using the abandoned factory as a setting. The unique character of the place charges the action with romantic overtones that were missing from the American models. The artists call the main space the “Cathedral”, while the adjacent space is known as the “Sacristy”. The building is experienced as a holy place, and Francesco Garbelli creates an *Altar* there with iron pipes and sheets of plastic. Stefano Arienti, a student of agricultural science at the time, and an absolute beginner in art, makes *Muffe* (Moulds), using pastel chalk to produce a texture on the walls of the former factory, a work that becomes a part of the wall, blending with it.

So there is a little bit of art now, in Isola. During this period personalities like Mario Merz, Mimmo Paladino, Giò Ponti, Pierpaolo Calzolari, Tony Cragg, Bill Woodrow and others find their way into the zone. There are a few studios, and one well known gallery¹¹, but the image of Isola as a creative playground is definitely an a posteriori invention. There is no one place or group or project capable of catalyzing art and generating ongoing experimentation. Mostly there are individual presences, connected mostly to the combination of low cost of living and vicinity to the city center.

On the other hand, towards the end of the century the Isola of the 1900s sketched above no longer exists. The factories have all been abandoned, and the TIBB structure has been almost totally dismantled, through the combined action of the local committees and the public administration. Halfway through the 1990s only one building remains of that great structure: the so-called “Stecca degli Artigiani”, flanked by two green areas that, with time, become neighborhood parks. The Communist Party self-destructs in 1991, and the headquarters on via Volturno passes to the DS (Democratici di Sinistra) and then to the PD (Partito Democratico), before being completely abandoned. The criminals are all gone. Or at least there are no more of the old-school brigands, the kind who always greeted everyone. They’ve all gone into retirement. The lucky ones have changed their lifestyle, without going to jail, while others have spent good-sized chunks of their lives behind bars, only to emerge as “new men”.

So what remains of the past? The legend, and a few traces.

Precisely in this period, though, something interesting happens in Isola. The social makeup of the neighborhood gets more complicated. There are still the workers and artisans of the Isola of the past. But the typical courtyard buildings with access balconies are welcoming new tenants: students, art workers and immigrants. Those who arrive in Milan without the wherewithal for a house in the center often decide to settle in Isola. Here – it’s true – many things have changed, but there are still many positive factors. Family businesses, the market, the parks, availability of spaces, a very active network of squats,¹² good quality of life, and the poetic charm of living in a historic working class neighborhood that is still a bit dangerous. The new arrivals blend in perfectly with the veteran denizens, and at the start of the new millennium the process can be said to have been completed. Not because there are no more people arriving, but because those who do can easily find their place in a composite, vital microcosm.

It is a microcosm the city never manages to exploit, however. From the outside, Isola still looks like a paradox. A crime inside the continuity of the urban fabric. So the new millennium sets out to succeed where past attempts have repeatedly failed.

¹⁰ The cited projects are called *Splitting* (1974) and *Conical Intersect* (1975).

¹¹ Galleria Toselli, on via De Castillia from 1977 to 1979.

¹² In particular, the San’Antonio Rock Squat, Pergola Tribe and Metropolis.

After all, the passage from one millennium to the next has always been a moment in which man reflects on the magnitude of his potential. Just after the year 1000, medieval Europe emerged from the worst crisis of his history, and it has been demonstrated that to a great extent this was precisely due to the stimulus of being in a new millennium. By surviving such a striking passage unscathed, man is regenerated and rediscovers himself. The same thing happens in Milan. The new millennium is the opportunity to enter Isola, a neighborhood that for the entire 20th century was much discussed and, perhaps, little understood.

As we said at the beginning, an island looks like an island only if you observe it from above. But that is a geographical island. You can depict an Isola of stories, thoughts, actions and traditions only if you observe it from the inside. And, in effect, the conflict narrated below is the result of the contrast between two vantage points, more than two opposing factions: the vantage points of those who live inside Isola and those who try to decide its fate from the outside.

1. The City of Fashion (2000-2002)

At the start of the new millennium Isola is a postindustrial neighborhood, to the north of the center of Milan. All the factories are closed by now, and most of the industrial buildings have been destroyed. The zone has a mixed population, thanks to the combination of workers' housing and low-medium real estate prices. It is one of the least expensive areas anywhere near the city center. Isola has half a century of history of failed urban plans, which from the postwar era on have attempted to radically transform the neighborhood into an administrative zone known as the "Centro Direzionale". All those attempts were stopped due to the resistance of the inhabitants.

But the vicinity of the city center makes it an extremely attractive area for real estate speculation: a massive new development operation is being planned for the area that includes the Garibaldi station, the former Varesine amusement park, and Isola. To find a name for the project, the planners turn to the much-abused cliché of Milan as the "City of Fashion", or the "City of Fashion and Design", or even the "City of Fashion, Design and Communication".¹³

In 2000 the center-right coalition of the mayor Gabriele Albertini, a manager who had made a career in the industrial associations Federmeccanica, Assolombardia and Confindustria, decides to relaunch an urban plan for the area, with the goal of creating a "City of Fashion", adopting the label suggested by the fashion mogul Nicola Trussardi. The administration set operations in motion to approve the construction of one million cubic meters of offices, hotels and residences, turning the project over to the company Sviluppo Garibaldi Repubblica S.p.A, which assigns a budget of 1500 billion euros. In parallel, the Fondazione Città della Moda¹⁴ is formed to promote the project and facilitate its implementation, and a Master Plan is developed by the well-known Milanese architect Pierluigi Nicolin. In 2001 the Albertini administration approves a Program Agreement for a new planning variant, and makes the area available for construction. The City of Fashion progresses rapidly from being an abstract suggestion to becoming the future of an area that has always been seen as strategic for the development of Milan.

Nicolin's plan for the Garibaldi-Repubblica zone arranges the buildings of the City of Fashion and those of the regional and municipal governments around a large rhombus-shaped space, known as the Campus.

For Isola, the consequences of the plan would be of great impact:

- The extension of via Volturno, bringing the traffic coming from north (viale Zara) directly to the center, literally cutting the Isola district in two with a Y-shaped highway.
- The demolition of the remaining parts of an old industrial building known as the Stecca degli Artigiani, or the "crafts building", since it had contained the workshops of artisans and some associations for many years.
- The demolition of a series of historical buildings of the neighborhood, known as the Cascina Romagnina¹⁵, the sole remnant of the agricultural past of Isola; of the apartment buildings on via De Castillia, the ruins of the Janecke comb factory and the Heinemann soap factory, the Nuova Idea disco, a historic reference point for the gay community in Milan, and many other structures.

¹³ Giovanni Verga, Alderman of Territorial Development, press release of 4 February 2004.

¹⁴ The founding members of Fondazione Città della Moda e del Design are: the Mayor of the City of Milan Gabriele Albertini, as president; Beatrice Trussardi, operative vice-president; Roberto Formigoni, President of the Lombardy Region; Paola Iannace, Province of Milan; Mario Miscali, Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio delle Province Lombarde; Luigi Roth, Ente Autonomo Fiera Internazionale di Milano; Mario Boselli, Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana.

¹⁵ Until the industrialization in the 20th century, Isola was outside the city walls, in the rural zone known as Corpi Santi.

- The paving over of the only public parks in the zone, to make room for 120,000 of new edification, organized in two 13-storey buildings.

It is clear that the urban plan in question is very traumatic for a neighborhood that has been offered many development projects since the postwar era that were never implemented, that were supposed to reconnect it to the center of Milan, and to fill an urban gap that was considered a paradox. Isola had been saved from break-up not only by the lack of vision of the projects themselves, but also by the stubborn resistance of the inhabitants, who always managed to block or at least to limit these programs of “renewal”.

This time, however, the effect would be to privatize, and to take away from the inhabitants, vital public spaces like the gardens and the Stecca. The plan would also disrupt circulation due to the traffic artery, which would be damaging in terms of air pollution as well, already a pressing problem in the city of Milan.

But in this period the projects are still in the initial phase, and many people believe that once again everything will fail, or be revised in the face of the mobilization of the local residents.

Cantieri Isola, Isola Art Project and Comitato I Mille: the first steps in opposing urban planning

In 2000 a group of young architects from the Milan Polytechnic form Cantieri Isola, an association with the aim of creative intervention in this imminent urban transformation, through a campaign of information that would make it possible to understand the program. The group, whose most active members are Marco Brugnara, Francesca Cognetti and Isabella Inti, does not think of itself as a committee, but as a “neighborhood workshop”¹⁶.

Social workers, students, members of Legambiente and of the social cooperatives Azimut, which works with disadvantaged young people, and Apolidia, which focuses on the difficulties of immigrants, also enter the group. Cantieri Isola sets out to put the various segments of the neighborhood into contact with each other, to have an impact on urban planning decisions. The association organizes a series of encounters that attract many people at the Azimut headquarters, on via Volturno, and a series of neighborhood events called *The street overthrows the city (la rue renversa la ville)*, a quote from a poem by Paul Eluard¹⁷. The group’s first flyer sums up the goals in three points:

1. To understand the various vocations of the neighborhood. To think about a “qualitative” development of the zone, it is necessary first of all to understand the particularities of the social, economic and territorial fabrics that make it a place with its own history [...].
2. To establish relations with the Garibaldi-Repubblica project. The Neighborhood Workshop acts as an interface between the various local subjects and the administration, as a driving strategy of connection and disconnection with the Garibaldi-Repubblica project. Possible paths of mediation and dialogue will be sought between the major urban planning project and the dimensions linked to the neighborhood, avoiding ideological positions such as local vs. global, design from below vs. design from above, institutional actions vs. informal/self-organized actions.
3. To experiment with forms of direct participation of the inhabitants. An approach from the ground up, basing projects on participation and engagement, responds to the needs to launch more efficient and effective actions, because they are positioned where the processes take form, come undone or are transformed. Processes capable of generating development, seen as an increase in relations, appropriateness of the goals achieved, better quality of life, increased democracy.¹⁸

In this phase Cantieri Isola presents itself as a young, dynamic workshop, open and critical with respect to the urban planning projects, though without a precisely defined line of intervention¹⁹. The activities of the group, in any case, gain wide visibility.

Stefano Bocalini, Mariette Schiltz and Bert Theis, artists and residents of Isola for some time, decide to cooperate with Cantieri Isola, which in turn is already in contact with the architects and artists of the group A12.

A small group is thus formed, and decides to activate a contemporary art project for the long term, temporary and closely connected to the situation of conflict that is arising between the residents of the neighborhood and the city government and the contractors.

The group begins with “Isola Art Project 1”²⁰, a series of interventions done in the gardens of via Confalonieri in the context of *The street overthrows the city*.

¹⁶ /www.inventati.org/cantisola/

¹⁷ *Chanson enfantine des Deux Sèvres* (Paul Eluard, *Poésie involontaire e poésie intentionnelle*).

¹⁸ Cantieri Isola, neighborhood workshop, flyer, 2001.

¹⁹ For a critical analysis of the work of Cantieri Isola see: Felix Mülle, *Un “conflit créatif” autour d’un espace délaissé à Milan*, Criticat n2, Paris 2008. Available online at <http://issuu.com/criticat/docs/criticat02/1>

²⁰ 10 June 2001.

*Untitled/Untitled*²¹ by Bert Theis is a fence, 100 meters long, built to protect the gardens, at the point where the planned street would cut them in two. The work is also composed of three bench modules offered to the neighborhood as a place to relax, and made with the help of about thirty local residents. Legambiente Lombardia submits the application for the installation of the work and receives approval for a duration of three months. Nevertheless, the barrier was to remain in place for six years.

In a dialogue with *Untitled/Untitled*, Stefano Boccalini installs three yellow hammocks, which form the *Sleepy Island. Tracce* by the A12 group, on the other hand, is located in 100 points around the neighborhood, featuring lime squares of 40 cm per side, on which the signs of the passage of vehicles and people soon appear.

The event concludes with a debate on Public Art, at the headquarters of Rifondazione Comunista on the first floor of the Stecca, to discuss the value of artistic projects in urban space with the local residents. Everything is documented on video by Mariette Schiltz, a role she has played throughout the evolution of the events in Isola, all the way to the present.

In 2002 the situation changes: information is made public by the City of Milan to the effect that the City of Fashion will be composed of different urban planning projects, embedded one inside the next like a veritable matryoshka. The Programma integrato d'intervento (PII Garibaldi-Repubblica, Integrated Intervention Plan) covers the entire area, dictating the realization of the City of Fashion. The PII Isola-De Castillia covers the gardens of via Confalonieri and the Stecca: a land swap between the City and private owners would permit construction on this public area, in keeping with a project by the architect Lugli. The Piano Integrato di Recupero (PIR Isola, Integrated Recovery Plan), on the other hand, calls for the construction of a Y-shaped street and an 13-storey building between via Confalonieri and via De Castillia.

The City organizes a meeting with some of the artisans of the Stecca to inform them and to set the conditions for their relocation. There is talk of a shed to be built by October 2003 on vicolo De Castillia, to provide them with space not far from their present location.

The inhabitants understand that this time the change is truly imminent, and as a result their distrust and concern increase. Their anger explodes in February, during the information session "Garibaldi-Repubblica seen from Isola" organized by Cantieri Isola at Teatro Verdi on via Pastrengo.

After having heard talks by urban policy experts, the audience begins to grumble and does not even spare the speakers invited by Cantieri Isola, considered too technical in their analyses and too detached from the real concerns of the residents.

Discontent clearly emerges regarding the proposal of Cantieri Isola: the group's policy of mediation with the municipal authorities and potential investors is seen as totally inadequate by a part of the residents, who now want to begin more forceful mobilization against the projects of the City of Fashion.

In the meantime, Cantieri occupies²² one of the empty spaces in the Stecca degli Artigiani and opens a small cafe, active every Wednesday as a gathering place. The Stecca is also being used by two associations that rent spaces, Athla²³ and Apolidia²⁴, and by about a dozen craftsmen (some paying rent, others squatting) and two homeless men, the Italian Luciano and the Sudanese Mago.

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? The title refers to the work *Tilted Arch* by Richard Serra, an outstanding example of public art not appreciated and then destroyed. See Daniel Buren, *Can Art Get Off Its Pedestal and Rise to Street Level?*, in *Contemporary Sculpture. Projects in Münster*, Hatje Publishers, 1997.

22 A few years later, Cantieri Isola explains that the occupation was supposed to be of a temporary nature: "If new practices and temporary activities are catalysts for new populations, flows of goods, products and services, then we can talk about temporary reuse as another, subsidiary economy, but not as a replacement for policies of urban renewal". From the poster for "Dispositivi Riuso Temporaneo", a seminar and international round table organized by Cantieri Isola, Multiplicity.lab, DiAP-Politecnico Milano, 9.9.2009. "The temporary, then, as an opportunity to design, in a time between a before and an after, a service for the city, to trigger transformation, to bring an abandoned place back to life and to reconstruct networks of relation. In the temporary project specific forms of expertise are called into play, just as management, together with the definition of a program of action and the estimate of costs and investments, is decisive for temporary success". Isabella Inti and Valeria Inguaggiato, *Riuso Temporaneo: Una casa per i giovani*, www.arcipelagomilano.it, 28 June 2010.

23 In September 1986 ATLHA is formed, the Association for Leisure Time of the Handicapped. It aims to provide recreational activities and favor wider social integration for the disabled. www.atlhaonlus.eu

24 "Apolidia is a non-profit intercultural association based on volunteer work. It was formed in 1990 thanks to a group of Italians and immigrants, with the idea of creating a gathering place for people of different cultures. It organizes free Italian language courses for foreigners, on different levels (beginning, intermediate, advanced) and other language courses (Arabic, Chinese, Spanish)." www.lastecca.org/apolidia

In May a new element appears, in opposition to the transformation: the Comitato I Mille²⁵. It is composed of neighborhood residents²⁶ who define their objectives in more precise, resolute terms than Cantieri Isola:

The Committee will act so that the community will be ensured of having public parks that can be used, opposing the ceding to private interests of municipal lands now used as green areas, and promoting extension of the green areas.

The Committee believes that the creation of a high-speed traffic artery is not part of the criteria of renewal on an municipal or a local level, and believes that the creation of an artery leading to the city center will simply increase the congestion of traffic in the city and the neighborhood.

[The Committee] promotes all the necessary demands to guarantee the livability of the Isola neighborhood and to propose alternative solutions to the Garibaldi Repubblica project and to the P.I.I. (Integrated Intervention Program) on the Isola Lunetta areas. [...]

[The Committee] will take legal action in the appropriate courts of law to safeguard the quality of life of the neighborhood and environmental protection.²⁷

Comitato I Mille immediately activates capillary distribution of informative flyers on the urban planning projects, organizes encounters at the gardens on via Confalonieri with snacks and games for children, and collects signatures on a petition that leads to a public hearing at City Hall, moderated by the Councillor for Urban Planning Gianni Verga.

Art and neighborhood: the beginning of a continuing challenge

In 2002 *out* is formed (Office for Urban Transformation), an open platform invented by Bert Theis to support the struggle of the neighborhood against top-down urban planning, using artistic means. The *out* office is above all a working method, to develop a new type of urbanism from the ground up. Its guidelines: to understand the city, to dream of the city and transform it, combining the artistic sensibilities of many professionals (architects, philosophers, photographers, designers, lawyers, researchers and others) with the everyday urban experience and intuitions of the inhabitants of the city. The *out* office occupies a space on the first floor of the Stecca, and prepares to activate it with encounters and exhibitions.

The involvement of contemporary art in the issues of the neighborhood continues to grow. In November 2001, for the presentation of the website of Cantieri Isola and the opening of an Infopoint on the Garibaldi-Repubblica project at the Stecca, the group organizes, together with Mario Gorni of Careof²⁸, "Isola Art Project 2": *Art and the City*, a video program on the first floor of the building. A slide show explaining the meaning of Isola Art Project is projected in the courtyard. In June 2002 "Isola Art Project 3" offers a varied program: at the cafe of Cantieri Isola there are screenings of the *5 Bar Clips* by Thomas Hirschhorn, conceived precisely to be watched in a bar and not in an exhibition space, and *House for Travellers* by Marjetica Potrč, made for Manifesta 3 in Ljubljana²⁹. In the parks, there is a collective planting of a *Palma Clandestina* under the ironic moniker of "Bert Theis and friends", to complete the *Untitled/Untitled* project of the previous year. Actiegroep, a group of young architects from Genoa, presents *Passaggi Attraverso*, a model that shows a possible restructuring of the Stecca, connecting the two parks by means of a passage that crosses the building. All this is followed by the debate on "Art as service/Art as social organization", with Actiegroep, Gruppo A12, Stefano Boccalini, Bert Theis, the curator Marco Scotini and the critic Emanuela De Cecco. The latter comments on the encounter in an e-mail sent to the participants:

²⁵ The name of the Committee refers symbolically to the "Expedition of the Thousand" led by Giuseppe Garibaldi in 1860, with the aim of unifying the peninsula under the flag of the Kingdom of Italy. The connections between this historical episode and the present situation are many: the major development project for the area is called Garibaldi-Repubblica; the state railway station in the zone is Garibaldi Station, which is also the name of the subway stop serving Isola; Garibaldi's expedition began precisely with the landing at Marsala, in Sicily, on an island; not to mention the legend stating that Garibaldi spent the night in Isola, or the story of a bust of Garibaldi stolen by the Socialists in a courtyard in the neighborhood. In any case, there is quite a bit of healthy irony in the decision of the committee opposed to the Garibaldi-Repubblica project to call itself "I Mille".

²⁶ The five founding members are Patrizia Airaghi, Giuliana De Carli, Augusta Signorini, Eugenio Vendramet and Silvia Vallini.

²⁷ Document of the constitution of Comitato I Mille, Milan, 15 May 2002.

²⁸ Careof is a non-profit contemporary artspace that has operated for years in Milan, focusing on the promotion of young Italian artists. For several years now it has moved into the Fabbrica del Vapore together with Viafarini, another non-profit artspace of Milan, giving rise to DOCVA, an archive of new Milanese and Italian art.

²⁹ Marjetica Potrč donated her budget for the event to a homeless family, so they could build a house on the outskirts of the city. The video documents the construction of this improvised lodging.

Often the most resistance to artistic interventions or similar initiatives comes precisely from the people who reside in the places the projects are done. The local residents often feel like they are being observed by curious onlookers, or as if their habitat had been invaded by aliens who know nothing of the real problems of the place, and act superficially, with an attitude of guests, which is very different from the attitude of someone who experiences the internal dynamics of a territory, with firsthand knowledge of its pros and cons³⁰.

This is a key reflection to correctly interpret this phase of contemporary art projects in Isola. The only clear thing is that this is the start of a long dialectical process, aimed at gradually bridging the inevitable starting gap between artists and inhabitants in motion. The challenge is to make normally parallel realities converge in a single trajectory. Stefano Boccalini writes:

The territory is not only defined through a series of volumes, but also through a series of relations, experiences and desires, because those who live in a place have to be active subjects in the transformation of public space. It is not possible, in my view, to activate a project in the territory without knowing the aspects connected with the lives of people and their desires for future development. The wager, each time, is to manage to create a sense of belonging that is not only linked to the history of the territory, but that also starts with the defining of new types of belonging. This means that today communities are no longer those passed on to us by history, but also those that from time to time we are able to construct, to represent ourselves inside a social system that often does not have the capacity, in its constituted organs, to represent us³¹.

With the support of Cantieri Isola, Boccalini activates a long-term project: the creation of *Wild Island*, a community vegetable garden in one of the endangered parks. The artist involves citizens in its creation, who donate the plants and, above all, activate an exchange that is full of meanings.

