Intelligence, Creativity and Fantasy

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CIAUD- FA ULisboa/ CHAM, FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, Portugal

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## Table of contents

Fantasy and creativity of the Azuchi-Momoyama period Japanese tea architecture
*A.P. Higashino*  
89

From fantasy to experimentation: The one-to-one scale in architecture exhibitions
*A. Neiva*  
93

Architecture and cinema: The tower as both scenario and protagonist
*E. Kuchpal & A. Pimentel dos Santos*  
99

Fictional movement on the NY's Guggenheim ramp
*S. Paiva de Sousa & M. Baptista-Bastos*  
105

Gottfried Böhm's creativity: Architecture as a sculpture made of concrete
*A. Serafin*  
109

Intelligence, creativity and fantasy in Bernard Tschumi's Glass Video Gallery: In-between trans lucency, transgression and interaction
*A. Vasconcelos*  
115

From the intensity to the essence: Fantasy and architectural creativity between the Neorealism and the Third Modernism in Portugal
*M. Baptista-Bastos & S. Paiva de Sousa*  
121

Paper as a flexible alternative applied to the Dom-Ino System: From Le Corbusier to Shigeru Ban
*A. Nogueira & M.S.M. Kong*  
125

The internationalisation of Álvaro Siza and the myth of the traditional and conservative architect
*J. Nunes*  
131

The fantasy of reality: On the design drawings of Álvaro Siza Vieira
*J.M.C. Duarte*  
137

The “good taste”: When patterns restrict creativity
*G.M. de Carvalho*  
143

Creativity and pragmatism: A practical example of a project
*C.R. Castro & M.S.M. Kong*  
149

Towards a more intelligent dwelling: The quest for versatility in the design of the contemporary home
*H.L. Farias*  
155

The house as a mirror and support of identity: Reflections for a more conscious and subjective inhabiting
*A. Santos Leite*  
161

Architecture stories in the construction of children's spatial conscience
*M. Louro*  
167

From fantasy to reality: Adaptive reuse for flour mills in Venice
*S. Palomares Alarcón*  
173

The ruined fantasies of intelligent minds: ‘The Nobel's town’ and neglected Swedish heritage in St. Petersburg
*I. Seits*  
179

World-in-spheres: A cartographic expedition through the spherical world of Peter Sloterdijk
*F.H. Brum de Almeida, G.H. Rosa Querne & L. de M. Reitz*  
187

From international context to Portuguese urban planning: Creativity on mechanical aesthetics in Planos Gerais de Urbanização
*J. Cabral Dias*  
193

“Fantastic” colonial cities: Portuguese colonial utopia
*A. Ramos*  
199
From fantasy to reality: Adaptive reuse for flour mills in Venice

Sheila Palomares Alarcón
ORCID: 0000-0001-5451-8225

ABSTRACT: When designers are faced with interventions in abandoned industrial buildings, their imagination leads them, among other things, to spaces that, like a palimpsest, accumulate the stratigraphy of their history. This fantasy gives rise to different design solutions that will inevitably differ from one person to another, leading interventions in our industrial, architectural heritage to become increasingly varied and complex.

Reuse has been a constant in Venetian architecture. Churches, convents and religious buildings were turned into factories in the 19th and early 20th centuries, as was the case with the Stucky or the Passuello e Provera mills, symbols of the local flour industry. These mills, in addition to filling the space of old convents after these were shut down, filled the imagination of the designers and owners who tried to bring these buildings back to life. Finally, and after a period of neglect, they now have new uses.

In this paper, and using the mills mentioned above as case studies, we intend to reflect on the life cycle of the two industrial buildings, and analyse the interventions aimed at their reuse, focusing on how the imagination of the designers gave rise to different solutions.

Keywords: Industrial Architecture, Industrial Heritage Adaptive reuse, Flour mills, Venice.

1 INTRODUCTION. FROM FANTASY TO REALITY, THE ART OF DESIGN

Fantasy: “means the same as imagination” (Covarrubias, 1611: 397). According to the dictionary of the Spanish language, “Imagination” is the “Ease to create new ideas, new projects, etc.”¹

When architects or engineers have to design a new project, they face the challenge of translating the ideas they have imagined in their heads for these new spaces into their plans, or later on, into the building.

This task becomes even more difficult when it comes to renovating or retrofitting a building regarded as industrial heritage because the assumptions that will condition the development of the work are an important input for imagination.

When designers are faced with interventions in abandoned industrial buildings, their imagination leads them, among other things, to spaces that, like a palimpsest, accumulate the stratigraphy of their history. This fantasy gives rise to different design solutions that will inevitably differ from one person to another, leading interventions in our industrial, architectural heritage to become increasingly varied and complex.