Cantieri Isola and the local Legambiente branch decide to organize an organic market on a regular basis in the parks, to encourage people to use them. They start to work with the Italian organic agriculture association AIAB, organizing the first market day on 10 November 2002, with financial backing from Fondazione Cariplo. This is precisely the situation in which Boccalini undertakes his project:

During an organic market [...] I set up an office, where I asked people to donate plants for the construction of the garden. When they signed up, I told them to come to the next organic market, so we could plant the garden together in the selected area. I wanted *Wild Island* to grow as the contemporary city grows, where the combination of different cultures develops exponentially. So in the garden the people living in the neighborhood would plant something that belongs to their culture, to their desire, sharing it with others: a fig tree grows next to an exotic plant, a lavender bush next to a paulownia.³²

The first organic market was also the occasion in which “Isola Art Project 4” was organized. In the press release Marco Scotini makes at first attempt to outline a theoretical profile of the contemporary art projects in progress:

Isola Art Project makes the relationship between artistic practices, popular activism and local context one of the strong moments of social and collective project creation. With respect to the initiative that defines itself as an alternative orientation towards the Garibaldi-Repubblica program, Isola Art Project from the start has taken on a multiplicity of tactics, scattered in space and stratified in time, already permitting legibility of its tracks. [...]

Making contemporary art practices its main tool of interpretation of the instability of places and the management of urban transformations, in the moment in which they are proposed as projects open to collective participation, ordinary creativity and social protest, Isola Art Project pursues its operative strategy, calling on a series of new figures and giving rise to new functions³³.

“Isola Art Project 4” opens the *out* office on the first floor of the Stecca, where Comitato I Mille gathers signatures for its petition. In the atrium behind the office the slide show *Infotainment*, presented by Park Fiction at documenta 11, is screened, along with an exhibition of drawings on the Stecca, *Inselskizzen* by Andrea Sala. Mario Gorni curates a video program using the Careof archive and presents two projects done recently in the Isola neighborhood: *Installazione Isola 2* by the A12 group, done on the Bussa overpass with furniture found in the Stecca, and *Wild Island* by Boccalini. At *out*, finally, there is the debate “Park Fiction, Hamburg and Isola Art Project, Milan, two experiences compared”³⁴.

³⁰ Emanuela De Cecco, e-mail dated 30 July 2002, archive of Isola Art Center.

³¹ Stefano Boccalini, text for the *Forum mondial-Villes et qualité de vie. Enjeux globaux, solutions locales*, Geneva 2006.

³² *ibid*

³³ *Isola Art Project 4*, press release of 10 November 2002, archive of Isola Art Center.

³⁴ With Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, Roberto Pinto, Francesca Pasini, Marco Scotini, Angela Vettese, Gruppo A12, Stefano Boccalini, Andrea Sala and Bert Theis.

The enthusiastic participation makes many artists, critics and curators in Milan start to pay attention to the artistic and urban situation in the neighborhood. They include Francesca Pasini, art critic and curator, and Grazia Toderi, one of the outstanding exponents of Italian video art, who had recently moved her studio to Isola.

Starting in December 2002 different meetings are held at the *out* office to develop future strategies, in relation to the increased number of people interested in participating.

It is also important to point out that the Milanese art world is going through a particular moment here, because the city has no contemporary art museum, no centers of experimentation. The possibility of making such a place in Isola therefore meets with great enthusiasm. The Stecca seems like a suitable place to fill this gap, while offering the possibility of responding to two emergencies at the same time: the art crisis of Milan and the urban crisis of the neighborhood.

2. The City from Below (2003-2004)

In 2003 it becomes clear that the big names of the world of fashion in Milan are not interested in clustering in a luxurious ghetto called the City of Fashion. Nicola Trussardi, who had the idea for the project, died in 1999, and his son Francesco died in 2003. Other brands like Armani or Prada opt to create their own spaces, elsewhere³⁵. The municipal administration continues to work on the City of Fashion with Fondazione Trussardi, the Camera della Moda, an association of smaller fashion firms, and Fondazione Fiera, which is looking for a place in the city to hold fashion shows previously hosted in the spaces of Portello, the trade fair facility that is now too small.

The Lombardy Region, in the meantime, approves the Program Agreement for the PII Garibaldi-Repubblica, permitting construction on a territorial scale of 230,238 square meters.

The City Council votes to renew an agreement with a company from the Ligresti group, the Italian real estate giant, dating back to 1989 and previously nullified by the Council of State in 2000 due to charges of corruption. This document permits construction of a building of 33,000 m² for offices, a shopping center and hundreds of parking places, as well as the construction of the first segment of the street from the Nicolin master plan.

The year 2003 is also the moment in which the Texas-based multinational corporation Hines appears on the scene, which splits up the capital of the project with the Italian Ligresti group. Hines moves in a strategic way, far from the spotlights, purchasing different lots of land through small owners gathered in the Società di Sviluppo Garibaldi Repubblica S.p.A.³⁶

Few people in Milan are aware that Hines is a major player in the worldwide real estate business.

On its website, the company introduces itself as follows:

Since 1957 Hines has initiated, acquired or managed over 1000 projects, representing 390.000.000 square feet of real estate in 245 cities on four continents.³⁷

Hines controls assets of 12.5 billion dollars, and has been active in New York since 1981, where it has built six buildings in Midtown, including the Lipstick Building by Philip Johnson.

In Italy the Hines group has operated since 1999 through Hines Italia S.r.l., created together with the Coima company of the Catella family³⁸, in operation since the 1970s. Hines Italia has already done several projects in Milan, like Borgognone (23,000 m²) and Eginardo Renovation (18,000 m²), before taking charge of the Garibaldi-Repubblica and Varesine projects (250,000 m²).

³⁵ Since 1993 Fondazione Prada has managed a former industrial space, used for contemporary art, at via Fogazzaro 36, showing projects by artists like Laurie Anderson, Louise Bourgeois, Walter De Maria, Dan Flavin, Michael Heizer, Carsten Höller, Steve McQueen, Tobias Rehberger, and others. Fondazione Trussardi, since 2003, has chosen a different operative mode, holding its shows in different places around the city of Milan, where the curator Massimiliano Gioni presents exhibitions by Elmgreen & Dragset, Maurizio Cattelan, John Bock, Anri Sala, Martin Creed, Fischli & Weiss, Tino Seghal, Paul McCarthy and others.

³⁶ ? "During the course of 2003 the Hines Group has reached agreements with seven private owners in the context of the Garibaldi-Repubblica project, controlling 86% of the private development rights. This has made it possible, thanks to agreements with other private owners, to reach the signing, on 11 July, of the convention with the City and therefore to effectively launch the Garibaldi-Repubblica project". Press release of the City of Milan, 30 September 2003.

³⁷ www.hines.com, January 2011

³⁸ In 1974 Riccardo Catella founds Coima, the real estate development and management company of which the Catella is the main shareholder, together with the Domomedia group.

In the meantime, a resolution on the variant of the master plan adds another piece of the project, making it possible to build on the area of the former Varesine station, on the edge of the Garibaldi-Repubblica zone. The area has been involved in a long struggle between the State Railway, the City of Milan and the architect De Mico.³⁹ In 2004 the Council of State rules in favor of the latter, permitting construction on the land of 82,000 m² of buildings for private use and 6030 m² for public use.

The sum of all the components in play leads to an overall operation that is unprecedented in scale for the city of Milan: over one million cubic meters. The fact that the three zones involved in the projects (ex-Varesine, Garibaldi-Repubblica and Isola) are neighboring areas makes it logical to assume there will be an urban planning effort to cover the entire zone, taking the interactions between its parts into account. Instead, the City approves multiple urban plans, independent from each other, ignoring their devastating overall environmental impact.

The projects are then commissioned to prestigious architecture studios: New York-based Pei-Cobb & Partners will build the new headquarters of the Lombardy Region; world-famous architect César Pelli will handle Garibaldi-Repubblica, designing the buildings for that zone; the rhombus-shaped park (Campus) becomes the focus of an International Design Competition with the title “Giardini di Porta Nuova - area Garibaldi-Repubblica”. About ten groups are selected for the competition, including the Italians Marco Bay and Giancarlo De Carlo Associati, and the international group Inside/Outside of Mathias Lehner, Petra Blaisse and Mirko Zardini. The City declares: “The Gardens of Porta Nuova represent the heart of the Garibaldi-Repubblica project: namely a park of 100,000 m² around which will stand the City of Fashion, Design and Communication, and the Institutional Pole.”⁴⁰ A heart that will have trouble beating, as we shall see.⁴¹

Different identities of opposition

In 2003 and 2004, as a reaction to the forces called into play by the City and by private interests, the mobilization against the top-down projects imposed by the administration and the real estate developers becomes stronger and more diversified. The antithesis of the City of Fashion is the City from Below.

After the experience at Teatro Verdi, the members of Cantieri Isola take a more radical position. The slogan on the flyers distributed to support the struggle is: “The Stecca needs you to help stop the bulldozers”. In January 2004 Cantieri Isola, together with Legambiente and Comitato I Mille, files a series of critical observations on the PII Garibaldi-Repubblica and on the environmental impact study conducted by the City of Milan. The law states that the City has to respond to these observations point by point, deciding whether to accept them or not.

The Comitato I Mille informs and organizes citizens with flyers, posters and constant door-to-door canvassing. The Council of Zone 9, on July 2003, is attended by about 100 persons, who protest against the PII Isola, the new plan for the neighborhood issued by the City in June, raising many points. When the Zone Council approves the project, the session ends in chaos due to the protest of citizens and some of the councillors themselves⁴².

In October 2003 a petition with many signatures is delivered to the municipal administration, the Zone Council and all the members of the City Council. The document summing up the demands of the neighborhood is signed by the most important local institutions and by over 3000 Isola residents.⁴³ The proposal is not to build on the parks on via Confalonieri, to restructure the Stecca degli Artigiani and make it into a gathering place for the residents and a center of art, culture and crafts. The petition also requests that the present road network be maintained, and that the shopping center be built elsewhere. The proposal would transfer part of the building rights of private investors from the parks on via Confalonieri to the Garibaldi-Repubblica area, with the aim of connecting the parks to the future Gardens of Porta Nuova and the rest of the city. In this way, the building rights and the general needs of the city would be respected, without overlooking the rights of the inhabitants of the surrounding area.

One Sunday morning in March 2004 the Committee meets with about 100 inhabitants in the parks on via Confalonieri, for a collective performance in which the people form a heart around plywood letters that form the

³⁹ “The embankment owned by the railway system, 32,000 m² along viale Liberazione, assessed by the revenue office at 36 billion, had wound up in the hands of Bruno De Mico, whose name and that of his company Codemi are associated with the graft scandal regarding the building of prisons. We were in December 1985. De Mico had obtained from the Minister of Transportation at the time, Claudio Signorile, the signing of a contract of exchange: Codemi would get the area, and the Railroad would get 300 already constructed houses. De Mico would then have to deal with the revoking of the contract, decided by the new Minister of Transportation Giorgio Santuz. A legal battle began: after several years, De Mico wins the whole dispute. The area is his, and the terrain can be developed”. Soglio Elisabetta, *Corriere della Sera*, 7 April 2001.

⁴⁰ “Milano. Giardini di Porta Nuova”, brochure of the Urban Center of the City of Milan, 2004.

⁴¹ At the time of the publication of this book the park has still not been built.

⁴² *Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica*, 4 July 2003.

⁴³ “Le battaglie e le proposte del Comitato I Mille. Intervista alla presidenza dell’organismo”, Renato Marelli, *Zona Nove Isola* n. 4, January 2009.

word “Isola”. The image, shot from the roof of the Stecca, is repeatedly utilized for media communications in the future, to spread awareness through mass media of the counter-proposal of Isola. The Committee also proceeds with its opposition on a legal level. When the City, in 2004, approves the two projects that have a direct impact on Isola, the PIR Isola and the PII Isola, the Committee organizes groups of citizens to appeal against those decisions, to the Regional Administrative Court (TAR Lombardia).

The alternative proposal in the petition of Comitato I Mille is illustrated by *out* - Office for Urban Transformation. To visualize the dream of the community, the office distributes an empty silhouette of the Stecca and the parks on sheets of A3 paper, to the associations and residents of the neighborhood. The sheets provide room to draw and to write one’s own desires and proposals of transformation.⁴⁴ At the end of the investigation, *out* produces a synthesis of the materials thus gathered: the design of a collective dream is printed on a large PVC sheet and hung on the facade of the Stecca.⁴⁵ The Committee, in turn, creates and distributes posters, adding the message “Parks on via Confalonieri... what if they were like this?”. The Committee needs a constant supply of images that can explain its positions and proposals, and *out* works in this direction: the drawings are attached to press releases, published on flyers, posters and newsletters, projected during encounters and discussions.

The *out* office is an open platform of artists, architects, illustrators, photographers and students, which tries to identify fertile collaborations to open up possibilities of dialogue suited to the context.⁴⁶

One example is *Stecca X-Ray*, a series of 100 photographic portraits made by the photographer Alessandro Di Giampietro together with Bert Theis, creating an x-ray of the Stecca microcosm. Displayed in the *out* headquarters, the photographs contribute to encourage the encounters and cooperation of many people who have been visiting the Stecca for some time without ever having entered into contact with each other. The occupied *out* facility functions as a meeting point for the neighborhood movement. For example, Comitato I Mille, which does not have its own facility, organizes its press conferences and other public gatherings in the *out* office.

Towards the end of 2002 the work of Isola Art Project attracts the interest of the local and national art world. The increased participation and fertile atmosphere lay the groundwork for a second phase of the project, which aims at a leap of quality and visibility. In February 2003, after months of preparation and meetings at the Stecca, about thirty artists, critics and curators found the association Isola dell'Arte-IdA.⁴⁷ Grazia Toderi is elected president. The members are mostly artists and critics of the generation that has recently emerged on the contemporary art circuit in Milan, a choice is intended to make the ambitious proposal of an art center at the Stecca more credible, giving the project stronger political clout in its opposition to real estate speculation.

In its first press release the IdA association explains its objectives as follows:

Isola dell'Arte is an association formed by artists, critics and curators, to propose to the City of Milan the use of some empty spaces in the Stecca degli Artigiani to make a contemporary art center and to create a dialogue with the social realities operating in the Isola neighborhood, which have the aim of saving the two parks next to the Stecca, that are threatened with destruction by the Garibaldi-Repubblica urban project.⁴⁸

Some of the founding members work on an ongoing basis on the organization and management of the space. Others offer their names to the cause without actively participating in the process of experimentation in progress.

Francesca Pasini observes how the action of IdA can simultaneously address the inhabitants of the zone and the art world:

⁴⁴ The method is based on the “archive of desires” created by Park Fiction in Hamburg. To design the park, in the St. Pauli district, the collective had gathered the various proposals of the inhabitants in an archive. Some of the proposals were later implemented, and can still be seen on the site (www.parkfiction.org).

⁴⁵ The drawings of *out* are by the artist and illustrator Marco Vaglieri, and are made together with Bert Theis. The printing is financed by the Museum of Modern Art (Mudam) of Luxembourg, which in exchange receives a copy of the sheet for its collection.

⁴⁶ Over the years the following people have worked with *out* in Italy: Giulia Alberio, Angelo Castucci, Alessandro di Giampietro, Mara Ferreri, Marcello Giannoli, Carmelo Mutalipassi, Alberto Pesavento, Alice Pintus, Cecilia Pirovano, Lorenzo Ronzoni, Mariette Schiltz, Luis Miguel Selvelli, Noah Stolz, Bert Theis, Marco Vaglieri. Through the initiative of Lorenzo Rocha Cito, other people have been involved in the branch offices in Mexico City and Bilbao, while Renaud Codron has collaborated from Geneva.

⁴⁷ The founding members of Isola dell'Arte are: Mario Airò, Stefano Arienti, Stefano Boccacini, Marco Brugnara (Cantieri Isola), Antonella Bruzzese (A12), Cecilia Casorati, Giulio Ciavoliello, Laura Cherubini, Emanuela De Cecco, Anna Daneri, Gabriele Di Matteo, Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, Stefano Dugnani, Eva Marisaldi, Liliana Moro, Adrian Paci, Luca Pancrazzi, Francesca Pasini, Roberto Pinto, Gianni Romano, Marco Scotini, Bert Theis, Grazia Toderi, Vincenzo Chiarandà and Anna Stuart (UndoNet), Giorgio Verzotti, Angela Vettese, Francesco Vezzoli, Cesare Viel and Luca Vitone.

⁴⁸ Isola dell'Arte, press release for “Le Mille e una Notte 1”, 13 April 2003.

It would be tautological for us to address only those who have already chosen the horizon of art. IdA intends to speak with the men and women who live in Isola, to start with them and then to address others. [...] We share an intention, that is gradually defined: [...] a system to think together, and not just a real need to start with the most urgent issues. [...] To participate in a synchronic way in the definition of an art project has made me see something that happens before I look at the work or the proposal of a project, and in this shift I have glimpsed a special understanding, I seemed to be watching the birth of a thought as if I were behind an open door, from which I could see and listen. [...] A collective project has to be utopian and ahead of its time. So it is a piece of this unexpected desire to associate art and critique of everyday life of a working-class neighborhood of an Italian metropolis.⁴⁹

Works that refer to the context of the district are often created or shown, like the series of photographs *Concrete Island* by Paola Di Bello, set in the neighborhood, or *L'isola dei Paci* by Adrian Paci, a video in which the artist invites all the people with the name Paci living in Milan to participate, taking advantage of the fact that his surname is a common one among both Italians and Albanians.

Certain works refer directly to the neighborhood's struggle, like the video *Shining Garden* by Grazia Toderi, in which a child runs on the lawn of the park of via Confalonieri, drawing the form of the infinity sign with lights that magically turn on. The performance *No* by Ottonella Mocellin and Nicola Pellegrini symbolically defends the Stecca building, as they link themselves with handcuffs through the building's walls, reproducing the technique used by the squatters of London. *Untitled* by Marcello Maloberti gathers a group of residents on the roof of the Stecca, where they form a compact block that symbolically defends itself, brandishing canvases with illustrations of tropical animals.

Some of the members of IdA put the project of creating the contemporary art center that is lacking in Milan prior to the urban planning issues of Isola, but they identify, in any case, with the objectives of the neighborhood struggle, establishing excellent relationships with Comitato I Mille.

Awareness of the idea that an art center, especially if it is inserted in the context of a project of urban restructuring devoted to fashion and design, can favor the gentrification of the neighborhood, only emerges gradually, as the urban projects take more definite form. In 2003 there is still the hope, perhaps a bit ingenuous but certainly based on strong convictions, that art can make a contribution to save the neighborhood. There is also still a belief in the possibility of a dialogue with the public administration and the developers:

The relatively central position in the city, the proximity to other, existing centers of creativity, or ones that are being developed [...] lead us to believe that the implementation of our proposal can contribute to restore to Milan a cultural dimension, allowing it to interact as a peer with cities like Berlin, London, New York.⁵⁰

In this moment, the analysis shared by all the associations is that it is impossible to stop the Garibaldi-Repubblica program as a whole, but that there is hope of a victory in Isola, which is just a small part of the gigantic program, though also the most significant in historical and cultural terms. It is no coincidence that none of the other zones impacted by the project have produced such a force of opposition.⁵¹ Meanwhile, IdA creates a contagious dynamism and soon has about fifty members. The group decides to organize a series of exhibition events lasting one day each, with the evocative title "Le mille e una notte" (The thousand and one nights)⁵².

The opposition movement starts to diversify

In 2002, when Cantieri Isola, *out* and Isola Art Project enter the Stecca, more than half of the building owned by the municipal government is still empty and full of debris. The spaces occupied by Cantieri Isola and *out* have been ceded by Domenico Bertolaso, an artisan who has rented space at the Stecca since 1985, who repairs and sells used furniture. Besides his rented space, Domenico has always used other spaces in the building, including the whole second floor, set aside as a warehouse for old furniture.

Starting in the spring of 2003 different groups of young people are attracted by the activities at the Stecca and squat other spaces. The most dynamic of these groups is undoubtedly the workshop of design students of the Polytechnic, Controprogetto, which occupies a large space on the side of via De Castillia. The spokesperson for the group,

⁴⁹ Francesca Pasini, *Noi che abbiamo scelto l'Isola*, unpublished text, May 2003, archive of Isola Art Center.

⁵⁰ *ibid*

⁵¹ The collaboration of Comitato I Mille for the legal action against Garibaldi-Repubblica with the ephemeral Comitato Bosco di Gioia ends when the latter committee is dissolved, after not managing to stop the destruction of the park in December 2005. See: *La città divisa*. The Committee for the ex-Varesine area never really gets off the ground.

⁵² Invented by Francesca Pasini.

Davide Rampanelli, immediately states that the Stecca represents the pursuit of a space for self-production. The group's website puts it as follows:

We defend this space from speculation, demolition, commercial decay. Controprogetto is an open reality, a place of gathering, exchange and contamination. An artistic, social and community laboratory in ongoing evolution and mutation.⁵³

Controprogetto immediately installs a large bar, which attracts hundreds of students every evening, drawn by the alternative character of the place. The bar, also rented out to other groups, ensures good income, and the group decides to use part of the proceeds to launch projects of renovation of the Stecca.

In this phase different groups are attracted by the building, most of them with a favorable view of the policies of Cantieri Isola: for example, Isola TV, the bicycle repair shop +bc, the Isola Critica purchasing group and "Architetti senza frontiere". Others still, like the collectives "La Breccia" and "acKme", engage in rather temporary squatting, with no particular impact on the cultural and political production of the Stecca.⁵⁴

The first problems arise inside the Isola movement around two aspects: the attitude towards the urban planning projects and the modes of management and organization of the spaces of the Stecca.

When the competition guidelines for the Giardini di Porta Nuova are published, the architects of Cantieri Isola decide to participate as part of the group headed by Giancarlo Di Carlo, creating the first split. Giò Pozzo, a member of Cantieri Isola, Legambiente and +bici, writes:

Participating means accepting the terms of the guidelines, and as a result the destruction of the Stecca, the parks, etc. [...] And then? A bit of publicity in academic circles, in exchange for the impossibility of continuing with the counter-information we wanted to do. [...] In short, rather than taking part in the design group of De Carlo, for the project of a park that will probably never be built, and that in any case will be outside of the neighborhood and isolated from it, [we should] concentrate our forces on what, instead, can happen very soon: the destruction of the Stecca and of the two parks. To truly, in this case, make use of participatory design, to defend by all possible means what we can defend. [...]

We should keep padlocks ready to chain ourselves to the Stecca, if necessary, instead of participating in the competition for the park.⁵⁵

IdA also goes through moments of tension as a result of the competition, because one of its founding members, Luca Vitone, takes part, with the group headed by the Milanese architect Marco Bay. The group's project accepts the destruction of the Stecca and the construction of the park, but attempts to shift the activities of the Stecca into a former rail depot on via De Castillia, a much smaller space.

On the other hand, the project of the Giancarlo De Carlo group with Cantieri Isola proposes saving the Stecca and the adjacent parks, but accepts that they be cut across by the Y-shaped street; furthermore, in a very ambiguous move, it attaches plans for construction on one of the two existing parks⁵⁶. This ambiguity had already appeared in encounters with associations and inhabitants organized in the spaces of *out* by Cantieri Isola: at the time, the local residents had been asked to imagine possible constructions in the parks.

The jury chaired by Stefano Boeri selects the group Inside/Outside, composed of Petra Blaisse, Mathias Lehner and Mirko Zardini⁵⁷, for their project called the "Biblioteca degli alberi" (Library of Trees), which calls for saving the Stecca and one and a half parks. The project is based on the concept that the park is a central feature of urban design, and that all the constructions should be organized around this pivot. The design does not totally correspond to the desires of the neighborhood, but in any case it leaves room for hope. The problem is that the City is not required to build the winning project.⁵⁸

⁵³ www.controprogetto.it

⁵⁴ In 2006 Breccia and acKme have already vanished from the scene and their spaces are taken over by other groups of the same provisional nature, like Deposito Lirico.

⁵⁵ G. Pozzo, letter to the mailing list of Cantieri Isola, 17 July 2003. Archive of Isola Art Center. The Cantieri Isola mailing list connects all the people active at the Stecca. Following the disagreements about the future of the Stecca in July 2006, Cantieri Isola interrupts communication and the members of Isola dell'Arte are removed from the list.

⁵⁶
[?] See: *La costruzione di un progetto*, Alinea Editrice, Florence 2004, p. 105

⁵⁷ Inside/Outside Group: Petra Blaisse, Mathias Lehner, Lieuwe Conradie, Marieke van den Heuvel in collaboration with Michael Maltzan, Mirko Zardini and others.

⁵⁸ In the competition guidelines, point 4.7 does not oblige the City to construct the winning project; in case of lack of construction, a financial compensation is provided for the winner.

The second point of conflict has to do with the conception of the Stecca and the use of its spaces. IdA, *out* and Comitato I Mille want a Stecca in which craftsmen and socio-cultural associations connected with the neighborhood can operate, offering all the gathering places that are lacking in Isola: meeting rooms, recreational activities, parties, self-organized initiatives, a cinema and an art center. The project of Cantieri Isola, on the other hand, is a Stecca that offers and sells services to the inhabitants of the neighborhood, so the group attempts to include associations and projects that respond to these parameters.

The disagreement about the use of the spaces takes concrete form in April 2003. For the first event entitled “Le mille e una notte”, IdA frees up and cleans a series of spaces in the Stecca that were previously not utilized. In particular, it wants to temporarily transform one room on the ground floor into a cinema. Cantieri Isola, however, feels that the space should be used in a different way, changes the locks and makes it into a storeroom for the organic market and the headquarters of the purchasing group located in the Stecca. Cantieri Isola also takes over another space freed up by IdA on the first floor, making it available to Isola TV.

The members of IdA, in spite of tensions and bad feelings, given the numerical force of the group from the Polytechnic, decide to concentrate programming on the second floor of the Stecca and in the parks, giving up any claim on other spaces. So in June 2004 *out* also leaves its office on the first floor, and moves to the second floor, as part of the art and neighborhood center.

From April 2003 until the summer of 2004 IdA offers very intense programming of activities, exhibitions, performances and encounters, also activating a café and a book space. These initiatives take place in about half of the second floor, with the declared intent of cleaning up the other half and making it ready for use in the future.

Nevertheless, the other groups of the Stecca dispute IdA's right to independently decide on the programming of the art center, and after the summer of 2004 they break the lock on the entrance to the second floor and start to clear out the not yet accessible space. The space remains open for a few days. The equipment and materials of IdA vanish, though the group is participating, in any case, in the work of clearing and cleaning of the new space, so as not to leave it in the hands of the other groups. In the meantime, to protect the space utilized up to this point, a wooden door is built to divide the second floor into two halves. In November 2004 an assembly of Cantieri Isola, Controprogetto, Isola TV and Breccia decides to construct, on the second floor, a room for the homeless mason Aziz, hosted at the Stecca by Controprogetto to help with the restructuring of the building. For two years the mason lives in dreadful conditions, without running water or a bathroom, before he decides to leave Isola.

The noise and litter caused by the customers of the bars of the Stecca create tensions with the inhabitants of the nearby via Confalonieri and via De Castillia. Cantieri Isola opens its bar every Wednesday, and Controprogetto opens every Tuesday. These spaces are occasionally rented out to other groups for self-financing initiatives. The neighbors start to lose patience and threaten to circulate a petition against the bars.

Comitato I Mille, sensitive to the reactions of the neighborhood, decides to no longer take part in the meetings of the groups of the Stecca, starting in May 2003. One year and a half later, the situation has deteriorated, as indicated in the minutes of a meeting of the various occupying groups:

Three main causes of this decay have been identified.

1. General pollution of the spaces and abandoning of litter, trash and excrement in the courtyard, on the staircases, near the enclosure walls, in the basements and the non-occupied spaces.
2. Social decay and criminal activities.
3. Overcrowding of cars and vans. [...] To keep the courtyard of the Stecca from becoming a hang-out of drug dealers, prostitutes and others, it is necessary to keep it well lit during the night, and from now on the question of drug dealing will be constantly monitored.⁵⁹

The problem of drug dealing becomes fatal for the Stecca. Milanese squats usually solve the problem by controlling access to their spaces and organizing their own security teams. The two things do not seem to be possible at the Stecca, given the size of the building and the multiple entrances. The only plausible solution, proposed by Comitato I Mille, IdA and *out*, is the closing of the bars, but the other groups refuse to accept this hypothesis. Therefore IdA and *out* also gradually pull out of the coordination of the Stecca, and start to participate in the general meetings only when there are exceptional problems to be discussed.

The three strategies of Isola dell'Arte

IdA, from its foundation, implements three complementary strategies:

- To occupy the Stecca building with permanent artworks.
- To finance lawsuits through the sale of artworks donated by artists.

⁵⁹ Comitato per la tutela e la salvaguardia della Stecca degli artigiani, minutes of the meeting of 11 November 2004. Archive of Isola Art Center.

– To create a group of national and international impact in the world of art and culture.

IdA immediately makes permanent artworks in the parks, and works inserted in the structure of the Stecca, enhancing the spaces in the hope of protecting them from destruction⁶⁰.

For the first edition of “Le mille e una notte” Liliana Moro, with the help of Stefano Dugnani, makes *Casedagioco*, micro-constructions of colored cement placed in the parks, offering a permanent space for play and imagination to the children of the neighborhood. Stefano Arienti reprises his very first work, done 18 years earlier at the Brown Boveri factory⁶¹, entitled *Muffe* (Moulds), a repeated gesture that slowly covers the external and internal walls of the Stecca with pastel chalk colors.⁶² *Viaggio sulla luna* (Trip to the Moon) is the title of a work done by Gabriele Di Matteo: a series of small drawings from the film of the same name by Meliès, done on the walls of the staircases of the Stecca, in the bathrooms and on the second floor. The A12 group makes a long table and the counter of the café of the nascent art center. Liliana Moro installs her neon *Cin Cin* on the façade of the building, representing a cocktail glass.

Following this strategy, with the continuing editions of “Le mille e una notte” the Stecca is filled with artworks by the founding members of IdA and other artists. With the help of Andrea Sala, Massimo Bartolini installs *Step*, a step of the stairs in pink Portuguese marble, on the way to the second floor, in a game of meanings between precariousness and permanence. Loris Cecchini constructs *Monologue Patterns*, a door-sculpture for the rest rooms on the first floor, a functional work that blends into the architecture.

The second strategy of IdA is to contribute to the financing of lawsuits to try to block the urban planning projects. This is done by means of an exhibition combined with an auction, entitled *Arte per l'Isola*, held in December 2004 on the second floor of the Stecca. The gallerist Lino Baldini takes care of the installation of the works with the help of Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, the new director of the GAMeC museum in Bergamo. Works are put on sale by some of the artists of IdA, together with those of external sympathizers like Massimo Bartolini, Loris Cecchini, Michelangelo Consani, Alberto Garutti, Marcello Maloberti, Maurizio Nannucci, Enzo Umbaca, Patrick Tuttofuoco, vedovamazzei and Italo Zuffi and others.

The third strategy of IdA is to call for support from the international art world, to have a greater impact on a local level. For “Le mille e una notte 1” a conference is organized on the theme “What spaces for art today?”, with the aim of stimulating debate on the lack of spaces for contemporary art in Milan. The participants include Christoph Schäfer and Margit Czenki of Park Fiction of Hamburg, and Christian Bernard, director of the Mamco museum in Geneva. The latter invites IdA to participate in the exhibition *Fragments d'un Discours Italien*, presenting an overview of works done during the years of activity in Isola, as well as the film *Ondanomala*⁶³ by Mariette Schiltz and a *Timeline* by the A12 group. With Park Fiction, on the other hand, a long-term collaboration begins.

Olaf Nicolai is a good example of how an international artist can effectively insert his work in a local context. The artist from Berlin creates the *Bocciofila Isola*, a bocce court to be built in the parks on via Confalonieri, evoking the sign of the historic Bocciofila of Quartiere Sasseti. The project, however, is rejected by the Department of Parks and Gardens of the City of Milan.

To go along with the large number of signatures gathered by Comitato I Mille, IdA launches its own petition in the world of Italian culture and international art, to inform the municipal government and the city of the attention and solidarity with the project, that extend far beyond the borders of the neighborhood. The list of signatures in 2005 includes the editor of *Rolling Stone* Carlo Antonelli; the curators Harald Szeemann, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Hou Hanru, Carlos Basualdo, Manu Park, Adelina von Fürstenberg, Florian Matzner; the museum directors Daniel Soutif, Marie Claude Beaud, Christian Bernard, Klaus Bussmann, Jan Hoet, Jérôme Sans; about a dozen gallerists, including Giò Marconi, Lia Rumma, Francesca Minini and Raffaella Cortese; about a dozen international collectors and artists, like Marina Abramovic, Maurizio Cattelan, Thomas Hirschhorn, Marietita Potrc, Olaf Nicolai, Tobias Rehberger, Joop Van Lieshout, Richard Nonas. Considering the fact that the battle is against the creation of a

⁶⁰ This strategy, begun during Isola Art Project with *Untitled / Untitled* by Bert Theis and *Wild Island* by Stefano Boccalini in the Isola parks, would also continue in the years to follow.

⁶¹ In Isola, in 1984-85 groups of artists and other creative people around Corrado Levi occupy, with on-site installations, the former Brown Boveri factory, of which the Stecca is a part. In *The Middle of the Eighties* by Maria Garzia, the most complete text on this experience, was published in *Espèces d'espace*, the Eighties First Part, by Le Magasin, Grenoble, 2008

⁶² In a review with the title Brown Boveri in *Flash Art* 128 in 1985, Giulio Ciavoiello writes: "In fact, the work of Stefano Arienti, who explicitly recognizes his amateurism and the occasional character of his actions in the artistic field, has managed to intervene in the most pertinent manner: he has colored, with pastel chalk, the hidden walls, blending into and mingling with the incrustations, cracks and stains of dampness. His light, perishable project, nearly impossible to photograph, is the result of a slow process of osmosis with the place, an industrial cathedral, of rusty machinery and heavy metal."

⁶³ *Ondanomala* by Mariette Schiltz, made for the exhibition of IdA at the Mamco in Geneva in 2003 and later shown at the Stecca, narrates the first three years of art and struggle in the neighborhood through video documents.

would-be City of Fashion, even more significant signatures are those of Miuccia Prada, Angela Missoni, Alessia Bulgari and Antonio Marras.

In 2004 the project of creating a credible and well-known art center at the Stecca has indubitably been achieved. The daily newspaper “La Repubblica” publishes an article *L'Isola del futuro* about the “celebration for the new museum at the Stecca degli Artigiani”:

The Stecca degli Artigiani, the picturesque, crumbling but very lively former Siemens factory in the heart of the Isola neighborhood, a laboratory of creativity and incubator of social conflict, threatened with destruction in the context of the Garibaldi-Repubblica urban project, could be saved and transformed into a contemporary art center. [...] The new Center would occupy a vast space of 1500 square meters on the second floor of the Stecca, now empty. While the rest of the building would contain, with the artisans who already work there, other service activities for the neighborhood and the city, from a cinema to a bar. Isola dell'Arte is a strong, influential lobby, whose members include artists and critics with sturdy national and international ties: from Grazia Toderi to Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, Angela Vettese to Roberto Pinto, Laura Cherubini to Stefano Arienti. The project is credible.⁶⁴

Two months later, the architect Stefano Boeri, in the newspaper “Corriere della Sera”, talks about a “Stecca degli Artisti” that has taken over from the existing Stecca degli Artigiani.⁶⁵

3. The Divided City (2005-2006)

In 2005 and 2006 the two visions of the Isola neighborhood became polarized, to the point of opposition: the City of Fashion vs. the City from Below. Artists and curators, together with philosophers and neighborhood associations, begin to implement the project for an art and neighborhood center. No waiting, no wondering, just acting. The forces unite from below and organize themselves in a forum that operates on multiple levels. In the meantime, the municipal administration and the real estate developers determine the particulars of their project, forcefully promoting it and accomplishing its first parts.

Hines comes out into the open

One decisive factor in the evolution of the events is the position assumed in this period by Hines. From 2003 to 2005 Hines worked in a rather discreet way with the institutions and financial backers. But in 2005 the need to accelerate the program makes the presence of the multinational developer in the neighborhood more evident.

In 2005 Hines signs a strategic agreement for the development of the City of Fashion with Gruppo Sai Fondiaria of Salvatore Ligresti, Italy's most powerful real estate developer. Ligresti acquires 48% of the company Garibaldi S.c.s.⁶⁶ and splits up the Isola area with Hines. The media side is managed by the CEO of Hines Italia, Manfredi Catella. This arrangement is useful for Ligresti, who keeps a low profile, probably aware of his very bad public image.⁶⁷

Hines enters Isola on tiptoe. Manfredi Catella contacts neighborhood organizations, saying he wants to understand the context in which Hines will intervene. In September 2005 Catella visits the exhibition *Paradossi dell'Amicizia*⁶⁸ at Palazzo delle Stelline, expressing interest in the alternative projects for the neighborhood designed by *out*. He seems to be open to discussion. Catella, often together with his wife or his mother, is on hand at all the moments of public discussion in the zone, and regularly attends the sessions of the Zone Council and the City Council. His mother, Alida Forte Catella, is involved in the projects through Coima, a real estate development and management company specializing in interior architecture. Catella poses as an enlightened builder, sensitive to the context and

⁶⁴ Armando Besio, *L'Isola del futuro*, “La Repubblica”, Milan edition, 4 February 2004

⁶⁵ Stefano Boeri, *Uno spazio per i ragazzi*, “Corriere della Sera”, Milanese edition, 8 April 2004

⁶⁶ “Yesterday Hines announced the joint venture with Fondiaria-Sai: the company of the Ligresti group will participate in the project through its owned subsidiary Milano Assicurazioni Spa, partner with share of 48% with Garibaldi Scs, the corporate vehicle that will develop the real estate initiative, which remains under the 52% control of the Hines group”. “Corriere della Sera”, 4 May 2005.

⁶⁷ Salvatore Ligresti is involved, in 1992, in the Italian maxi-scandal of Tangentopoli, and on 16 July that same year he is arrested for kickbacks in the context of the works for the Milan subway system, and spends 112 days in prison. After his release, he agrees on a suspended sentence of 2 years and 4 months in prison, and after a period of obligatory social services he returns to his normal activities as a contractor.

⁶⁸ *Paradossi dell'amicizia*, curated by Barbara Fässler and Paolo Bianchi, Palazzo delle Stelline, Milan, 15 September-29 October 2005. Bert Theis presents *out* together with the projects by the artists Michelangelo Pistoletto, Daniel Spoerri and Jean Odermatt.

willing to consider the doubts of the local residents. He makes personal contact with the spokespersons of the various local associations and political groups.

A decisive move by Hines is the hiring of the well known Milanese architect and politician Stefano Boeri to draw up the master plan of the Isola project. Boeri, in practice, also becomes Catella's strategy consultant and the spokesperson who communicates the projects to the media. Boeri is often interviewed and writes articles for newspapers. He is the editor of the architecture magazine "Domus" (and later of "Abitare"), teaches at the Milan Polytechnic, and is active in the art world with his Multiplicity group. At the Polytechnic one of his close collaborators is Isabella Inti, also the spokesperson for the group Cantieri Isola at the Stecca. Boeri has a reputation as a progressive thinker (the son of a partisan, previously active on the far left and still very active on a local level)⁶⁹. His involvement becomes a very effective way of dissipating local distrust of Hines.

In April 2006, on the last possible day prior to the municipal elections, and with 27 councillors absent, the City Council approves the PII Isola, with an amendment introduced by Boeri and Catella. The text takes the criticisms advanced by local associations and residents in previous years partially into account: one branch of the Y-shaped street that is to cross the neighborhood is eliminated, and the height of the buildings planned along via Confalonieri is reduced to match that of the already existing buildings. It is decided to organize the constructions along the edge of the lot, to make a bit of open space between the buildings, through the massive volume of the project – 90,000 cubic meters – is not altered.

The most ambiguous item in the amendment is point 4:

Maintaining and enhancement of the cultural and social functions, of acknowledged public interest, present in the Stecca degli Artigiani or in the same place, or in any case in an adjoining location inside the lot.

This formula declares the intention to protect vague "cultural functions", but it does not indicate the fate of the Stecca.⁷⁰ On the other hand, no specific project is attached to the document, so the options would still appear to be open.

Starting in May 2006 Hines organizes a series of encounters with neighborhood associations and stakeholders. That same month, Manfredi Catella creates the Fondazione Riccardo Catella, named for his father, with planned offices in the lodge of the former rail depot at via De Castillia 28, made available to him by the City of Milan for a period of 99 years. Catella announces that the first initiative of the new Foundation will be to create a small garden with a bocce court for public use.

Hines then hires an advertising agency and the management consulting firm MilanoMetropoli of Fabio Terragni, assigning it the task of developing a solution for the management of the future Stecca. MilanoMetropoli thus organizes meetings with the associations of the Stecca and Forum Isola.

Forum Isola

The initiatives of Hines change the political climate of the neighborhood. The Lombardy Region, the City of Milan and the Council of Zone 9 all approve the urban planning documents required for the implementation of the projects. The inhabitants start to lose faith in the possibility of getting a fair hearing, and mobilize with greater determination.

The new political context introduces new subjects in the conflict. In particular, the Confalonieri Parents' Association gets involved, a group formed in 2002 composed of parents of students in the elementary and middle schools of Isola. The concern about the announced loss of the parks on via Confalonieri prompts the association to act to defend those public spaces, involving over 500 families.

The board of the Association invites Comitato I Mille and Isola dell'Arte to a meeting, with the aim of understanding the direction of the projects in progress and the initiatives organized to stop them. From this moment on, the three associations decide to work together to defend the public spaces of the Stecca and the parks.

Shared objectives are specified:

To counter these plans and to defend the rights and the quality of life of citizens [...], to defend the quality and quantity of public space in the neighborhood and its characteristics [...], to make an art and neighborhood center, with exhibition spaces and gathering places [...], to transport into the future, without nostalgia, a varied vision of shared existence [...], to be a representative expression of the desires of the neighborhood.⁷¹

⁶⁹ In 2010 Boeri takes part in the primaries of the Partito Democratico to choose a candidate for mayor of the city of Milan. He is defeated by Giuliano Pisapia, who later appoints him as Alderman of Culture, Expo, Fashion and Design, a position he held until 17 March 2013.

⁷⁰ ? Emendment to the PII Isola, 17 October 2006, archive of Isola Art Center.

⁷¹ Flyer of Forum Isola, May 2006, archive of Isola Art Center.

While working together, the components of this alliance maintain their complementary specific characters. The Parents' Association widens the movement with simple, communicative information programs. Comitato I Mille acts by analyzing the plans for transformation in a precise way, filing observations and initiating legal action, while maintaining relations with the press. Isola dell'Arte functions as an artistic megaphone for mobilization in the neighborhood. It creates a true art center at the Stecca, setting it apart from any other Italian artspace, developing it in a rhizomatic way. The impact of the new center in the world of culture is strong: the events organized immediately involve a large number of Italian and international artists and curators. Stefano Boeri himself, before having been hired by Hines, in a discussion at the Stecca, has this to say about the center:

This is a fantastic place, it absolutely must be saved. We have to all make an effort, and I think we have a good chance of success.⁷²

One of the first steps of the joint mobilization of the Comitato I Mille, the Parents' Association and Isola dell'Arte is a large protest march organized in the neighborhood on 13 November 2005. The participants include over 100 local residents, the "Rete dei comitati milanesi", the "Amici di Beppe Grillo", the associations of the Stecca, the Milano Clown Festival, the "Banda degli ottoni", Dario Fo and Franca Rame. Under the title "Let's defend ourselves against smog, cement and skyscrapers", the announcement of the march reads:

Over one million cubic meters of cement (Garibaldi-Repubblica-Isola-De Castillia plans) and the extension of Viale Zara towards the city center are threatening the neighborhood. Let's not allow the zone to be split in two! We will not permit Via Volturno to be made into the route to the city center. We will prevent them from cutting down the trees! We must protect the neighborhood parks. Save the neighborhood stores! Support the legal appeals to the TAR and the revising of the projects!