Se c’è una città dove il problema del “che fare” di questo importante patrimonio non esiste – e questa è ‘altra singolarità che mi preme segnalare – ebbene questa è proprio Venezia. (Mancuso, 1980, p. 37)

Reuse has been a constant in Venetian architecture. Churches, convents and religious buildings were turned into factories in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Mancuso, 2009, p. 67). These are spaces with significant value as heritage, not only from an architectural, social, historical, technological or economic point of view but also in terms of the role they play in the urban landscape.

Nella città ’arte per eccellenza anche il luoghi e gli impianti della produzione dovessero mimetizzarsi tra ‘edizionia monumentale e quella tipica veneziana. (Randolfi, 1979, p. 15)

The industrial flour mills built at the dawn of the 19th century are characterised, among other things, by their large scale. They are usually imposing and very tall buildings that, despite this, in some cases, can blend into the urban landscape; the Stucky or the Passuello mills, symbols of the Venetian flour industry, are only two examples of that.

¹ Royal Spanish Academy. Dictionary of the Spanish Language. Available at: https://dle.rae.es/?id=L08fZIc
Part II: Architecture/urbanism/design

These mills, in addition to filling the space of old convents after these were shut down, filled the imagination of the designers and owners who tried to bring these buildings back to life. Finally, and after a period of neglect, they now have new uses.

In this paper, and using the mills mentioned above as case studies, we intend to reflect on the life cycle of the two industrial buildings, and analyse the interventions aimed at their reuse, focusing on how the imagination of the designers gave rise to different solutions.

2 THE ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE OF THE FLOUR MILLING INDUSTRY IN VENICE: FROM USE TO REUSE

The Italian food industry was only modernised from the first decades of the 19th century onwards. There were several reasons for that, among which the lack of energy resources; the strong presence of self-consumption; the absence of a specialised workforce; internal and external political problems, or the financial limitations of the domestic market. (Giuseppetti, 1995, p. 12) These circumstances meant that there was no development of the large modern food industry, based on extensive mechanisation, vast economies of scale and standardised production (Chiapparino, 2009, p. 32) until the second half of the 19th century.

From the 1870s onwards, there was an expansion of markets that contributed to an improvement in communications, especially by rail, and modernisation of the machinery used in different industries. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1870 also benefited commercial traffic in cities such as Venice. (Giuseppetti, 1995, p. 13)

Even so, the buildings related to the agri-food industry did not have a large scale nor were they arranged in large manufacturing plants, except for specific situations, especially in the flour milling sector, mostly located in the north of the country, such as the Stucky mill. (Chiapparino, 2009, p. 44)

2.1 The stucky mill: Currently, a hotel, congress centre, and residential building

On the Giudecca island, the church and convent of Santi Biagio e Cataldo (Giuseppetti, 1995, p. 24) were demolished to allow for the construction of what was considered the most significant industrial flour milling complex in 19th-century Venice and the largest and most modern cylinder mill in Italy until World War I: the Stucky mill.

Giovanni Stucky, who had built a flour milling factory based on the Austro-Hungarian system in Treviso, decided to move to Venice and build a steam mill on the Giudecca island. This decision was driven, among other things, by the fact that most of the grain was imported in bags from North America, Russia or Turkey (Giuseppetti, 1995, p. 15) by sea, so transportation was faster to Venice, especially after the construction of the maritime station (1880), resulting in time and cost savings. (Cacciani, 1997)

This first building, which dates back to 1884 and was based on the multi-storey factory typology, had four diaphanous floors, a rectangular floor plan, numerous windows clad with Istrian limestone, cast iron pillars with capitals, wooden ceilings, and gabled roofs. Preference was given to functionality and production, rather than architecture or decorative aspects. (Giuseppetti, 1995, p. 26)

These facilities were extended three years later, with the construction of a new building with characteristics similar to those of the original one. Offices, warehouses, a three-storey building for storing finished products, workers’ homes, a canteen, a mechanical workshop. The Stucky mill grew and was continuously

3. In the cylinder milling system the wheat runs through a series of rollers placed at variable distances from one another, with more or less grooves; after each grinding, the fine flour is sifted out, and the leaving of each sifting are themselves ground and sifted several times. (Amorós, 192-102) The first mills of this type, using iron cylinders, were built between 1821 and 1832 in countries such as Switzerland or Germany. (Maddaluno & Monte, 2012). Among the most commonly used systems were the ones developed by the Swiss companies DAVERIO (1850) or BÜHLER (1860; Daverio branch that split off in 1880), whose main advantage was that the grain casings were preserved during the manufacturing process, clearly separating the flour from by-products such as bran. Thus, performance improved and production increased. (Bayo & Borras, 2009, p. 271 quoted by Palomares, 2016, p. 59)