The march starts at Piazza Minniti, proceeds along the parks of via Confalonieri, past the Stecca degli Artigiani, and reaches the Bosco di Gioia. This destination is no coincidence. The Bosco di Gioia is the site chosen for the construction of the new headquarters of the Lombardy Region: a skyscraper on via Melchiorre Gioia, at the edge of Isola. The project is part of the PII Garibaldi-Repubblica and construction is about to begin. To save the "bosco" (green area) and to change the project by the studio Pei Cobb Freed & Partners, the Comitato Bosco di Gioia is formed, acting in coordination with Comitato I Mille. One of the leading activists in this battle is the keyboard player of the famous Italian band Elio e le Storie Tese, Rocco Tanica, who on 7 April 2005 begins a hunger strike in a camper parked in front of the Bosco. Thousands of signatures are collected to support this battle, but the regional administration of Roberto Formigoni is not willing to make any compromise.

On 27 December the Bosco di Gioia is bulldozed, in spite of the protests of the local residents, who gather there en masse in spite of the holiday season, supported by Milly Moratti, Michele Sacerdoti, Dario Fo and Franca Rame. The latter makes this sarcastic comment: "In Isola, instead of the Three Kings the bulldozers have arrived"⁷³. Elio e le Storie Tese commemorate the episode in the satirical song *Parco Sempione*, which concludes as follows:

16,000 signatures / no food for Rocco Tanica / but that park got razed / while the people were off on vacation / they didn't give a damn / now they are building a palace / they destroyed the Bosco di Gioia / those ugly SOB's.

The destruction of the Bosco di Gioia represents a significant defeat, but it does not stop the mobilization in the neighborhood. The associations count on still being able to have an impact on the PII Isola regarding the Stecca and the parks, because the adversaries are different ones, and because the residents there are more determined. In the first months of 2006, after different information initiatives, it is decided to go forward with the legal battle, filing a second appeal to the TAR against the PII Garibaldi-Repubblica, and another suit against the PII Isola De Castillia.

On 3 May 2006, in the parish center in Isola, the associations hold a public assembly with the theme: "Stecca and parks. The choices of Isola". The space is packed with people. Comitato I Mille and *out* present the projects of the municipal administration and the alternative proposals of the neighborhood, with illustrations and models. Manfredi Catella is there, with his wife Kelly. He immediately asks to speak, but the moderator asks him to first listen to the citizens. Once he has been granted the floor, Catella illustrates the projects of Hines, amidst general distrust. At the end of the assembly the Parents' Association, Comitato I Mille and Isola dell'Arte announce that from now on they will act under the name Forum Isola, a space of discussion and action open to all citizens who share the objectives that have been clarified during the assembly.

Before the summer, the Forum organizes a large festival in the parks on via Confalonieri. Comitato I Mille sets up an information gazebo on the urban planning projects and the connected lawsuits, while the Parents' Association sells watermelon and organizes games for children.

⁷² "Vuoti pubblici", encounter at the Stecca on 10 April 2005, documented in the film *Isola Nostra* by Mariette Schiltz, 2007.

⁷³ Blog of Beppe Grillo, 28 December 2005.

Isola dell'Arte, at the Stecca, organizes the exhibition "La Comunità dell'Arte" of Wolfgang Träger, which includes 500 portraits of artists photographed during the installation of works at various biennials and international events. In the parks, the group Ma! does a complementary series of self-portraits of neighborhood children. The installation *Karaoke per l'estate* by Alek O. is a big hit, especially with the younger kids. Two collectives of the art center provide special projects: Love Difference presents the workshop of bodily expression *Un bosco di persone, un bosco di idee*, in which artists and visitors are urged to position themselves in the park, imitating the forms of trees, while Osservatorio inOpera gathers the thoughts and desires of the people on hand, later published in a newsletter. The day concludes with a musical performance by Steve Piccolo and Xabier Iriondo, and a collective performance in which the participants line up in the form of a heart, holding hands, around a large plywood "Isola" sign, with children seated at the center. The Forum demonstrates, with a temporary, joyful and playful action, how it intends to use the spaces of the Stecca and the parks, also in the future.

The opposition movement splits

The control of the Stecca is the field of disagreement between Forum Isola and the various associations that gravitate around Cantieri Isola. The Forum has always opposed the commercial practice of self-financing through which the associations, with bars and parties with entrance fees, have attracted drug dealers and created problems in the relationship with neighbors. In the spring of 2006 the situation at the Stecca gets even worse, and local residents start to take a more negative view of the place.

The definitive split in the Isola movement also happens thanks to other closely interconnected issues: the development of two different, irreconcilable final objectives for the struggle, i.e. the position to be taken in discussions with the City and the real estate developers.

For the Stecca, the Forum develops a project of a Center for art and the neighborhood, named Q'Art, to make the building 100% public, with the exception of the original crafts workshops. The project of Cantieri Isola and the other associations calls instead for commercial and business activities:

The spaces for associations and young businesses, like the spaces at the service of the neighborhood, the crafts workshops and the art center, the classrooms and multimedia archive, would occupy about 65% of the community center, while 35% of the facility, or about 2000 m², would be set aside for an incubator for young businesses and associations in the start-up phase.⁷⁴

No mention is made of "spaces for the neighborhood", but of "spaces at the service of the neighborhood": the inhabitants are seen as clients of the services offered by companies and associations included in the future Stecca⁷⁵.

For the Forum, on the other hand, the inhabitants should be active protagonists of the project.

For Cantieri the «models of reference are the Community Centers or Creative Factories in England and America, like the Chocolate Factory»⁷⁶, a London cultural center whose fulcrum is a theater, which rents out part of its spaces for other activities. The Forum, on the other hand, proposes the development of an «unprecedented concept that combines gathering places for the neighborhood with the activities of an experimental art center».⁷⁷ Based on precise analysis of the needs of the inhabitants, a detailed project is formulated:

In Isola there is a lack of gathering places and activities to respond to the needs of families, teenagers, children, senior citizens and adults. For social activities, the associations and the citizens have to turn to schools or the parish, requesting to use spaces that are not always suited to their needs. [...] For contemporary art spaces are needed that are independent but also closely connected to the spaces for the neighborhood, for exhibitions, projects, experimental and teaching activities. Part of the concept is the "contamination" between art and everyday life. [...] For an economical and rational use of the spaces, their main quality has to be that of functioning for different activities. [...] Based on these premises, the Forum would assign, for art, the 1500 sq meters of the second floor of the Stecca, to create exhibition spaces, but also a technical workshop, a storeroom, a café and a bookstore. Offices, education facilities, spaces for workshops, conferences and encounters, can be planned on another floor. For the neighborhood, on the other hand, at least four different spaces are required: a large multifunctional space for parties, assemblies, conferences or other activities, a medium multi-purpose space for recreational activities, with adjacent kitchen, a small meeting room for the neighborhood associations, and a gymnasium/sports facility.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Application for participation of Cantieri Isola in the competition *La città di città* promoted by the Province of Milan, March 2006, archive of Isola Art Center.

⁷⁵ *ibid* The document lists the associations Apolidia, Architetti Senza Frontiere, +BC ciclofficina, Cantieri Isola, Controprogetto, Ciuma, Deposito Lirico, Isola Critica, IsolaTV, Maltrainsema, La Compagnia del parco-circolo Legambiente, AIAB (Associazione Italiana Agricoltura Biologica) and three craftsmen.

⁷⁶ *ibid*

⁷⁷ *Q'Art, 12 Proposte per un Isola migliore*, information flyer of Forum Isola, March 2007, archive of Isola Art Center.

⁷⁸ *ibid*

Cantieri Isola focuses only on the spaces inside the Stecca. The only proposal connected with the parks is that is using them as the site of the temporary organic food market. The Forum sees the question of the parks as an essential issue, and the Stecca as an element of public space connected with green areas:

We propose a different, safe Stecca⁷⁹ that becomes an integral part of the public green zones of the neighborhood, and therefore a natural passage from one park to the other, a bridge between the past of the neighborhood and its future, a place dense with meaning that can be fully experienced, in complete safety, at any time of day.

Forum Isola and the associations of the Stecca have positions on how to approach Hines that cannot be reconciled. To prepare for the first encounter organized by the multinational with the representatives of the various realities of Isola, the Forum invites the forces of the movement to a preliminary meeting at the space of the *out* office in the Stecca (14 May 2006). About fifty people attend: besides the activists of the Forum, there are some of the craftsmen of the Stecca, representatives of Cantieri Isola, Controprogetto, Isola TV, Compagnia del parco-circolo di Legambiente and some representatives of political forces.⁸⁰

The goal is to find a shared line of reasoning, to come up with a convincing, united reaction to the proposals of Hines. The Forum proposes the renewal of the intentions expressed in the petition of Comitato I Mille, signed by everyone in 2003 and to simply listen to the proposals of Hines, without beginning any negotiations.

The discussion is heated, especially between Augusta Signorini of Comitato I Mille and Paolo Artoni of Legambiente, who returns to the concept passed by the City Council to “save the functions of the Stecca” and says: “It does not matter if the Stecca exists or not. What interests me is what is inside it!”⁸¹ Artoni, an architect, proposes that the architects of the various associations form a work group to develop concrete proposals, but the idea is rejected, to avoid separating a group of professionals from the rest of the movement.

During the course of the discussion it becomes increasingly clear that Cantieri Isola and Legambiente will not sign a unified document and will refuse to act in a unified front in the future. The City Councillor Adriano Ciccioni warns everyone about how Catella plans to destroy the movement with the principle of *divide et impera*; others, though, like Francesca Cognetti of Cantieri Isola, see a positive side in the division: «For me it is a bit demagogic to say that there has always been a united front, because it is not true, in the sense that having different positions seems like positive factor, to me». Isabella Inti of Cantieri is also open to negotiation with Hines: «But whom are we fighting against? Instead, let’s meet with Catella and figure out how much we can achieve there. In any case, he is already the owner».⁸²

The movement leaves this meeting divided and weakened, which is an advantage for Hines, which from this moment on finds itself facing a significantly smaller number of adversaries.

The relationship between Forum Isola and Hines/Boeri

At first the Forum is open to discussion with Hines and the company’s collaborators, though on each occasion it emphasizes that no agreement is possible without the creation of the art and neighborhood center, and the salvaging of the parks.

On 16 May 2006, two weeks after the assembly of Forum Isola, Hines invites a limited number of neighborhood representatives to a small meeting room of the Isola parish. The guests are welcomed by Manfredi Catella, his wife Kelly, an employee of the advertising agency of Hines, and the architect Stefano Boeri. No city councillors or aldermen take part in the meeting. Catella presents a very simple diagram, divided into two parts: the fixed points and the flexible points of the project. He says that the volumes to be built on the parks, stipulated in the PII Isola, are fixed factors that everyone has to accept, while other topics, such as the street layout, can still be modified. When a representative of Isola Art Center mentions the lawsuits in progress and points out that even fixed elements can become flexible, Catella asks him to leave, but Boeri intervenes and calms things down.

Two weeks later, the Forum informs the neighborhood that «no agreement has been made between our representatives and public or private operators. Forum Isola, as a representative expression of the zone, cautions

⁷⁹ *ibid*

⁸⁰ Renato Capelli, member of the Zone Council, of Comunisti Italiani, and member of Comitato I Mille; Franco Tucci, Zone 9 councillor of Rifondazione Comunista and Antonio Pinna, of the same party; Michele Sacerdoti, environmentalist and activist; Adriano Ciccioni, city councilman and collaborator of Milly Moratti; Matteo Stanzani, zone councillor of the party Democratici di sinistra.

⁸¹ Transcription of the video documenting the meeting of 14 May 2006, archive of Isola Art Center.

⁸² *ibid*

any other entity against negotiation on behalf of the neighborhood». ⁸³ In a letter to Manfredi Catella dated 14 July 2006, the Forum writes:

Forum Isola will develop, in complete independence, its own cultural and social program, continuing the work that has been done in these years [...]. We are therefore willing to put our forms of expertise together, if the objective is that of creating an exemplary, innovative “container” of public functions. We hope that in the months to come it will be possible to develop satisfactory solutions, not just for the creation of an Isola Art & Community Center, but also for all the aspects that are fundamental for the neighborhood: traffic, greenery, constructed volume, shopping areas.⁸⁴

Catella responds that same day:

The contribution of Forum Isola and the other expressions of the neighborhood are essential for us in the definition of a correct, complete project. This is why I hope, soon, to achieve a united front that can define the possible social activities and related spaces, already represented with clarity in your documents. The issues you raise with reference to greenery, constructed volume, street layout and traffic and commercial activities are equally important and central in our present commitment to reach a shared project. The sum of these components will identify the project, which I hope can become an extraordinary opportunity for the neighborhood and for Milan.⁸⁵

On 16 June that same year a second meeting is held at via della Moscova 18, again with Stefano Boeri on hand. Catella seems to be ready to accept at least part of the demands put forward by the Forum, but it is necessary to wait for the master plan for Isola designed by Boeri Studio in order to understand the true intentions of Hines.

After the summer the information that leaks out is extremely negative. Forum Isola asks to meet with Boeri Studio to find out more about the project being developed. The meeting is on 27 October, and on this occasion Boeri discusses questions of footprints and street plans, but offers no information on the real physiognomy of the projects, or on the fate of the Stecca and the parks.

It becomes increasingly clear that the demands of the neighborhood are in no way being taken into account. The Forum therefore announces its withdrawal from the dialogue with Hines (perceived at this point as a ruse) during an encounter at the Department of Territorial Development on 2 November, attended by the alderman Masseroli, Manfredi Catella and the associations of the Stecca connected with Cantieri Isola. At this meeting, Isola Art Center and the Forum reject the offer to move from the Stecca into temporary spaces proposed by Hines, while the other associations agree to move to these provisional facilities.

On 22 November 2006 Stefano Boeri and Manfredi Catella finally present the master plan and the projects designed by Boeri Studio⁸⁶ for the area of the parks and the Stecca, as well as a plan for the future street layout. The Zone Council chamber is packed once again, but the presentation is a huge disappointment for the neighborhood.

The plan calls for total demolition of the Stecca and the parks. The solution chosen by the architects in order not to diminish the constructed volume or to move it is inevitably a skyscraper: white, with irregular windows. In the projected simulation, the long, narrow building of the Stecca gets an erection and becomes a tower. The free space between the buildings becomes a meadow, which is also the roof of five levels of underground parking, presented as a private garden with public access.

Stefano Boeri wants to demonstrate that his project will increase the exhibition space of the neighborhood, taking it to 4500 m², as opposed to the 3000 indicated for the present Stecca (actually 4000). To achieve this result, however, he combines the floorspace of three very different structures: Fondazione Catella (1500 m²), a “Nuova Stecca” (1000 m²)⁸⁷ to be built next to the Fondazione, and an Isola Community Center (2000 m²) to be built on the parks.

The Community Center would have a spectacular rounded form, to contain artisans, associations, exhibition rooms, cultural spaces and facilities for children. To recoup the “functions” of the Stecca, a box-like construction is planned, known as the “Art Incubator”, managed in the initial years by an organism controlled by Hines. In the simulated exhibition space of the Community Center the architects insert modernist sculptures, while at the Nuova Stecca-Art Incubator we see a sculpture by Jeff Koons. Fondazione Catella, finally, would have the function of promoting the projects of Hines. The experimental contemporary art found at the Stecca, then, does not seem to have a place in the future of Isola.

⁸³ Flyer of Forum Isola, 30 June 2006, archive of Isola Art Center.

⁸⁴ Archive of Isola Art Center. Forum Isola defines its project for an art and neighborhood center, at first, as Isola Art & Community Center, and later as Q’Art, a workshop for Art and the Neighborhood. Also see the document *12 proposals for a better Isola* on the Isola Art Center website (www.isolartcenter.org).

⁸⁵ ? Archive of Isola Art Center.

⁸⁶ The partners of Boeri Studio are Stefano Boeri, Giovanni La Varra and Gianandrea Barecca, a member of the group A12.

⁸⁷ Actually the building will be just a bit more than 700 m².

As for the street network, the master plan only partially considers the observations of the local residents, erasing a part of the Y-shaped extension of via Volturmo and attempting to limit the envisioned increase of traffic, keeping via Confalonieri and via De Castillia as one-way streets.

For Forum Isola this presentation eliminates any possibility of compromise. The newspaper *Corriere della Sera* comments: "The Committees say no to the Isola project, it should be redone".⁸⁸

In the light of these developments, the Forum passes to action. During the course of a meeting, the parents propose bringing children to the Zone Council session of 28 November 2006 to have them sing *Il ragazzo della via Gluck* by Adriano Celentano, a very famous Italian song that talks about the loss of green areas and the unhappiness caused by traumatic urban changes (*Where the grass once grew, now there is a city / [...] it is good fortune, for you who can still play barefoot on the meadows, while I breathe cement here in the center*). The performance by the kids is introduced by the president of the Parents' Association Lorenza Cassini, who says: «Dear Councillors, you always say that you are listening to our criticisms, and it is true, you have listened, but you have not understood! For this reason, today we want to try to explain what we want in a different way». For four minutes the children sing and the politicians listen quietly, together with Manfredi Catella, who is in the audience.

In a press release issued two days later, Forum Isola remarks on the presentation of the project of Boeri Studio, and asks that it be shifted to the areas owned by Hines on via De Castillia, that the present street network be conserved, that the art and neighborhood center at the Stecca be organized, that the commercial building of Ligresti be moved to a more appropriate site, and that a plan to keep the craftsmen in Isola be implemented.

Catella and Boeri respond to these criticisms in Milan's leading newspaper.⁸⁹ The first talks about the division of the opposition, stating that «in the zone, and the entire neighborhood must be listened to, there is a large majority of approval of the solutions we have proposed», while the latter says the proposals of the Forum «cannot be taken seriously».

So 2006 comes to an end with a dual division: that between the interests of the real estate speculators and those of the inhabitants, which has not changed, and the internal division in the neighborhood opposition movement, intensified by the hiring of Stefano Boeri by Hines. The dialogue announced by Hines has turned out to be superficial and strategic, to postpone or soften what is by now an open conflict.

A new kind of art center

In 2005 a new phase begins for contemporary art in Isola. In April, Isola dell'Arte opens the Isola Art Center, a center without a director and without funds, located in the Stecca, the first and only independent self-managed art center in Milan.

The new project began some months earlier, in an evening of discussion of IdA, a group that was showing signs of fatigue and disagreements regarding the artistic programming. Some of the artists and critics feel the project should be limited to a small circle of participants; others think IdA should be an open platform, for a much wider and more varied range of subjects. As a result, some members of IdA abandon the group, while others continue to work or arrive on the scene⁹⁰, favoring the insertion of a new generation of artists and curators who can enthusiastically contribute to the development of the project.

The decision is made to start a new phase, and the task is not a simple one. Various questions arise: How to operate without institutional support and financing? How to promote theoretical research in such a unique context? How to avoid encouraging the gentrification of the neighborhood through art programming, rather than contributing to combat it? To find the answers to these questions, there are no existing models to which to turn. The response suggested is the *instituent praxis*⁹¹, i.e. experimentation with a new type of institution that functions more like a movement and is not based on money, but on values that are usually pushed into the background: solidarity, enthusiasm, energy, self-management. So Isola Art Center gradually takes form around certain interconnected concepts, that indicate the direction of its growth.

1. A rhizomatic self-managed platform

⁸⁸ "Corriere della Sera", 29 November 2006

⁸⁹ "Corriere della Sera", 6 December 2006.

⁹⁰ For example UnDo.Net, Gabriele Di Matteo, Steve Piccolo, Adrian Paci and Marco Scotini.

⁹¹ ? To explore this concept: Gerald Raunig, *Instituent Practices, No. 2 Institutional Critique, Constituent Power, and the Persistence of Instituting*, January 2007, available at www.eipcp.net/transversal. Raunig sees the *instituent practice* not as an action against the institution, but as a flight from institutionalization and structuring. If the term institution suggests a static quality, the idea is to replace that static nature with the organization of a dynamic praxis.

Radical organizational change makes it possible to (re)find the energies needed to make the project grow: the functioning of the center has to be horizontal. For it to become an open platform the decision-making structure has to be changed, opening the door to different groups and curators. The criterion for participation (and for exclusion) is participation in the battle for public space, with the neighborhood associations. The decisions of Isola Art Center are made at meetings by those who take part and make a commitment, not by directives or by a director. In the whole history of the center, voting is never done. Proposals and problems are discussed together, until a solution is found. Every decision made is then implemented with the available energies. The digital newsletter "Isola Art Center info" keeps everyone informed and updated.

The structure, which previously moved only along the parallel and complementary tracks of IdA and *out*, now becomes polyhedral and rhizomatic: little by little different collectives are integrated, which combine to form Isola Art Center: Sugoe⁹², Stazione Isola⁹³, UnDo.Net⁹⁴, Love Difference⁹⁵, Millepiani⁹⁶, Werkstatt⁹⁷ and Forum Isola, while *out* continues the work begun in 2002 in the new constellation. The organizational form is thus conceived so as to permit the center to renew its forces in a cyclical way, because the inevitable loss of enthusiasm on the part of certain participants can always be compensated by an equivalent turnover. Closed groups and collectives do not have this ability, and in most cases they dissolve after a given period of work. The longevity of Isola Art Center undoubtedly also depends on its organizational approach.

2. Institutional Autarky

Isola Art Center has no stable institutional ties. This is because dependence on fixed financing and public or private decision-making structures often leads to phenomena of censorship, self-censorship, compromise and bureaucratization. Moreover, Isola Art Center, by inserting itself in a context of struggle against the urban planning decisions of the City of Milan and the Lombardy Region, excludes a priori any hypotheses of financing on the part of these public agencies, the very source of most of the backing for other non-profit spaces in Milan. The only weak institutional tie is created with *inContemporanea*, the art network organized by the Department of Culture of the Province of Milan, active during the years of rule by a center-left majority (2004-2009). Isola Art Center regularly takes part, with the other associations of the network, in the exhibition events coordinated by the Province. The relationship is facilitated by the fact that the Councillor of Culture, Daniela Benelli, comes from Isola and supports the neighborhood's struggle, to the point of making the extraordinary gesture of officially opening Isola Art Center, an occupied municipal space. The collaboration with public agencies, including the City of Florence and the Tuscany Region,⁹⁸ or with private organizations like Open Care and Frigoriferi Milanesi, is always based on the implementation of a single project.

3. No Budget

No Budget is based on the principle of solidarity of those who support the project. It does not mean not allowing the use of money, but choosing not to have a fund for the planning of exhibitions, encounters and long-term work. Each time a project is activated, it is necessary to find the means needed for its realization.

The work of clearing out and cleaning the space, that of exhibition installation, the shifts of people on hand to keep the exhibitions open, the conferences and encounters, the management of funds, communication and the café are all based on the work of volunteers. Since its creation, the café⁹⁹ (called the Ginoteca and dedicated to Luigi Veronelli) operates at every opening, with proceeds set aside to cover the installation costs of the next show. Careful financial management makes it possible, over time, to acquire a minimum of equipment: gas stoves for the winter, three

⁹² Members of Sugoe: Marco Colombaioni, Alice Pintus, Fernando Saavedra Roca, Fabrizio Stipari, Christian Raimondi, Manuel Scano and Giovanni Ciapessoni, Giovanni Giaretta, Matteo Rubbi, Luca Pozzi, Alek O., Santo Tolone, Matteo Mascheroni and others.

⁹³ Members of Stazione Isola: 11:27, Paola Ceretta, Giovanni Giaretta, Camilla Micheli, Gionata Gesi Ozmo, Cosetta-Titta-Raccagni and Alessia Bernardi Di Pace, Christian Raimondi, Angelo Sarleti, Claudia Sinigaglia, Alessandro Nassiri Tabibzadeh, Michela Taeggi.

⁹⁴ UnDo.Net: Anna Stuart Tovini, Vincenzo Chiarandà, Emanuele Vecchia.

⁹⁵ Love Difference Milano's members include Pippa Bacca, the granddaughter of Piero Manzoni tragically killed in Turkey during a voyage-performance. The other members are Alberto Mazza, Arianna Panarella, Chiara Piraccini, Noemi Satta.

⁹⁶ Millepiani: Tiziana Villani, Ubaldo Fadini, Francesco Galluzzi, Stefano Vailati and others.

⁹⁷ The components of Werkstatt are: Tiziano Doria, Simona Barbagallo, Antonietta Foschini and Jacopo De Gennaro.

⁹⁸ Networking presents, at Isola Art Center, "My home. Una casa in città", also supported by the Tuscany Region and the City of Florence, 16 March 2006.

⁹⁹ The café also sells Isola Art Beer, organic beer produced for the Center by a small brewer in Bergamo.

video projectors and DVD players, sound systems, extension cords, light bulbs, electrical gear. Donated tools are used to create a professional technical workshop. Wood found on site is used to make multifunctional platform-benches and stages, at zero cost. The enthusiasm of the young artists, designers and researchers of Sugoe even makes it possible to build a wood-burning stove in the café. Artworks are also produced that have certain production costs, like the door-sculpture *Monologue Patterns* by Loris Cecchini, the large neon sign *New Museum* by Kings, placed on the roof, and the large *Isola Project* banner by *out*, hung on the facade. The construction of the *Core Unit*¹⁰⁰ by Marjetica Potrč, a small residential module in actual size, is a good example of the No Budget method: to make it, the Center asks for the help of Tullio Leggeri, a contractor from Bergamo and an art collector, who provides the materials, the workers and the transportation, instead of financing. In this way the work is not made through an exchange of money, but through a free supply of resources, a very unusual procedure in the mechanisms of contemporary art.

The relationship of collaboration with the Province of Milan does not guarantee stable funding for the project, which remains in a state of permanent precariousness¹⁰¹. To make the Center's website, a grant is obtained from the American Center Foundation.¹⁰² This book has been published thanks to the contributions of a number of museums and institutions.

4. Dirty Cube

Isola Art Center challenges the standard of the White Cube (the main form of praxis of contemporary art display over the last few decades), in the belief that it is obsolete and must be replaced¹⁰³. The Center thus decides to operate in a Dirty Cube, avoiding the transformation of the industrial space of the Stecca into a neutral, aseptic environment. Most of the rooms are left in their natural state of conservation, simply freed up by clearing away rubble and trash.

Places like the Stazione Leopolda in Florence or, even more so, the Isola Art Center in Milan, where as in the case of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris the spaces have been reorganized, starting by stripping down the building, removing any identifying architectural features, making a sort of absolute void, a place of deterritorialization par excellence, demonstrate that today architecture has to start over again, from scratch, re-establishing itself in a complete new language, erasing the past and responding to the changes in progress.¹⁰⁴

The decision not to conceal the industrial past of the building is shared by the Center with a range of initiatives that took place in the same sites, but many years ago: in 1973 Gordon Matta-Clark made *Infraform*¹⁰⁵, cutting triangular openings into the walls of the abandoned Brown Boveri factory. In 1984-85 a group of artists and creative people guided by Corrado Levi entered the Brown Boveri factory to make site-specific installations, using materials found on the site.¹⁰⁶

5. Solidarity and collaboration among artists

At the start of the new millennium the relationships among young artists in Milan are generally based on a strong sense of competition. For young art the moment is undoubtedly a tough one, without many chances to show work, and practically without any kind of institutional support.¹⁰⁷ The lack of public structures open to young talents, such as those of the French FRAC facilities or the German Kunstverein or Kunsthallen, means that the only possible

¹⁰⁰ The *Core Unit* is shown for the first time during *Sculpture. Projects in Münster 1997* at the Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte of Münster. Until 2007 Isola Art Center was the only "museum" in the world to have shown the work, which is now owned by a Greek collector.

¹⁰¹ ? For participation in the annual project *inContemporanea* the Province of Milan offers a reimbursement of from four to five thousand euros. But even this small sum is not always guaranteed.

¹⁰²

? Now known as FfAI, Foundation for Artists Initiatives.

¹⁰³

? In this research Isola Art Center is in tune with the Palais de Tokyo of Jérôme Sans and Nicolas Bourriaud in Paris. Today the Dirty Cube approach is used in international contemporary art events, like the Athens Biennial in 2011 and Manifesta 2012 in Genk, Belgium.

¹⁰⁴ Fabrizio Violante, *Architettura: Grado Zero?* in *Interferenze*, monthly brochure on the arts and architecture, Florence, July 2005.

¹⁰⁵ The pieces of cut wall and the photographic documentation were then shown at Galleria Toselli in Milan. To date, no biographies of Gordon Matta-Clark correctly indicate the Brown Boveri factory in Isola as the site of the making of *Infraform*.

¹⁰⁶ The cover of the catalogue of the exhibition on the Brown Boveri project, published by Studio Marconi, features the work *L'altare* by Francesco Garbelli. See also Pierre Restany, *La cattedrale B.B.*, D'Ars, July 1985; Giulio Ciavoiello, *Brown Boveri*, "Flash Art" n.128, 1985; Maria Garzia, *In the Middle of the Eighties*, published in "Espace d'Espace" by Le Magasin, Grenoble, 2008.

¹⁰⁷ In this context the positive work of non-profit structures like Careof and Viafarini should be emphasized, which in this difficult situation have created an archive of young art (Docva) and offered the possibility of exhibition in Milan outside the commercial art system.

career path is the commercial circuit of galleries, art fairs and magazines. The reference points are the heroes of Italian art who have managed to make a name for themselves on the international market. So young artists tend to work for themselves; without, or even against, the others.

The working method in Isola rejects the egotistical, aggressive, elitist spirit. Solidarity and collaboration are a constant. Adrian Paci may copy the drawings of Dan Perjovschi on the wall of the Stecca, or Manuel Scano and Alek O might physically produce the two works by Tania Bruguera *Revolution is on hold* and *Until the unreachable victory*. The artists make a commitment to install and keep open even exhibitions that do not contain their own works, demonstrating a tie with the project that goes beyond individualism.

6. External energies: picnics and international curators

The energy resources are sufficient to permit dynamic, almost frenetic programming. To make it even more open, the concept of the “picnic” is invented: artspaces from outside Milan are invited to organize exhibitions at Isola Art Center, with absolute freedom, as if they were bringing food from home, for an excursion in the country.

The first *Picnic* is organized by More Fools in Town, the project created in Turin by the Australian artists Geoff Lowe and Jacqueline Riva, together with the French curator Charlotte Laubard. Works are shown by thirteen different artists, along with the performance *How to Explain Contemporary Art to Live Eels* and a public seminar on the exhibition praxis of the guest group. Other *Picnics* involved Placentia Arte, the Piacenza-based gallery of Lino Baldini, which stands out for its support of young artists, and the White Project, a gallery from Pescara.

The desire to experiment with other exhibition logics leads to the inviting of international curators to work at Isola Art Center, where the operative conditions are a challenge for those accustomed to curating exhibitions in institutional situations. Thus Katia Anguelova invites Evelyne Jouanno to present the Milanese phase of the Emergency Biennale in Chechnya. The Parisian curator Martina Koeppel-Yang organizes the exhibition “Women shi gaibian (The revolution is us)”, presenting works by some of the members of the Chinese collective Canton Express.¹⁰⁸

7. Artists as curators

Isola Art Center also allows artists to work as curators. Adrian Paci is the curator of *Revolution is on hold*, involving international artists like Tania Bruguera or Carey Young, but also the very young Italian artist Emma Ciceri. Another Albanian artist, Fani Zguro, is the curator of the exhibition *Absolute Beginners*, presenting the first works of some Albanian artists who have since become better known, over the last decade. In October 2005 Matteo Rubbi invites the theater duo Antonio Rezza and Flavia Rastrella to present the performance *Incontro/Scontro*. Bert Theis, together with the critic Maurizio Bortolotti and the architectural historian Marco Biraghi, curates the exhibition *Situazionisola*, which sets out to test the timeliness of Situationist concepts when applied to the specific context of Isola.

8. Theoretical research and the spread of content

As Isola Art Center gradually develops original concepts of contemporary art in its practice, the need arises to further explore the aspect of theoretical research and the reporting of its contents to an increasingly vast audience. *out* often acts as the organizer of these moments, working together with the group of philosophers Millepiani. The presentation of books is one of the methods used to stimulate research and discussion. *Definizione zero, origini della videoarte tra politica e comunicazione* by Simonetta Fadda, *L'amara vittoria del Situazionismo* by Gianfranco Marelli, *Palais de Tokyo, sito di creazione contemporanea* by Paola Nicolin and *Il tempo della trasformazione* by Tiziana Villani are just a few of the titles presented in Isola. The encounters are always accompanied by debates, which become further opportunities for research.

Together with Millepiani, seminars are organized on specific themes, like “Foucault at the Stecca degli Artigiani” and “The urban future, interdisciplinary philosophical workshop”. Isola Art Center and *out* also respond to opportunities for discussion outside of Milan, taking part, for example, in the international workshop *Methods – research projects on art-society relations* at Fondazione Pistoletto in Biella.

9. Self-training

The Center is a proving ground for young artists. Isola Art Center constantly works with art academies and universities, in contact with new generations of artists, curators and researchers. This is a non-institutional practice, activated by individual professors. Various members of Isola Art Center are also teachers in schools in Milan, and facilitate this mode of operation: Stefano Bocalini, Paola Di Bello, Gabriele Di Matteo, Adrian Paci, Steve Piccolo, Marco Scotini, Gianni Romano, Bert Theis... The list of academies and universities in Milan and vicinity that work with Isola Art Center is a long one: the Academy of Brera, the Academy of Bergamo, the European

¹⁰⁸ Already invited by Hou Hanru to the Venice Biennial in 2003.

Design Institute, the Polytechnic, and above all NABA (Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti of Milan), with which the Center has an ongoing relationship.

In May 2005 Marco Scotini curates the exhibition “Who uses the space?”, involving students in the Visual Arts courses at NABA. In June that same year Salvatore Falci, an artist and professor at Accademia Carrara in Bergamo, curates the exhibition of the Clorofilla group, composed of former students from his course. The work is never simply didactic, but is done based on professional criteria, in order to constitute a true growth experience, not a banal end-of-year exhibition.

10. *Fight-Specific*

Contemporary art is a specialized field of research, and it is obvious that most of its production does not appeal to the habitual interests of the inhabitants of a neighborhood. The practice of Isola Art Center gets away from the author/viewer paradigm, not attempting to create a new audience for contemporary art, but inserting the people of the neighborhood in a process of production. The praxis of Isola Art Center is specific to the site (the Isola district), and contains aspects of community art, relational art, participative art and public art, but without being limited to these concepts.¹⁰⁹

The relationship of trust between the inhabitants active in the struggle and the artists, thanks to the participation of the latter in all the initiatives of the committees, makes the activation of this contact easy, also explored through personal relationships. For example, one consolidated practice is for international artists, like the Argentine artist Tomas Saraceno or the Chinese members of Canton Express, to be lodged in homes in the neighborhood and involved in dinners with the local residents, during which themes of contemporary art are discussed, but also the problems of the zone.

In many cases the artistic projects have to do with the people of Isola in a direct way, as in the case of the portraits of inhabitants made by Paola Di Bello at the Stecca and given to their subjects. *Stone Island* by Stefano Boccalini, to cite another example, pairs places of Isola with the stories of senior citizens in a parallel narrative.

In other cases, the neighborhood becomes a true field of study. Angelo Sarleti, as part of the larger project *Stazione Isola*¹¹⁰, surveys buildings to learn about the nationality of the tenants, information then given visual form thanks to flags attached to the facades.

It would be an error, however, to categorize these practices as “community-based art”¹¹¹ simply because their environmental context and subject matter may be the neighborhood itself. The decisive factor is that Isola Art Center is a contemporary art project inserted in a context of urban conflict, where it intervenes alongside the residents in a situation of mobilization. Therefore the project is not just specific to the site, in a strictly spatial sense, nor is it simply relational, in a social sense. It is specific to the struggle of those who work and live in that site. Hence the conceptual shift theorized as a definition of an unprecedented operative mode: from *site-specific* to *fight-specific*¹¹² art. The latter is not addressed to an existing community, but creates a new community, consolidating it by fighting. All the forms of art are therefore acceptable, as long as they are consciously inserted inside this dynamic.

This also explains why Isola Art Center applies a logic of sale of artworks simply in terms of fund-raising auctions, done twice under the name *Arte per l'Isola*¹¹³ to contribute to the legal expenses of the lawsuits brought by local residents against the urban projects.

The *out* office can be defined as *fight-specific* in the strict sense of the term, because it creates a direct link with the activists of the committees, producing illustrative materials on alternative proposals, putting the various parts of the opposition movement into contact, and providing its own space for meetings and press conferences. *out* also displays the material produced in different Italian and international art events, giving the struggle of Isola major visibility and different kinds of support.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ For a critique of these concepts see, for example: Christian Kravagna, *Working on the Community, Models of Participatory Practice*, www.republicart.net.

¹¹⁰ *Stazione Isola* is a group of young artists founded by Stefano Boccalini together with the curator Katia Anguelova, which focuses its attention and production on the neighborhood, using different methods (archives of sounds, visuals and writings).

¹¹¹ The so-called community-based and participative actions develop on the art and activism scene in American in the 1980s. Two important names connected with the history of community-based art are Suzanne Lacy (*Mapping the Terrain. New Genre Public Art*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1995) all the way to the recent and controversial contribution of Miwon Kwon (*One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, MIT Press, 2004) which has totally revised the interpretation of the impact and role community-based art can play in social and urban transformations, and in the art system.

¹¹² The concept of *fight-specific* art is an invention of Isola Art Center.

¹¹³

? *Arte per l'Isola!*, curated by Isola dell'Arte with the contribution of Giacinto Di Pietrantonio and Lino Baldini, Isola Art Center, Stecca degli Artigiani, 12 December 2004 and *Arte per l'Isola! Asta per la raccolta fondi*, NABA-Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti, Milan, 30 March 2006.

¹¹⁴ The material of *out* is shown at the Mamco in Geneva, the Istanbul Biennial 2007 and the Tirana Biennial 2009, at the Galleria Contemporaneo of Mestre and at the exhibition *Club 21* in London (2010).

4. The Violent City (2007-2008)

Halfway through 2006 the financial architecture of the various urban plans of the Garibaldi-Repubblica, ex-Varesine and Isola areas has become solid. With investments of 2.5 billion euros, construction will begin on an area of 290,000 square meters, following three master plans, for the Garibaldi (Pelli Architects), Varesine (Kohn Pedersen Fox Architects) and Isola (Boeri Studio) areas. Nine investors and seven banks will finance the construction, under the guidance of Hines.

The process of acquisition has been supervised by Hines Italia, which from 2005 to 2006 has signed over twenty agreements with major investors like Impregilo, Monti Riffeser and Bruno De Mico. Three companies have been formed, one for each project: Caprera Srl, Varesine Srl and Isola Srl, controlled by the Hines group, with indirect participation of a variegated community of shareholders. The shareholders of Caprera are the Hines European Development Fund; the Isola shareholder is the Coima group, while Varesine shares are held by Hines European Development Fund, together with Fondiaria-Sai, Galotti, Immobiliare Lombarda, Premafin and the Italian institutional real estate development fund Monte Paschi Hines Real Estate Crescita.¹¹⁵

With the presentation of the master plan for Isola by Boeri Studio, the situation shifts into one of open conflict. It is clear that Hines does not want to sacrifice even one cubic meter. The municipal administration continues to work in harmony with the multinational. In March 2007 the City and Hines sign a pact for the implementation of the PII Isola, definitively laying the groundwork for the elimination of the parks on via Confalonieri and the demolition of the Stecca. All signs of the industrial past of Isola will be eliminated, with the exception of the former railroad depot, which becomes the communications center of the real estate developers.

Forum Isola continues the battle, calling all the forces into play that can block or slow down the implementation of the projects, in the hope of forcing the adversaries to accept compromises not yet achieved. To emphasize the demand for a new art and community center, Isola Art Center installs a large neon sign on the roof of the Stecca, with the message *New Museum*, a work by the group Kings. Inside the Stecca, in spite of the grave problem of drug dealing on the ground level, the programming of the Center continues with exhibitions, encounters and workshops. One important legal move is made by deciding, together with the craftsman Amido (known as Domenico) Bortolaso to file a claim in court to obtain usucaption (squatter's rights) for ownership of the second floor of the Stecca, the home of Isola Art Center, which he has occupied non-stop for over twenty years. Were the court to officially acknowledge this claim, the City would not be able to demolish the Stecca, as it would not be the owner of the entire building.

The neighborhood movement, however, has been weakened by the split of the previous years. The groups connected with Cantieri Isola, Controprogetto and Legambiente accept the proposals of Hines and prepare to move to the "temporary Stecca" made available by the multinational on vicolo De Castillia. They are to wait there for the construction of the Nuova Stecca-Art Incubator, designed by Boeri Studio. Hines wants to negotiate with just one counterpart, and for this purpose the groups, on 27 March, found the ADA (Associazione delle Associazioni), with Isabella Inti of Cantieri Isola as president.

Drug dealing and media

Hines and the City continue to run up against the firm resistance of Forum Isola, which reacts by sending an open letter to the press, entitled *The Forum does not move*¹¹⁶. As long as the Stecca is not empty it cannot be demolished, so a forceful reason must be found to justify the eviction of an established organization like Isola Art Center, in the eyes of the media. Some of the original artisans are also still in the building, along with the local office of Rifondazione Comunista, where a number of party organizations hold their meetings.

The main argument against the Stecca is undoubtedly the serious situation of its use as a headquarters for drug dealers. The City and the law enforcement authorities do nothing to prevent or hamper the pushers, so public opinion gradually shifts in favor of demolition and renewal.

Attracted by the crowds of young people found in the evening at the Stecca since 2003, some drug dealers have made the place their base. There is no concrete opposition to their presence on the part of the associations running the bars, which fill up with potential customers for the pushers in the evening.

A few months earlier, an attempt on the part of the associations, artisans and artists to close the entrances to the Stecca failed, due to the predictable opposition of the drug dealers and the lack of coordination among the associations, some of which continue to put their own commercial activities ahead of the conservation of the

¹¹⁵ Paola Bivona, 6 June 2007, <http://www.lavoripubblici.it/news>.

¹¹⁶ "Il Manifesto", 28 March 2007.

building. The problem is described in the newspapers, and in a flyer distributed in the neighborhood¹¹⁷ the associations of the Stecca around Cantieri Isola ask the local residents to help them to guard the building, but to no avail. Isola Art Center contacts the police through Rifondazione Comunista, to ask for an operation to clear away the drug trade, but nothing happens other than sporadic visits on the part of the narcotics police, which do not solve the problem. Without orders from above, plainclothes police cannot act in an incisive way, and cannot arrest the pushers. Such orders are never issued.

The situation gets even worse at the Stecca when a war breaks out for control of the drug market between Moroccan and Senegalese dealers. The latter are the victors, and occupy some of the empty spaces of the building. When they move in, the atmosphere changes drastically. The Senegalese guard the two entrances to the Stecca, and bonfires are lit every night. The sale of drugs goes together with drug use, and violent fights often break out.

Isola Art Center is forced to stop using the main entrance to the Stecca, opening a new entrance to its spaces from via Confalonieri. For the craftsmen with workshops on the ground level the situation becomes extremely difficult, because their customers no longer dare to set foot in the Stecca. Their future is more uncertain than ever.

The City and Hines take advantage of the grim situation, launching a coordinated media campaign to destroy what is left of the positive image of the Stecca. Daily newspapers and television stations promote Hines's project, without offering equal time and space to the opposition. Even "La Repubblica", the daily newspaper known for its progressive orientation, takes full part in this campaign, publishing articles with eloquent headlines: "The dark side of the Stecca; The drug fortress; Drug wars in Isola; North Africans vie for drug market in deserted neighborhood; Cocaine and hashish sold openly, sentinels, anti-police slogans".