4. The first steam mill built in Venice was located in the Church of San Geromalo (1842), whose tower was used as a chimney to extract steam. (Giuseppetti, 1995, p. 22).
improved. Plansichters were introduced in 1890\textsuperscript{5}, and in 1895 an application was submitted at the city council to renovate and extend the mill, with a project signed by the German architect Ernst Wullekopf. (Julier, 1978, p. 8-13)

The architecture of the Stucky mill was consistent with the training that the architect received at the Hanover Polytechnic, which at the time was promoting the “Gothic-Norman”, or even the Romanesque or Neoclassical style, distant from the Venetian tradition, for industrial architecture. (Giuseppetti, 1995, p. 46)

From the early years of the 20th century onwards they also produced bread, pasta and introduced improvements that solved hygiene issues. There were several fires, and the building underwent various extension and renovation works:

- A second silo was built in 1907, this time with a reinforced concrete structure, but with the same ornamental technique used in the building by Wullekopf, according to a design by Giancarlo Stucky;
- The façade of the pasta factory was renovated and extended in 1920 by Emil Wurt;
- A new warehouse was built in 1922 by Giancarlo Stucky, who also designed a house that was used as residence between 1924 and 1927.

It was decommissioned in 1954. Without maintenance, the silos were virtually empty in the 1990s, and almost none of the machinery that attested to their industrial power had been preserved. (Giuseppetti, 1995, p. 60-61)

In 1990, Società Acqua Pia, together with Banco San Popolo and other private investors, launched procedures to purchase the mill and discussed different possibilities for its renovation with the city council. Several uses, such as residential, sports, commercial, or hotel were considered. One of the problems involved in the renovation was the size of the building, which made it difficult to intervene in the complex as a whole. (Rafoni, 2000, p. 36)

Finally, Società Acqua Pia, a group of designers specialising in conservative restoration led by Francesco Amendolagine and Giuseppe Boccanegra, and the Venice City Council, in a public-private intervention, moved forward with the renovation of the Stucky mill, turning it into a five-star hotel, a congress centre, and residential building.

The renovation took 12 years to complete. The mill was regarded as

un valore storico in ogni sua parte, senza possibilità di sottoporlo a giudizi di valore soggettivi e fuori dalla storia. (Amendolagine & Boccanegra, 2007, p. 16).

2.2 The passuello e provera mill, currently ca’ foscari university

In Cannaregio, north of the city, the convent of San Giobbe was reused in a variety of ways: part of it was used as a cemetery by the church of San Giobbe, and the rest was turned into a wax factory decommissioned in the first half of the 19th century.

The company Società Anonima Commerciale e Industriale Passuello e Provera used the old wax factory as grain warehouse and mill. Faced with the need to extend its facilities, the company bought adjacent land and commissioned the extension project to the engineer Filippo Zanetti in 1921. (Giuseppetti, 1995, p. 48)

Only one two-storey construction was drawn in the Mill extension project as a pre-existing building.\textsuperscript{6} The project envisaged the construction of two additional floors above it and an adjacent warehouse. There was also an area for the construction of silos. We should add that the mill’s façade overlooked the River Crea and the railroad tracks, making the transport of goods substantially easier.

\textsuperscript{5} A plansichter is a machine with a large number of square sieves that move back and forth in a zigzag pattern, separating the flour from the bran and the semolina and classifying them (Moreno & López, 2011, p. 56)

It has been part of the economic campus of the university, based in San Giobbe, since 2015. The intervention involved transforming the silo cells, building new slabs at the flour mill floor levels, and building two additional floors.

Inside there are classrooms, research rooms, a library, didactic laboratories and the offices of the Economics and Management department.

In order to achieve this, while preserving the building envelope, as well as the configuration of the openings and the colour of the cladding, there was the need to build new connection spaces and renovate the building as a whole, including the wooden structure of the factory's roof, which was left visible and adapted to its new use.

3 CONCLUSION

The Stucky and the Passuello e Povera mills were the largest in the city. Being typologically similar (multi-storey factory, Austro-Hungarian system) and architecturally different (scale, size, decoration, construction system), they represent the rich industrial past of the Venetian flour milling industry and exemplify the continuous reuse of the city's buildings.

From convent to factory. From factory to neglect. From neglect to "what do we do?" From "what do we do?" to a hotel, a congress centre, residential building and a university.

There are numerous possibilities for reusing industrial architecture, and Venice is an example of that.

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10. There were other silos, built in 1900–1901 by the engineers Carissimo and Croti, which were demolished in 1979. They were a great mass visible from all over the city (Fontana). There is an interesting series of photographs in the "Fondo Reale Fotografia Giacomelli" from 1923 to 1978 in which we can see the evolution of these silos. Available at http://www.albumdivenezia.it/ (Venetian Album).
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