The articles address the problems in a sensational tone, and never consider the viewpoints of the artisans, the associations, artists and activists who continue to work in this troubled situation, for the future of the building and the parks. Stefano Boeri himself writes an article for "La Repubblica" that sheds doubt on the defense of the historic neighborhood. "Why Isola is not authentic" justifies the planned transformations of his project with theoretical reasoning on authenticity and modernization, while asserting that the process of gentrification has already happened.¹¹⁸ He concludes with these words: «Authenticity does not always help us to defend the interests of the weakest».¹¹⁹ The Alderman for Urban Planning Masseroli talks about Isola as a "neighborhood of fear" and declares: «The Stecca is a building in a state of both structural and administrative decay. It makes much more sense to destroy it and to move the craftsmen into a new building».¹²⁰

The sole intervention organized by the law enforcement authorities takes place on 12 March 2007 and concludes with the arrest of eight pushers. The Senegalese barricade themselves inside the Stecca and defend themselves by throwing objects, until the inexplicable retreat of the police. The raid simply increases the tension and produces a new wave of even more unilaterally biased articles. The vice-mayor De Corato announces that a "definitive solution" will soon be implemented.¹²¹ Reasoning that is far from logical is passed off as obvious, implying that in order to solve a problem like that of drug dealing and abuse in the neighborhood, it is necessary to demolish the building where it takes place, instead of rethinking territorial hierarchies and strategies of urban development that progressively destroy public space and intensify processes of social exclusion.

The battle of the Stecca¹²²

In spite of the climate of tension, Isola Art Center and the Forum continue to construction the art and community center, and on 14 April 2007 they open the exhibition *Situazione Isola*, containing works by a group of artists who operate in close contact with the neighborhood. It is one of the largest exhibitions done at Isola Art Center, with a very high level of participation.

At six in the morning on 17 April, the Polizia, Digos (special operations force) and Carabinieri, in riot gear, arrive at the Stecca, which is still municipal property, to evict those still inside it. On the ground floor the workshops of the craftsmen are opened and all the materials are carried away by workmen, under the guidance of Manfredi

¹¹⁷ "Lettera e invito al quartiere Isola", May 2006, archive of Isola Art Center.

¹¹⁸ The idea that Isola was already completely gentrified prior to the construction of the luxury apartments by Hines is taken up by Isabella Inti, president of ADA-Stecca: "In these years we have witnessed a real process of gentrification of Isola, a process of social substitution and real estate improvement that transforms the more affordable districts into neighborhoods filled with more affluent families". Zona 9, November 2008

¹¹⁹ "La Repubblica", Milan, 24 February 2007.

¹²⁰ "La Repubblica", Milan, 23 February 2007.

¹²¹ "La Repubblica", Milan, 15 March 2007.

¹²² The journalist Maurizio Bono refers to the "battle of the Stecca" as "the mother of all the battles against cement", "La Repubblica", 13 May 2007.

Catella and the architect Lides Canaia, director of the property office of the City of Milan. The drug dealers also obey the order to leave. In the meantime, the artists and activists of Forum Isola, supported by several politicians and environmentalists, gather in the art center and allow access only to journalists. The central entrance is barricaded in a makeshift way with the pedestals used to display the works in the exhibition. When the Digos have already broken the gates and are preparing to enter, the craftsman Domenico Bortolaso and his lawyer arrive on the scene, claiming from the city the squatter's rights of the spaces on the second floor, used for storage for over twenty years. A long day of negotiations ensues.

The situation is at a standstill. The Digos police captain at the site is getting many telephone calls from the upper floors of City Hall. The law enforcement officers, joined just after noontime by the vice-commissioner D'Amato, feel uncomfortable and irritated, and at a certain point someone grumbles about having been sent to act as bailiffs and then mediators, in the place of the municipal authorities. As far as the police are concerned, their job was finished when they had removed the drug dealers and illegal aliens from the Stecca. But they end up having to stay there well past 6 PM. [...] An agreement is arduously reached, and signed in the evening by the craftsman claiming squatter's rights and the municipal attorneys. The letter of intent calls for a sort of truce until 3 May, awaiting the sentence of the courts on the claim of squatter's rights.¹²³

The agreement reached stipulates that everyone, both police and occupiers, have to leave the space, which will be walled up awaiting the decision of the court. In the meantime, the fact surfaces that Bortolaso lives with his wife in a municipal housing project: he is threatened with eviction, and is therefore under great pressure. On 20 April he is asked to go to an appointment at the offices of the municipal attorneys, and he goes there without his lawyer. The meeting lasts for several hours, and in the end Bortolaso gives up on his claim to squatter's rights. That same day he sends of fax to the Prefecture, the Police Headquarters and the city government of Milan, using words that reveal a dramatic change of viewpoint:

[...] This personal decision reflects my desire not to impede a program of public benefit that far exceeds my private interests, in the hope that we can all continue to respect a vocation of a neighborhood in Milan that has known how to conserve values and traditions. [...] ¹²⁴

On 25 April, Liberation Day, Hines cuts the Stecca in two with a steel cable. Then the bulldozers begin demolition of the half on via De Castillia, without giving the artists the chance to salvage works that are their property, or the assets of the art center. A gratuitous, illegal act that seems to be designed to punish the lack of cooperation with the real estate developers.

The half of the Stecca that is still standing contains the offices of Rifondazione Comunista on the first floor, and what remains of *out* and Isola Art Center on the second, with the entrance walled up.

Isola Art Center launches an international appeal to the City of Milan, under the title *Isola Art Center must live!*¹²⁵ It is signed by hundreds of artists, critics, curators and directors of Italian and international institutions, as well as by Daniela Benelli, Councillor of Culture of the Province of Milan¹²⁶.

Following the intervention of the lawyer of Isola Art Center, a legal action suspends the eviction operations and the artists can finally return to the part of the Stecca that is still standing, in order to recover their belongings. Many of the artworks have been unjustifiably destroyed, while others are seriously damaged. The expert Prof. Giorgio Zanchetti, head of the department of Contemporary Art History at the Università degli Studi of Milan, assesses the damages at 422,000 euros. The company Open Care¹²⁷, specialized in the storage, transport and restoration of artworks, provides a truck with a crane and recovers the works that can be transported, restoring them when required and placing them in the company's art storage facility. Bert Theis immediately files a criminal lawsuit against the City and Hines in the name of Isola Art Center¹²⁸, for the damages to the artworks and misappropriation. Forum Isola reacts to the disruption by create a larger structure, the "Coordinamento in difesa della Stecca e dei giardini nel quartiere Isola" (Committee for the defense of the Stecca and the parks in Isola), including not only local residents but also the political forces that support the struggle. The Coordinamento demands that the

¹²³ Beniamino Pianteri, *Isola: Il giorno più lungo*, online newsletter 239 of ChiAmaMilano, 17 April 2007.

¹²⁴ Beniamino Pianteri, *Chi è il padrone delle macerie della Stecca?*, online newsletter 240 of ChiAmaMilano, 3 May 2007.

¹²⁵ The petition is presented at the exhibition *inContemporanea1*, organized by the Province of Milan, Triennale di Milano, 11-13 May 2007.

¹²⁶ We can mention just a few of the signatures: Luciano Fabro, Thomas Hirschhorn, Anri Sala, Maurizio Nannucci, Patrick Tuttofuoco, Marjetica Potrč, Catherine David, Marie-Claude Beaud, Vasif Kortun, Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, Gabi Sgardi, Gianni Romano, Cesare Pietroiusti, Charles Esche, Hou Hanru, Xu Tan, Yang Jiechang, Manu Park.

¹²⁷ Open Care Servizi per l'arte is a company that specializes in the storage, transport and restoration of contemporary and antique art, located at via Piranesi 10 in Milan. www.opencare.it

¹²⁸ Isola Art Center has never formed an association, and continues to operate under the aegis of Isola dell'Arte.

demolished half of the Stecca be rebuilt, and holds its meetings in the Rifondazione Comunista offices on the first floor. On 22 May the Coordinamento invites the President of the Chamber of Deputies (at the time), Fausto Bertinotti, to visit the site and to get involved regarding the situation of the parks on via Confalonieri. Bertinotti arrives to give his support, and talks with the Isola residents about the parks. But his speech is rather general and offers no concrete suggestions for action.

In September the Coordinamento, together with the committee of the ex-Varesine and the association ChiAmaMilano, presents the alternative project *The Possible Park*, designed by the architects Jacopo Gardella and Pierfrancesco Sacerdoti. The aim is to offer a possibility of an alternative layout of the constructed volumes stipulated by the PII Isola and PII Garibaldi-Repubblica master plans. But after two postponements, on 5 October the offices of Rifondazione Comunista are also evicted, and the operation of complete demolition of the Stecca degli Artigiani is brought to a close.

Paradoxically, the Zone 9 Council approves the *Possible Park* project in December, obviously without any consequences.

On 8 October 2008 the court dismisses the criminal lawsuit filed by Isola Art Center, accepting the argument of the public prosecutor and ruling that the case should be treated as a civil suit. But in December the lawyer of Isola Art Center appeals the dismissal.

The humanism of the investors

The most spectacular moment of the intense media campaign undertaken by Hines has to do with the new project by Studio Boeri. As a response to the demands for green areas on the part of the neighborhood, the architects revise the original project, replacing the parks with two towers bristling with trees, known as the Bosco Verticale (Vertical Forest) or eco-skyscrapers. The two towers are respectively 108 meter (27 floors) and 78 meters (21 floors) high, and entirely covered with cantilevered balconies designed to contain 900 trees with height ranging from 3 to 6 meters. The apartments are to be sold at premium prices to wealthy customers sensitive to environmental issues. Architecture historian Marco Biraghi comments on the project:

Faced with the first major opportunities to build, Boeri proves to be much more yielding to the temptations of speculators than one might have supposed on the basis of the positions he had previously expressed and supported. But perhaps it is precisely his desperate effort to save his soul, to protect his image as an advocate of participation in architectural planning, that generates the most embarrassing results. In the vast project in progress in the Isola neighborhood in Milan, the clumsy attempt to disguise two skyscrapers to be treacherously inserted in a context of low-rise working class housing winds up generating a caricature of the architecture of good intentions: where the fig leaf, in this situation, becomes a self-proclaimed vertical forest to scatter over the various levels of the towers, topped by an even less reassuring forest of windmills (all ideas already developed, in any case, in Dutch architecture).¹²⁹

So the greenery desired by the inhabitants is preserved, but in a vertical, private form. The project is presented for the first time from 1 to 30 June 2007 in the exhibition *Nuove verticali a Milano*, curated by Luca Molinari and Nicola Russi at Spazio FMG, and then, in a variant, at the Venice Architecture Biennial in 2008. For the exhibition, a manifesto is published that describes the invention as:

A project of metropolitan forestation, [...] an anti-sprawl device that limits urban expansion, an environmental system that reduces pollution, [...] a filter of urban particulate pollution, a system that optimizes, recovers and produces energy, a system that increases biodiversity, a system that encourages urban ecological culture, an urban sensor of biodiversity.¹³⁰

The appeal to the theme of ecosustainability is a success, and the master plan evolves on that basis. The residential buildings on via Confalonieri, designed by Lucien Lagrange, and the office building designed by William McDonough, are also presented as ecosustainable. The press spreads the news with enthusiasm: *Porta Nuova will be ecological, In Isola buildings like trees, And the city becomes a forest* (“Il Giorno”); *Porta Nuova, ecological future, The forested skyscrapers are coming, Enough constraints, more greenery for the city* (“Corriere della Sera”); *Porta Nuova, eco-buildings for Isola, Solar panels and lots of greenery at eco-Isola* (“La Repubblica”).

Boeri asserts:

The trees will lower the temperature in the summer, absorb particulate pollution and produce oxygen. By positioning them on the building, we have freed up space for more greenery and other functions: had these apartments been built horizontally, they would occupy an area of 5 hectares.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Marco Biraghi, *Storia dell'architettura contemporanea*, Einaudi 2008, p. 479.

¹³⁰ Boeri Studio, *Manifesto per il Bosco verticale*, May 2007.

¹³¹

? “La Repubblica”, 13 June 2008.

To promote Lagrange's buildings as ecological, the communications emphasize their solar panels and vaguely defined «systems to produce energy and hot water». While the offices of McDonough «have been designed like a tree: they get 75% of their energy from ground water, while capturing the energy of the sun».¹³²

The spokesperson of Legambiente – Compagnia del Parco (part of ADA-Stecca) takes part in the ecological accent of the Hines promotion campaign, awarding honorary membership in the environmental association to Manfredi Catella¹³³, who uses this support and that of a mysterious “Let's Improve Isola” committee to declare: «The sustainability of this project is also civic: we have tried to work with the territory and people, to reconcile the needs of public and cultural spaces for the neighborhood».¹³⁴

Information begins to circulate on the cost of the apartments. On 18 June Manfredi Catella and his mother, the architect Alida Forte Catella, present the projects at the Rotary Club. Their report describes “storybook dwellings” and the construction of a “city in the city”¹³⁵. In July the magazine “D di Repubblica” publishes an illustrated article on Isola that mentions, for the first time, a price for the apartments of the Vertical Forest, indicating it as approximately 10,000 euros per square meter, and adding that one of the first model developments for the “happy few” will be built in Isola, «a rare specimen of a working class neighborhood».

An interview with Saskia Sassen in that same issues tersely sums up the operation:

The social elevation of a neighborhood taken to an extreme, as it seems to me is happening in the urban intervention we see here, inserts a certain policy in urban space: too much displacement, too much power that pushes the weaker elements of the population out. And this will make a political reaction happen.¹³⁶

On 26 May 2007 Hines opens Fondazione Ricardo Catella, in the restored Liberty-style building of the former rail depot on via De Castillia, which becomes the propaganda center of the multinational corporation. The Foundation displays a large model of the Porta Nuova project, the overall name invented to indicate the total area of intervention (Garibaldi-Repubblica, ex-Varesine and Isola). There are also explanatory panels, promotional films and printed matter.

For the opening Manfredi Catella sends a personal letter to all Isola inhabitants, announcing the construction of the new Art Incubator, for the cultural associations previously operating at the Stecca, and of the Isola Community Center, another building for the neighborhood. He promises new gardens, one next to Fondazione Catella, the others around the Vertical Forest.¹³⁷

In the area of art, Fondazione Catella reacts to the activity of Isola Art Center, organizing a double exhibition on the hoardings set up around the construction sites. The main event is composed of black and white photographs of urban space in Milan by Gabriele Basilico; then there is also the exhibition *Passaggio 35* with images by the young photographer Marco Garofalo. The Foundation also announces another project, by an artist who has worked with Isola Art Center:

“Luminous installations, “dedicated to those born today”, by the artist Alberto Garutti. Thanks to an electronic system, every time a child is born in one of the connected hospitals of the city of Milan, the installation will light up. This project has also been done in Bergamo, Istanbul, Ghent and Gallipoli.”¹³⁸

"Cannibalism" of the ideas of the opposition becomes a constant in the operations of the real estate developers.¹³⁹ Catella's letter to the inhabitants depicts a harmonious situation of life in the neighborhood that does not correspond to reality, and ignores the opposition of Forum Isola and its allies:

¹³² *ibid*

¹³³ After this act, some of the members leave the group.

¹³⁴ “La Repubblica”, 13 June 2008.

¹³⁵ Attilio Bradamante, minutes of the session of 18 June 2007, www.rotary-giardini.it

¹³⁶ *L'Isola che non ci sarà*, “D di Repubblica”, 7 July 2007.

¹³⁷ To date the garden of Fondazione Catella is much smaller than what was promised, and the gardens around the Vertical Forest do not exist. It remains to be seen whether, once they have been made, they will really be «for public use», or whether they will be closed off or resized for reasons of security.

¹³⁸ *Porta Nuova Isola. Il nuovo progetto per il quartiere*, end of 2007, not dated. After this announcement nothing more has been heard about the project.

¹³⁹ Stefano Boeri uses the title Art Center for the rendering of his Art Incubator. The real estate developer Hobag also takes the name V33 which the collective of students ASSO had used for the occupation of the former PCI offices on Via Volturmo, and applies it to its luxury residential project.

For the artisans who had workshops at the Stecca, shared solutions have been found thanks to collaboration between the municipal administration, the Council of Zone 9 and Isola Srl. The craftsmen have thus been able to resume their activities in new, comfortable, suitable spaces; similarly, the associations have moved on a temporary basis into structures created at the end of vicolo De Castilia, until the coming spring when they will be hosted in the new Art Incubator, together with other cultural and artistic activities already existing in Isola. [...] Finally, updated urban furnishings, with bicycle paths, benches and new pavements, together with a new plan for lighting and security, will make the neighborhood more pleasant, and increasingly on a human scale. As you can see, we have worked at length to try to understand Isola, listening to it and interpreting its fundamental values. [...]¹⁴⁰

To enter the homes of Isola Catella also creates the newspaper “Porta Nuova News”, published by Fondazione Catella every four months and distributed free to all the apartments of Isola. The editorials signed by Manfredi Catella offer a generic, slanted vision of reality:

To design cities and territories calls for responsibility, expertise and passion. [...] Personally, I think about a new humanism, capable of putting man back at the center of the project. [...] Finally, there is the sustainability of the project: the balance of our planet has become a fundamental condition when we think about how to put man back at the center. [...] I believe that the experience of Porta Nuova is emblematic of this new approach that achieves the composition of a new public and private patronage, and a generation of enlightened architects that has the responsibility of moving forward based on a noble past of Italy.¹⁴¹

The transition of the art center

Held in April 2007, “SituazioneIsola” is the last exhibition at the Stecca degli Artigiani, which offers a demonstration of how contemporary art and neighborhood struggle can be combined in an unprecedented way.

The most successful experience of work with the inhabitants is the project for the *museo aero solar*, created by the Argentine artist Tomas Saraceno. When invited by the curator Maurizio Bortolotti to participate in the exhibition, Saraceno asks to meet with a group of people, to illustrate his idea. About thirty inhabitants of the zone and young artists responded. Tomas explains his artistic research and proposes making the world’s largest solar-energy balloon. The technique is simple and extremely inexpensive: plastic shopping bags are gathered in the neighborhood, cut and connected together with adhesive tape, to form a huge surface. The group at the meeting is enthusiastic, and the next day the collection of plastic bags is organized, with drop-off points in apartment houses around the neighborhood. All the plastic is brought to the spaces of Isola Art Center, where the bags are cut into squares and then assembled by artists, students, local residents and children.

The first attempt to inflate the plastic happens in the parks: the Sugoe and Werkstatt collectives build a plastic channel that brings the ventilation from the subway into the park and makes the plastic sheet rise, though it has not yet been assembled in its final form. The children, excited by the spectacle, run back and forth under the floating sheet. Over the next few days the balloon takes form, and early one morning a test flight is done over the parks on via Confalonieri. For the opening, Tomas Saraceno decides to inflate the balloon of the *museo aero solar* inside Isola Art Center.

The artist says that he is convinced that such a project would not be possible in a museum institution, and during the course of a discussion in Minneapolis he explains:

I think the project of the *museo aero solar*, which as you know took form there, owes a lot to the influence of what was happening in Isola and to the attempt to also shift that into our project, which I think is growing, and we find ourselves somehow in a situation of continuous learning of how to do it. This is somehow a very unpredictable project.¹⁴²

On 25 April the bulldozers remove any doubts about the possibility of re-opening the exhibition “SituazioneIsola”¹⁴³ and of saving the Stecca. The loss is devastating in emotional terms, and has great weight in the evolution of the neighborhood. But in terms of artistic operation, it creates new and unexpected opportunities. Inside the building, over five years the artists have experimented with all the possible approaches to the space for their creations, and there is now a strong desire to explore new languages. While the hope had been that of doing this by saving the Stecca and the parks, the traumatic experience speeds up the process and makes it indispensable for the survival of the Center. There are many young artists and curators who are full of enthusiasm, and the gravity of the situation galvanizes Isola Art Center into action.

New programming begins, still on the three levels that have always been part of the project: international, municipal, neighborhood.

¹⁴⁰ Manfredi Catella, *Lettera agli abitanti dell'Isola*, 9 May 2007, archive of Isola Art Center.

¹⁴¹ Manfredi Catella, *L'uomo al centro del progetto*, Porta Nuova News 2, 2008.

¹⁴² Invited by the Walker Art Center, Tomas Saraceno presents the *museo aero solar* to students in Minneapolis, MN. Info on the project can be found at <http://museoaerosolar.wordpress.com/>

¹⁴³ Programmed to last until 15 May.

On an international level the project continues to attract intense attention. In 2007 there is the important participation at the Istanbul Biennial. The curator Hou Hanru invites Bert Theis and *out* to tell the story of Isola Art Center. The exhibition includes the new documentary film *Isola Nostra*, by Mariette Schiltz, which narrates the events of the Stecca from 2001 to 2007. One year later, the documentary is also shown at the Taipei Biennial, in the exhibitions “Soft Manipulation” at Casino Luxembourg and at Stiftelsen in Bergen, as well as at *This is Not a Gateway Festival* in London.

In the period following the eviction, Isola Art Center produces a series of exhibitions in different art contexts in Milan, with the aim of spreading the word about what has happened at the Stecca. The first opportunity is the group show “inContemporanea. Numero uno” at the Milan Triennial, where Isola Art Center presents the project *Q’Art. Center for Art and the Neighborhood* and the international petition *Isola Art Center must live!* In Milan, Isola Art Center enjoys a good reputation in non-commercial art circles, so the exhibition “Made In”, which was to be held at the Stecca and curated by Katia Anguelova, with the participation of the Bulgarian artists Plamen Dejanoff and Daniela Kostova, is hosted at the non-profit artspace of Assab One in Milan.

While the story of the Stecca is spreading in Milan and abroad, Isola Art Center experiments with original artistic practices in the neighborhood, transforming the loss of the space into the gain of new exhibition possibilities. In October 2007, at Punto Rosso, a cultural association with offices in Isola, the “Isola Rosta Project”¹⁴⁴ is presented. The project is a tribute to the art posters put into circulation by the Russian telegraph agency Rosta during the early years of the Soviet revolution. The show contains five black and white drawings that directly address the situation in Isola, made by Marco Colombaioni, Marco Vaglieri and a group of artists of Isola Art Center who reproduce two works by Dan Perjovschi and one by Andreas Siekmann. A year and a half later, the project is extended to the whole zone, with the 19 security shutters of stores¹⁴⁵ in the “Isola Rosta Project 2”. The transformation of the shutters into exhibition spaces along the streets of the neighborhood makes it possible to create an even more direct, immediate relationship with the inhabitants than what happened inside the Stecca, where the local residents were involved but, in any case, had to actually visit the building to come into contact with the initiatives. Instead, now art becomes a habit, an experience of everyday life.

More and more activities of the neighborhood support the Center and are willing to offer their own spaces for exhibitions, encounters and initiatives. For example, the Tantrika Shop, which sells self-produced clothing on via Pollaiuolo, presents an exhibition of photographic projects by Paola Di Bello over the years with Isola Art Center, in March 2008. In November Tantrika Shop also hosts the video exhibition “Taipei-Beirut-Madrid-Berlin-Isola”, together with the Soundmetak musical instrument shop, opened on piazza Segrino by the musician Xabier Iriondo. The idea is to make use of spaces that have not been designed for the display of art, and to rethink, through original practice, the role and the possibilities of making art in times and spaces that are coextensive to the neighborhood. The situation in the neighborhood is still tense, because the inhabitants have no more green areas and the process of gentrification is starting to leave clear signs. But this does not weaken the opposition; if anything, it leads to greater determination.

5. The Rising City (2009-2012)

Over the last few years, the skyline of Isola and the nearby zones has changed at a torrid pace. Between via De Castillia, via Confalonieri and via Volturno a gigantic worksite takes form. The first building to be completed is the tower of the new headquarters of the Lombardy Region, designed by the studio Pei Cobb Freed & Partners on the site that was once the “Bosco di Gioia”. At the start of 2010 regional governor Roberto Formigoni officially opens the building, placing a copy of the “Madonnina” statue that tops the Milan Cathedral inside it. In the frenzy to finish the construction quickly, a green four-storey apartment house gets overlooked, and remains trapped with its tenants between the wings of the new building, which immediately gets the nickname of “La Piovra” (octopus). The Region takes all possible measures to proceed with the demolition of the green building, but the residents refuse to leave.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ The project is a tribute to the posters designed by artists and published by the homonymous Russian Telegraph Agency during the first years of the Russian Revolution.

¹⁴⁵ Shop shutters done by Alek O., Kristine Alksne, Stefano Arienti, John Armleder, Dafne Boggeri, Michelangelo Consani, Stina Fisch, Gaia Fugazza, Kings, Peter Kogler, Maija Kurseva, Gabriele di Matteo, Osservatorio inOpera, Adrian Paci, Luca Pozzi, Matteo Rubbi, Marco Vaglieri - *out*, Werkstatt, Fani Zguro.

¹⁴⁶ See Armando Stella, *Il palazzo che non vede la luce. Prigionieri del Pirellone bis*, “Corriere della Sera”, 12 September 2010, and the documentary *La casa verde* by Gianluca Brezza.

In 2008 Milan triumphs over Izmir and is selected as the site of Expo 2015. This means that the maxi-project of renewal for the Garibaldi-Repubblica-Varesine area is now interpreted as part of an overall transformation of the city to prepare for the big event. For Expo 2015 the administration and the real estate developers want to make the zone look like a small version of Manhattan. The architectural restyling of the two towers of the Garibaldi station begins. A new curtain-wall cladding transforms the two postmodern hulks into a more up-to-date glass and steel style. In October 2011 construction is completed on the Torre Cesar Pelli, which with its 231 meters (including the spire at the top) becomes Italy's tallest building. It is purchased by the Unicredit bank to install its new headquarters. The two towers of the Vertical Forest of Boeri Studio and the adjacent buildings are completed in 2012, faced by the new V33 luxury residence, a competing luxury residential tower at via Volturmo 33, the former headquarters of the PCI. The building is not included in any urban plan, but simply imposed upon a street of buildings of much lower average height.¹⁴⁷

Where the public buildings created to meet urban planning "standards"¹⁴⁸ are concerned, the situation is confused and gives rise to long discussions in the Zone Council and the City Council. No one dares to analyze or criticize the overall meaning of the operation of gentrification, however, in which the standard public service facilities are a part. They are used to make the neighborhood more appealing for the wealthy clients destined to live in the new apartments, rather than to guarantee services to the present inhabitants, as intended in the regulations.

The Art Incubator now stands next to Fondazione Catella, and opens its doors in October 2012, with the new name "Stecca 3.0", for settlement by ADA-Stecca. The Community Center, the other "standard" building called for in the master plan of Boeri Studio, vanishes from the projects without any explanation, and is replaced by a "Casa della Memoria" (House of Memory). The latter is a project presented in 2009 by the mayor Letizia Moratti and the Alderman for Housing Gianni Verga, which combines – in a confusing ideological mixture – the partisans of ANPI, an association of the deported, and another of victims of terrorism¹⁴⁹. The municipal administration and the Council of Zone 9 approve the proposal, ignoring the stipulations of the PII Isola and the promise, made at the time of the demolition, that the Stecca would be replaced with spaces that could guarantee the continuation of its activities. For the definitive design of the Casa della Memoria, in 2011 the City and Hines announce a national competition. The jury, chaired by Stefano Boeri¹⁵⁰, selects the project by the Genoa-based studio Baukuh, which proposes a box whose outer walls are «covered with small and large terracotta tiles that narrate, as in a medieval polyptych, this history of the city through the portraits of its great protagonists»¹⁵¹.

Another example of questionable handling of the standards has to do with a building by the architect Nicholas Grimshaw, called the "Lumacone" (Big Slug) due to its long, narrow form, which the master plan of the City of Fashion had proposed as a space for fashion shows inside the Giardini di Porta Nuova. At this point the City of Fashion has been definitively set aside, and Hines has already proposed, in 2007, the modification of the functions of part of the standard structures of the Lumacone, for a total of 20,000 sq meters. In January 2012 the City Council rules on the passage of 12,000 sq meters of standards of the building from functions of public and general benefit to service industry and commerce functions, in keeping with the demands of the multinational. The neighborhood thus loses another part of the standards, balanced out by 2.3 million euros, a sum that may be used to build a Civic Center.

Furthermore, last-minute modifications to the constructions planned on the future gardens have made the original project of the Biblioteca degli Alberi, winner of the Giardini di Porta Nuova competition, no longer feasible. The latter project will have to be changed to adapt to the new situation. One of its creators, Mirko Zardini, already commented on this problem in 2007:

¹⁴⁷ "The Lombard 'botteghino' that for forty years, from 1964 to 2004, housed the Communist Party and then the PdS and, finally, the DS, changes its function and becomes a luxury residence. [...] The company that is doing the work is Hobag, from Alto Adige. [...] At the end of the 1990s, the facility on via Volturmo passed to Unipol and then to Pirelli Re (Real Estate)." Giulia Guerri in "Il Giornale", 8 April 2010.

¹⁴⁸

[?] The term "standard" [in English] is used for the areas of public facilities or services of public or general interest, equal to a certain number of square meters for every new inhabitant of the buildings that are constructed. This public service quota can be converted into a building, whose cost of construction is equal to the value of the areas (qualitative standard).

¹⁴⁹

[?] The building provides a definitive location for the associations ANPI (National Association of Partisans of Italy), ANED (National Association of Deported Persons), AIVITER (Italian Association of Victims of Terrorism), INSMLI (National Institute for the History of the Liberation Movement) and the Association of Relatives of the Victims of the Massacre of Piazza Fontana. ANPI had previously been evicted from its historic headquarters on via Mascagni, occupied by the partisans in the final phase of the Resistance in Milan.

¹⁵⁰

[?] The jury of the competition for the Casa della Memoria is composed of: Stefano Boeri, Lides Canaia, General Director of Housing and Public Properties of the City of Milan, who directed the operations of eviction of the Stecca together with Manfredi Catella; the architect and center-left politician Pier Vito Antoniazzi, as representative of the Zone Council; Manfredi Catella and César Pelli.

¹⁵¹ "Corriere della Sera", 12 May 2011.

Now that certain decisions have already been made, and certain projects already outlined that will have considerable effects on the park (the project by Boeri, the competition for the Museum of Fashion, the exposition center of Grimshaw, Fondazione Catella, the open spaces of the new headquarters of the Region on via Restelli, the open spaces of the Hines project), the City requests our intervention, based on the new situation. What is problematic here is that in this period of time the City has not demonstrated any concern regarding the park, which had been conceived as a means to integrate the various projects in a coherent system of outdoor spaces. Instead, the City has encouraged the fragmentation of the surrounding interventions. The park, instead of guiding the design of the area, has been interpreted by the City as the leftover space after the installation of the surrounding projects.¹⁵²

Isola on the way to gentrification

At this point Isola finds itself in a situation of passage. The impact of the transformation on the life of the neighborhood can be completely assessed only when the luxury apartments have been completed and occupied by the wealthy social stratum for which they are being made. In the meantime the prices of houses have increased fourfold in ten years, and the signs of transformation are there for all to see. After the former PCI headquarters at via Voltorno,¹⁵³ another building that reflected the character of the opposition spirit of the neighborhood has changed its function: «the Pergola Tribe squat has been closed, for conversion of the building to contain high-quality residences»¹⁵⁴.

The Nuova Idea disco, a historic reference point for the gay community, is incompatible with the image of the new district and is expropriated, in spite of the legal battle waged by its owner¹⁵⁵ and a protest vigil organized by Forum Isola and Isola Art Center. The adjacent Cascina Romagnina, an old farmhouse that is the only remnant of the agricultural past of Isola, is also demolished. In the meantime, many small businesses are closing, and being replaced by fashion boutiques and bars.

It is clear that Hines wants to adapt the neighborhood to the needs of the city of the wealthy that is under construction. The goal is pursued by means of three complementary tools: Fondazione Catella, the new Urban Commerce District¹⁵⁶ and the intervention of the so-called “creative class”.

In the fall of 2009 Fondazione Catella opens a restaurant run by the actor Antonio Albanese. The name of the venue, Ratanà, refers to Don Gervasini, known as “El pret de Ratanà”, a charismatic figure of the Lombard tradition, a priest who lived in poverty together with the poor, donating all his worldly goods and bringing food and care to the needy. The restaurant immediately attracts a well-heeled clientele.

At the entrance to the Foundation, visitors are greeted by a quotation of Riccardo Catella: «To participate is to share». The rhetoric of participation is a constant in the communications of the multinational, and is fundamental for the creation of consensus. For this reason, Hines organizes parties and worksite visits, gathering these initiatives under the heading “I Progetti della gente” (The People’s Projects), which sounds a lot like the title of an exhibition held at Isola Art Center in 2006, “La Scelta della Gente/The People’s Choice”.¹⁵⁷

Hines pays close attention to unrest in the neighborhood. When the dust from the worksites causes problems for the local residents, the company launches the initiative “The worksite washes the cars it has dirtied” and distributes coupons so the residents of certain streets can get their cars washed free of charge.¹⁵⁸

The DUC (Distretto Urbano del Commercio/Urban Commerce District) gathers together all the local forces that are in agreement with the transformation in progress in Isola. The allies of Hines are the Association of Shopkeepers of via Borsieri and via Thaon de Revel, Cantieri Isola, aMAZElab, and the “Cooperativa sociale Città e Salute”. To move forward with the operation, they have an overall budget of 1,650,000 euros, supplied by the Lombardy Region and the Chamber of Commerce¹⁵⁹. The stated objective is to support small businesses, protecting jobs

¹⁵²

? E-mail from Mirko Zardini to Michele Sacerdoti, 4 October 2007.

¹⁵³

? From a presentation of V33: “The balconies and private terraces, which in the duplex apartments and the penthouse are organized on both levels, are comfortable, protected spaces that enhance the exclusive environments in which the most refined design generates maximum comfort and luxury. The V33 is a true island of style and tranquillity in the heart of a lively, pulsating neighborhood. The project by the architects Tiziano Vudafieri and Claudio Saverino expresses the right combination of design and technology, for improved environmental comfort and energy savings. The V33 residences are also provided with a fitness room and private garages”. <http://www.v-33.it/it/appartamenti-di-lusso-milano.html>

¹⁵⁴

? Gabriella Kuruvilla, “Il cemento invade l’Isola”, “Internazionale” no. 833, 12 February 2010.

¹⁵⁵

? On 18 November 2009 the TAR dismisses the appeals against the expropriation of Cascina Romagnina, stating that the suits have no legal basis.

¹⁵⁶

? Cfr. Mara Ferreri, Davide Caselli, *Acting in the emerging void. Notes on gentrification at Isola, Milan*, in this book.

¹⁵⁷

? Exhibition curated by Marco Scotini; see *Chronology* and Marco Scotini, *Ceci n’est pas une exposition. From art collectives to audience government*, in this book.

¹⁵⁸

? “La Repubblica” online, 13 March 2010.

¹⁵⁹ «We shopkeepers should contribute with 55,000-60,000 euros, while the other funds will be contributed by the Region, the City and private investors, meaning the large developers». Roberto Raguzzoni (president of the shopkeeper’s association of via Borsieri), “Zona Nove”, July 2010.

without damaging the character, style, tradition and culture of the neighborhood. But most of the initiatives of the District seem to move in the opposite direction: the financing of design projects for the Fuorisalone/Salone del Mobile, the creation of a logo for the promotion of Isola, a printed guide to the district, urban furnishing details, store shutters that prevent graffiti.

In an initial project in December 2009, the DUC finances the repositioning, on the traffic circle of Piazzale Segrino, of a Monument to the Fallen Partisans, previously located on via Sasseti in an area that has become part of the Hines worksite. In the document for the contracting of the move, the cost of the operation is indicated as 30,000 euros, split between Isola Srl (Hines Italia) (20,000) and the Lombardy Region (10,000). Manfredi Catella is on hand for the unveiling at the new location, and the event is covered on the front page of “Porta Nuova News”:

The movement of the monument has been made possible, in fact, also thanks to the support of the Fondazione [Catella], which has acted as the spokesman for the requests of the associations, and played a role of technical-administrative coordination between public and private subjects, in the context of the civic program known as “The People’s Projects”, promoted in collaboration with the City.¹⁶⁰

The interference of the multinational in the anti-fascist past of the neighborhood is seen in a negative light by part of the ANPI (National Association of Partisans of Italy), which refuses to participate at the unveiling, during which a group of citizens displays a protest banner: “Liberation from speculation”¹⁶¹.

Starting in 2009 the DUC intervenes extensively, together with Fondazione Catella, in the renewal/beautification of piazzale Segrino, via Borsieri and piazzale Archinto. Plantings are installed, along with playground equipment for children, revealing a certain cynicism since they are made with tree trunks, almost a monument to the extensive felling of trees that has happened in the zone.

The next target seems to be via Pepe. The blank facades of its buildings do not match the tastes of Hines, which hires the Mexican artist Raymundo Sesma to develop a project of abstract, gigantic geometric painting, also involving the pavement of the nearby parking area.

The cases in which “creative professionals” take part in the gentrification process are far from isolated. Many artists, architects and designers work with Fondazione Catella or operate on their own in the neighborhood. The City of Fashion, at this point, is a makeshift trendy neighborhood whose appeal needs to be boosted, as is emblematically demonstrated by an advertisement of Hobag, the real estate developer behind the V33:

Milan is a chameleon that never stops, a city in continuous transformation and evolution. The Porta Nuova zone, neglected for decades, is now in an exciting phase, and will soon be a futuristic economic and cultural pole. “The place to be” [in English, ed.], as they say in America. This is the location of the V33, the new project by Hobag, at via Volturno 33, in the historic Isola neighborhood, and very close to the best of what Milan will have to offer in the years to come. Tradition and innovation, past and future, a symbiosis of opposites that attract each other in an area adjacent to the center of the Italian capital of business, creativity and fashion.¹⁶²

An opportunity for visibility of the process of image development of the creative district is participation in the annual program, during the Salone del Mobile, of the events of the Fuorisalone, with projects organized by groups like aMAZElab or Esterni¹⁶³. On these occasions Isola becomes a location for projects aimed at the mass audience for design and art. A particular role is played in this process by Cantieri Isola, which together with aMAZElab and Xing organizes a series of encounters entitled *Isola Talks and Walks*, with the contribution of Hines, with the aim of promoting the Isola “brand”.¹⁶⁴

In April 2012 an artistic initiative is also organized in direct connection to the sales campaign for the luxury apartments: this is the exhibition of contemporary art and design *Anatomia del bosco verticale*, held in one of the towers by Boeri Studio, which have now reached their definitive height.

Organized in an area of 700 m², in the lobby and on the 3rd and 22nd floors, sculptural, luminous and sound installations narrate a “sustainable” way of making art [...]. On the third floor, together with several works, it will be possible to also visit the first model two-room apartment of the entire Vertical Forest complex, with the first tree planted on the balcony and a series of design objects selected by Alida Forte Catella of Dolce Vita Homes. Curated by Flash Art, *Anatomia del bosco verticale* offers an opportunity for citizens, free of charge, to experience the space and to activate the five senses, while also getting a glimpse of the remaining parts of a worksite that extends from the

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? “Porta Nuova News”, January 2010.

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? The image from the banner is later painted by Isola Art Center on a security shutter of Punto Rosso.

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? www.v-33.it.

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? The group “Esterni” is also involved in the project of the website Zonaisola.it, which it promotes together with the companies CityO and Mediatria. Esterni introduces itself at zonaisola.it with these words: «Esterni works for public spaces so they can grow, multiple and be enriched by creativity and diversity».

¹⁶⁴ See Mara Ferreri, Davide Caselli, *Acting in the emerging void. Notes on gentrification at Isola, Milan*, in this book.

Porta Garibaldi station to Gioia, and advances, also promoting an interdisciplinary vision that mixes urban planning, public spaces, culture, art and interior design. And this exhibition is just one phase of many.¹⁶⁵

The exhibition in question really does open up a new phase in Isola. Hines, which in 2007 destroyed the works of the artists of Isola Art Center, now uses artworks to promote its neighborhood of the future, where creativity is placed at the service of wealth.

Isola Pepe Verde

The failure of the neighborhood's attempt to save the Stecca and the parks is a grave disappointment for many of the local residents. A sense of defeat and resignation inevitably spreads. Some members of Comitato I Mille drift away, and some of the artists and curators of Isola Art Center move on to other projects, seeing the lack of a permanent space for experimentation as an insurmountable problem. Nevertheless Isola Art Center, as outlined above, manages to renew itself thanks to new modes of work in the urban fabric and the contribution of a new generation of artists and curators. For the neighborhood movements, on the other hand, the process of adaptation is slower and requires greater effort. A moment of internal discussion arises: part of Comitato I Mille and its board operate in tune with the Forum Civico Metropolitano¹⁶⁶ and continues to criticize the urban projects as a whole, with press releases and public meetings, demanding green areas and compliance with the urban planning standards in the form of services, where that is still possible. Other activists of Forum Isola agree that it is necessary to criticize and to propose, but they also think that concrete prospects need to be communicated to the inhabitants.

The objective of a self-managed social space no longer seems feasible in the places that are by now being altered by the gentrification project of Hines. Nevertheless, the movement from below that is the spirit of Isola continues to exist, driven above all by the lack of green areas for the activities of the neighborhood families. The shared desire is to concentrate energies to gain a new municipally owned space and to transform it into a community park. Such an area is found in a fragmented space, which includes a zone abandoned by a former construction materials storage yard, a fenced-off lawn and a parking area, between via Borsieri, via Pepe and the Bussa overpass. One of the positive aspects of the space is the fact that it is close to two schools, and the central fulcrum of the neighborhood.

Activists of Isola Art Center, Comitato I Mille and the Confalonieri Parents' Association take part in the project, together with newly mobilized inhabitants, acting under the name of Isola Pepe Verde.¹⁶⁷ The first flyer distributed contains an appeal:

We have found the neighborhood garden that is lacking in Isola! It is close to the schools and easy for everyone to reach, a bit outside the construction sites. A place where children can finally run and play, and mothers and senior citizens can finally gather and relax. It is big enough to contain a garden with benches, an area for dogs, a multifunctional sports field, a space for art and the neighborhood. Where? Between via Borsieri and via Pepe there is a municipal space, closed and abandoned. Let's all immediately ask that it be reopened and made available to the neighborhood. For greenery we can use, not just look at! Isola Pepe Verde¹⁶⁸

The appeal is illustrated with a graphic simulation done by *out*, to demonstrate a possible configuration of the future park. The Pepe Verde group grows quickly and operates on two fronts, that of mobilization and that of institutional relations.

To promote the project the group organizes different actions in the streets and squares of the zone, with gazebos and banners. In two days over 1000 signatures are gathered. A public assembly organized by the Isola section of ANPI prior to the municipal elections¹⁶⁹ becomes an opportunity to present the project to the mayoral candidate Giuliano Pisapia, who says he agrees with its intentions. When Pisapia returns to Isola during the next year, after having been elected mayor, the president of Isola Pepe Verde Africa Sunico makes him an honorary member.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁵

? www.affaritaliani.it, 10 April 2012. The works chosen by Flash Art are by Damiano Colacito, Maurizio Nannucci, Vito Acconci, Piero Gilardi, Fabio Mauri, Johannes Vogl, Fabrizio Ferri, Vico Magistretti, Fernando & Humberto Campana. Thinking that everything is for sale, the organizers of the exhibition contacted a gallery to include a work by Bert Theis.

¹⁶⁶

? Forum Civico Metropolitano is founded in 2010, combining citizens from different neighborhood associations and committees of the Milanese metropolitan area, with the aim of «reducing the distance between citizens and institutions, representing the most widely shared demands and also favoring a political-administrative path that can lead to the creation of modern local municipalities, based on the model of the major European capitals» (www.forumcivicometropolitano.it). The spokesperson of the Forum is Giuseppe Natale.

¹⁶⁷

? A name invented by the filmmaker and Isola resident Elvio Annese.

¹⁶⁸ Flyer by Isola Pepe Verde, Novembre 2010, Archive of Isola Art Center

¹⁶⁹ Almo Colombo Isola Section of ANPI, at Sala 1 Maggio (via Sebenico), 3 April 2011.

¹⁷⁰

After months of disappointment and regrets in the neighborhood movements, the struggle in Isola is back in the media and recharged with new energy.¹⁷¹

To start to use the reclaimed space, parties and public events are organized. At every party Isola Art Center intervenes with specific projects by artists, especially by the collective “Fuori dal vaso” and by *out*.

Discussing the simulation designed by *out*, some municipal technicians express doubts about its feasibility due to lack of funds, and suggest that a provisional version be developed as a first step. Isola Pepe Verde accepts the suggestion and *out* develops an immediately feasible project for the park using the eco-box system¹⁷², developed in Paris by Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée. All the illustrated proposals function above all for the promotion, discussion and activation of the project, whose definitive form will gradually be shaped by the ideas and work of the inhabitants involved in the process.

To get started with the work as soon as possible, it is also decided to take advantage of a law regarding sponsorship that makes it possible to care for green areas owned by the city. An application is made to the municipal administration to take care of the sloping green lot between the Bussa overpass and via Pepe, one of the small already green parts of the Pepe Verde project. The City grants the area after one year, and at the neighborhood festival in May 2012 planting begins. The torrid Milanese summer becomes a challenge, and the organizing of the watering of the plants is an opportunity to build a community of volunteers around the project.

In November 2010 Isola Pepe Verde submits an observation to the City in which it requests that the project for the new garden be inserted in the new PGT (Territorial Organization Plan). The request is rejected by the City, but unanimously approved by the Zone Council in January 2011. To be able to have institutional relations with the City and the Zone Council, Isola Pepe Verde forms an association on 6 October 2011. The association then sends the proposal for the creation of the temporary garden on via Pepe, prior to the definitive design.

Some members of the center-left administration elected in 2011 are open to dialogue, so a delegation meets with the Councillor of Municipal Properties Lucia Castellano and the Councillor of Urban Planning Ada Lucia De Cesaris. The latter proposes dividing the area of via Pepe between Isola Pepe Verde and ADA Stecca¹⁷³, given the fact that the latter is still waiting for the definitive opening of the Art Incubator. The proposal would make it possible to shift funds from the Garibaldi-Repubblica to the area, facilitating the creation of the park, but also altering its planned size at the same time. Isola Pepe Verde does not accept the idea and looks for other solutions. Councillor De Cesaris then proposes a contract of “loan for use” of the area, with the Department of Municipal Properties, the owner of the land. Councillor Castellano agrees, but the municipal administration wants to involve the Zone Council in the decisions, and thus proposes that the contract be drawn up between the Zone Council and Isola Pepe Verde.

In the meantime the Departments of Municipal Properties, Decentralization and Green Areas hold work tables and discussions to find a way to grant citizens in different areas of Milan the possibility of making community gardens in a unified, regulated way. Councillor Castellano proposes this type of convention for Isola Pepe Verde. Isola Pepe Verde accepts. In July 2012 the convention request is filed, examined by the Environment and Decentralization Commission of the Council of Zone 9 and finally approved on January 2013. Since then, Isola Pepe Verde activists enter the space to clean it, waiting for the Zone Council to hand over the keys of the area.

The Dispersed Center in the neighborhood, a new form of *fight-specificity*

The experiments in reaction to the events of 2007 bring about the metamorphosis of Isola Art Center from a specific place to a local diaspora that operates in a multitude of spaces. In response to the removal of the 1500 square meters occupied at the Stecca, Isola Art Center now uses the public spaces of the neighborhood, the squares and sidewalks, for collective performances, theater, readings and openings.

Most of the concepts developed over the years¹⁷⁴ determine a new path for the Center. Collectives like Osservatorio inOpera, Millepiani and *out*, which continue to work with Isola Art Center, are joined by others that participate in a more sporadic way, like PartiColAzioni, or in an ongoing way, like Fuori dal vaso.

? Public assembly with the Councillor of Urban Planning Ada Lucia De Cesaris, the Councillor for Decentralization Daniela Benelli, and the Council of Zone 9, Sacro Volto parish, 22 May 2012.

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? “Corriere della Sera”, 12 May 2011; “La Repubblica”, 28 November 2011; newsletter of ChiAmaMilano, 23 September 2011. The Agence d'Urbanisme de Lyon publishes on the Internet a documentary on Isola and Pepe Verde: www.urbalyon.org

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? The eco-box system has been used in Paris by the collective Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée to create community gardens on paved areas. The use of wooden pallets makes it possible to structure the space and create compartments in which to put plantings without having to break up the asphalt.

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? ADA Stecca, on its website, has presented a project of freight containers for the area of the former storage yard. In September 2009 Isola srl (Hines) requested the area from the Public Properties office on behalf of ADA, but did not sign the contract of “loan for use” prepared by the City.

¹⁷⁴ Listed and explained in Chapter 3.

The collaboration with universities and art academies remains a constant: every years, the graduate-level course of the Masters of Visual Arts of NABA develops a project for the neighborhood. In 2011 the young artists and curators produce the “LOASI” project, a temporary group show that touches on the theme of the real estate projects, the evolution of the neighborhood and its gentrification with a range of different works. Pierfabrizio Paradiso creates a banner on the history of Isola, which remains hanging for months on a wall on via Pollaiuolo, until the police remove it amidst the protests of the inhabitants¹⁷⁵. In 2012 the NABA students act under the name Room 47. The group focuses its projects on the Isola Pepe Verde area, becoming part of the struggle for the creation of the park. David Fayek and Edith Poirier make two murals on the wall bordering the strip of land conquered by Pepe Verde.

The concept of fight-specific art is interpreted along two paths: critique of the neo-liberal urban transformation in progress¹⁷⁶ and coordination with Isola Pepe Verde. As in the past, the platform of experimentation does not apply this line in a rigid, exclusive way, and also permits artists and curators to present other types of content¹⁷⁷. This happens, for example, during two events that attempt to make increased contact with young artistic production: *Show Desk*, a moment of free presentation of the portfolios of artists¹⁷⁸ organized by the Venetian collective Sottobosco; and *Granaio*, an event on micro-funding for art by the Milanese group Bougainville¹⁷⁹.

The connection of Isola Art Center in the neighborhood proceeds through strategic projects. Recalling the enthusiasm generated by the *museo aereo solar* of Tomas Saraceno among the inhabitants, Isola Art Center launches a new project addressed to the citizenry: *Beggar Robot*, the panhandling robot by the Slovenian artist Sašo Sedlaček. During the exhibition “Public Turbulence” in 2009, the robot is shown in different places in the neighborhood, where it asks for money in an ironic way. The artist does a public presentation in the spaces of the Soundmetak store, also showing a film that explains and documents the project. The Parents’ Association, in contact with Isola Art Center since the days of the Forum, organizes an encounter in which the artist presents the work of the students of the middle school of Isola. During the presentation, Sašo explains that the robot, built with pieces of old computers, is *free to copy*. The teachers and students are enthusiastic about this form of art based on recycling and recovery of materials, and they decide to build a copy with the help of Isola Art Center. A workshop is organized¹⁸⁰ at the school, and the new robot is built in a few months. The students also work on the words the robot will say, selecting phrases that have to do with the problems created for public education by the budget cuts imposed by the Berlusconi government. The robot is presented during the party for the end of the school year, and generates such interest that it receives coverage on Rai3 television. When interviewed, the principal of the school explains that the situation is problematic due to lack of funds, and that the robot will be used to beg for the money needed to provide good educational services. In this way, an artwork created in the complex social situation of Slovenia, where the shift to capitalism has made beggars out of many workers, is charged with new political meaning connected with the dramatic crisis of Italian education. In the context of Isola, the work takes on a fight-specific quality that links it to the battle of teachers and families to defend public schooling.

The exhibitions, encounters and projects curated by Aria Spinelli, together with Valerio Del Baglivo and Elvira Vannini in 2010, and together with Angelo Castucci and Maddalena Fragnito in 2011, clearly and decisively address the neighborhood context, as is already evident in their titles: “Horror Vacui-Occupying the Present”, “Architettando/Under Construction...”, “G as in Gentrification-The transformation of Isola”, “S as in Shoved Out”¹⁸¹. “Horror Vacui” focuses on the loss of identity caused by the speed of the worksites and the first signs of change in the territory. The sensation of disorientation forms the basis of the reasoning and the project takes on a function of reaction/action. The fear of emptiness is thus filled up with a series of events, exhibitions and

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? *Quando io penso solo a me stesso, chi sono gli altri? Quando gli altri pensano solo a se stessi, chi sono io?* by Pierfabrizio Paradiso, in collaboration with Elvio Annese and Marina Flavia Rossi.

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? Taken forward, for example, with various encounters connected with the magazine “Millepiani/Urban” or the presentation of documentaries by Elvio Annese on the Bovisa zone, and by Gianluca Brezza on the Casa Verde of via Melchiorre Gioia.

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? The projects by Fani Zguro, an Albanian artist and curator, focus on the realities of the dispersed center without addressing the problems of the neighborhood, following a line of personal research. The same could be said of the project *L'indiano in Giardino* by Santo Tolone and Alek O., a sort of exhibition-picnic with many artists of the Sugoe collective. Only the series of posters by Dafne Boggeri on the Nuova Idea gay disco, destroyed by Hines, focuses on the situation of Isola.

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? With the participation of Trama21, Andrea Kunkl and Giuseppe Fanizza, Katia Meneghini, Alessandro Nassiri and Thanos Zakopoulos.

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? During the project “Horror Vacui”, curated by Aria Spinelli and Valerio Del Baglivo, 2010.

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? *out office* workshop conducted by Carmelo Mutalipassi and Mariette Schiltz, and by the artist Fausto Falchi, who arrives for the occasion from Mestre.

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Mara Ferreri, doctoral candidate at Queen Mary, University of London, intervenes to explain the concept of gentrification. The theory is then applied to the neighborhood through the demonstration of local processes, then ironically illustrated in a series of drawings made by the artist Maddalena Fragnito. While the first encounter provides an introduction, the second is organized to intervene in a more direct way on the territory of Milan. For “S as in Shoved Out”, in fact, Pierre Bohr and Antonella Gradellini of the “Casa Degli Artisti” are invited, to talk about the occupied space on via Garibaldi evicted in 2007, the same year as the destruction of the Stecca.

conferences whose goal is to re-create the community scattered after the destruction of the Stecca. The direct confrontation with the reality of the zone is directly expressed in the incursion by Fabrizio Bellomo into the worksites of the PIR Isola to plant an illegal vegetable garden, and in the series of posters by Mirko Smerdel entitled *Your Skyscrapers*. “Architettando/Under Construction...” is a series of events inspired by the ambiguity of the Latin term, which alludes to construction, but also to deception (plotting). In a local bookstore (Puerto de Libros, now called Isola Libri) the materials of *No-Spot City* are shown, by the AUFO group of architects, who design a building for one million inhabitants in the center of Milan that would destroy part of the Castello Sforzesco. The project clearly alludes to the modes and motivations of the destruction of the Stecca.

The importance of *fight-specificity* is also the basis of the creative work of the collective Fuori dal vaso¹⁸², in 2011, when they decide to intervene in an independent way in the neighborhood struggle and the battle for the new park. For example, they construct a dewdrop of wood, painted green, 2.5 meters high, and put it in the space of Isola Pepe Verde, and then insert the symbol in Google Maps, where the park begins to exist on the maps, even though it is still only a project. The group starts a blog to support the neighborhood’s fight and makes hand-painted posters with the green droplet, gluing them to walls near the former storage yard in a nocturnal action. The activists of Isola Pepe Verde then decide to adopt the droplet as the logo of the association, revealing the contribution of the artistic action done by Fuori dal vaso.

The *fight-specific* approach can also be seen in the project “Green Desire/Desiderio Verde”¹⁸³, done in the exhibition space of Sasseti Cultura, the historic workers’ cooperative of the neighborhood, on via Sebenico. The works selected by the curators Camilla Pin, Elena Mantoni and Valeria Mancinelli, refer in different ways to the neighborhood struggle. The theoretical framework of the project is supplied by the philosopher Tiziana Villani, who introduces an encounter on the concept of the three ecologies of Félix Guattari. Starting with photographs of the conquest of the first park of Isola in 1991, taken by Danilo Borelli, the exhibition shifts to the years of the Stecca with documentation of the community garden project “Wild Island” organized by Stefano Boccalini in 2002, all the way to Isola Pepe Verde, with materials from *out* and Fuori dal vaso. Two international groups already involved in the fight in Isola, Atelier d’Architecture Autogérée of Paris and Park Fiction of Hamburg, are also in the exhibition, with videos. Public Works of London, on the other hand, produces seed bombs with the word “Pepe”, to toss into the still inaccessible space to trigger spontaneous plantings. The project connects theory with action, creating an open workshop for the construction of an Ecobox in the parking lot on via Pepe. This module, installed without permits, is still lovingly cared for by the inhabitants, and demonstrates how the temporary garden could function.

The dispersed center represents the third phase of the evolutionary process of Isola Art Center, which began without a fixed space and has returned to clandestine operation after the five years spent in the Stecca. The different operative situations have made it possible to experiment with various possibilities of interpenetration of art and a specific urban struggle. With the conquest and collective design of the new self-managed area of Isola Pepe Verde, coinciding with the publication of this book, a new phase, with new challenges, is now beginning.

6. The Future of the City

The city never stops. The only permanent characteristic of the metropolis is its unstoppable evolution.

It can expand or shrink. Its zones can get more or less dense, more or less affluent. It can change slowly or quickly, depending on the chemistry of the forces involved. Nevertheless, the development of the city is never natural or a matter of chance. It is always determined by economic, political and social dynamics, which need to be better understood.

Where the management of European cities is concerned, the architects of Atelier d’Architecture Autogérée point to Stockholm as an example of municipal policies that do not obey the dictates of neo-liberalism:

For example, the operation of the city of Stockholm deserves praise, as in the last ten years it has applied a policy of tactical investment. Strategic areas for the growth of the city have gradually been identified and covered by public investment, to avoid leaving them at the mercy of speculators. Administrators and politicians with good intentions have to come to grips with the logic of the free market, and act as a result. It may be too late to adopt other systems. So city administrators have to begin their own urban struggle.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸²

[?] Members of Fuori dal vaso: Aria Spinelli, Angelo Castucci, Maddalena Fragnito, Emanuele Braga and others.

¹⁸³

[?] With Emanuela Ascari, Atelier d’Architecture Autogérée, Massimo Bartolini, Stefano Boccalini, Danilo Borelli, Fuori dal vaso, *out*, Pierfabrizio Paradiso, Park Fiction, Public Works, Mirko Smerdel and Bert Theis.

In Italy urban policies of this type have never been witnessed, i.e. policies that oppose the neo-liberal logic without challenging the laws of functioning of capitalism. We will probably not be seeing them in the future, either, unless politicians sense strong pressures from the movements of the new outcasts of the city.

Different hypotheses exist for the future of Isola. «In the worst possible future, Isola will be just the name of a subway stop at the edge of a newly constructed district, Porta Nuova», Mara Ferreri writes¹⁸⁵, while Marco Biraghi believes that:

It is very improbable that Isola can conserve something of its original nature, in social and morphological terms. The risk, in fact, is that under the pressure of overwhelming economic forces it will lose everything it has been able to conserve up to this point: its positive condition of separateness, its character as an “island”. Actually this loss has already happened, in many ways. If architectural historians have to devote attention to Isola in the near future, in all probability it will be a sign that all resistance has been eliminated.¹⁸⁶

These are just possibilities, because all we can predict about the future are its trends. The Bussa overpass, that six-lane bridge over the tracks of the Garibaldi station, a remnant of what was supposed to be a long street crossing Isola that was never built, is a tangible reminder of the fact that mega-projects of urban transformation sometimes fail.

In 2007, immediately after the eviction from the Stecca, the philosopher Marco Senaldi, with a bit of irony, hypothesized some possible scenarios for the future of the zone, including this one:

Hines does not listen to reason, the City of Milan gives in to Yankee imperialism, and a formidable tower in the form of a pistachio nut is erected by a famous Italian artist (whose identity remains unknown, for obvious reasons...). A few decades pass in the shadow of this symbol of social repression, but as a result of repeated attacks on similar towers, often owned by Hines, the investors soon abandon the offices located in the building. Hines goes bankrupt: after a short while all its properties have been sold off, and in the general slump of the real estate market that continues in 2020 this type of building, which no one wants, falls into a state of decay and ruin. Left to their own devices, the spaces of the tower become first a headquarters for drug dealers, and then they are occupied by a group of counter-cultural artists who call themselves Isola Art Center Remastered.¹⁸⁷

The only thing we know for sure is that nothing will be the same as before. Most of the spaces that a multitude of inhabitants, artists, students and philosophers once filled with meaning and brought alive with their physical presence have been destroyed or privatized. The gypsies and the craftsmen of the Stecca have been shoved out of the neighborhood. The agrarian, industrial and political past of Isola has been erased. There will be no turning back, even in the case of failure of the operation of gentrification, or a future de-gentrification.¹⁸⁸

Undoubtedly in a totally gentrified Isola, an “island of the rich”, there will be no place for Isola Art Center. It would go against the genetic makeup of the Center. As the artist Christoph Schäfer explains:

Those who gain from gentrification are private developers, owners of land and buildings. Or those who transform every new idea, every new behavior, every new way of looking at the world into a commodity. To this we should add that more and more people are forced to live in the city, to offer their services of labor there, and to spend their free time there. [...] The conflicts regarding urban space are not necessarily battles that challenge the foundations of capitalism. Nevertheless, they are class struggles that take place in the spaces of the city, struggles for access to the means of production, to the time of one's own life.¹⁸⁹

“Take back Isola” was a slogan of the neighborhood struggles of the 1970s, painted on a long wall on via De Castillia. To make a serious return to such an aim, from below, and to achieve it, would imply social and political relationships of force that are very different from those of the present; it would mean a widespread situation of insurrection, on a municipal and national level.

Without excluding extreme future scenarios (total gentrification or urban insurrection), the contemporary art projects in Isola are constructed around the desire to be a part of the flow of transformation, knowing that it cannot be stopped, but it can be influenced, through conscious decisions about taking sides. Art can get away from its old role of representation of facts, and start to influence those facts from within. Art can decide whether to side with social forces operating from the top down or from the bottom up.

¹⁸⁵ Mara Ferreri, Davide Caselli, *Acting in the emerging void. Notes on gentrification at Isola, Milan*, essay in this book.

¹⁸⁶ Marco Biraghi, *Architectural history of the Isola quarter in Milan (1900-2011)*, essay in this book.

¹⁸⁷ Marco Senaldi, *L'Isola che non c'è (più)*, Exibart on paper, June 2007.

¹⁸⁸ Charles Esche has introduced the idea of "de-gentrification" in the discussion on the concepts of Isola Art Center in this book.

¹⁸⁹ Christoph Schäfer, *The City is our Factory*, Spector Books, Leipzig 2010, p. 304.

On Saturday 5 May 2012 a hundred “Art Workers”¹⁹⁰, including many of the artists and curators of Isola Art Center, gathered in Isola and then walked down via Pola, passing by the tower of the Lombardy Region built on the Bosco di Gioia, to reach the Galfa skyscraper. The tower had been empty for fifteen years for reasons of speculation, and is owned by the Ligresti Group, which together with Hines is the main force behind the construction in the Isola, Garibaldi-Repubblica and Varesine areas. Here the “Art Workers” open Macao, a new center for the arts, culture and research in Milan. In one week thousands of persons entered the building, participating in assemblies and work tables. Public opinion was generally quite in favor of the unexpected but short-lived initiative.

In a press release on 15 May 2012, the employees working in the Lombardy Region tower, together with the Rappresentanza Sindacale Unitaria (RSU, unitary workplace union structure), summed up the facts and took a position:

The space of Macao, opened a few days ago in the Galfa skyscraper in Milan, an office building that has been abandoned for 15 years, has quickly become a place of cultural production, frequented by thousands of young people and observed with interest by the inhabitants of a neighborhood that still feels as if it has been deprived of the reservoir of ideas that was Isola Art Center, and crushed by real estate speculation. The same forces of speculation that in just a few days have obtained, from the authorities, the eviction and closing of Macao. The RSU of the Regional Government of Lombardy unanimously (with 5 abstentions) expresses its solidarity with the young women and young men of Macao, in the hope that a solution will be found as soon as possible to permit the continuation of this important experience for the city of Milan.

This press release was read by a delegate of the workers of the Region in an assembly of hundreds of people who after the eviction remained in the street in front of the skyscraper, blocking traffic and creating what was known as Piazza Macao. The activity that had begun inside the tower continued in the street: meetings, university lectures, concerts, performances, production of a mobile stage... The daily arrival of visitors did not decrease, but even increased, and for a free concert by a hundred young musicians the crowd in the street swelled, containing about 10,000 persons.

With the “liberation” of the tower and the creation of the piazza, Macao¹⁹¹ managed in a short time to become the place of hope, of encounter and expression of many fragmentary realities of the urban territory. An idea took form of what the Right to the city means, and for a moment people caught a glimpse of what could happen were the experience to spread in a general way across the whole territory. Another city, another politics, another culture, another life.

¹⁹⁰ “Lavoratori dell'Arte” was founded in July 2011 when a group of artists, curators and professionals in the visual arts decided to make an organization to respond to the present situation of lack of job security in the sector.

¹⁹¹ After these events, Macao occupied Palazzo Citterio, an 18th-century building in the center of Milan, from which the occupants were evicted two days later by the police and the army. The group then occupied an empty former slaughterhouse owned by the City of Milan, at via Molise 68. www.macao.mi.it.