

The rewriting of the urban palimpsest through an “evocative building renewal” of two Milanese architectures

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Abstract

The topic of urban regeneration consistently involves a reflection on the relationship between pre-existence and transformation, between permanence and the research for an image renovation of the buildings that participate in the construction of the urban palimpsest. A contemporary architectural narrative cannot overlook the fundamental coherence between what it was - and now what is lost - and what remains. That point is symbolic of what happened in some industrial districts, which were subject to a functional conversion that is still in progress. As a result, these industrial archaeologies appear as silent buildings without any function. Otherwise, a building could still be used and play a leading role in the urban setting as an integral part of the contemporary urban story. In this instance, the conservation requests frequently prevail over the transformation requirements. However, this does not preclude design strategies that can also encompass the partial or complete renovation of the building, solely focusing on the functional and technological enhancement of the exterior envelope or even the reorganization of the interior spaces. Two significant examples of these directions - namely the first pertaining to the recuperation of industrial archaeology heritage that has been incorporated into the urban fabric, and the second aimed at reshaping buildings that necessitate urgent technological and formal renovation - were executed by Park Associati in the past decade.

Keywords: urban palimpsest, building renewal, envelope retrofitting, Milan, 20th-century architectural heritage

1. Introduction

Paul Ricoeur believes that «to build coherent temporal sets» means, in the very activity of the story, taking the form of «comparing time» [1]. However, the selection of a temporal whole and the research of a coherence - which can be internal if it is solely related to the events already included or external if it crosses multiple sets - are not straightforward actions and cannot always be attributed to objective criteria. They are the outcome of a critical-interpretive process that cannot be obtained from the fundamental moment of selecting the data of each set. This selection phase appears to be even more essential in projects involving existing buildings, namely "to build on the built". Indeed, the determination to proceed with a contemporary architectural narrative that does not overlook the essential coherence between what was - and what is now lost - and what remains, can only be derived from a meticulous examination of past fragments and spaces, of relationships and rules in each structure. All this information can translate the nature of the built heritage into a comprehensible and interpretable whole, as a prerequisite for the ability to work on it. The process of transcoding the signs' inheritance which in this way is transferred by the existing heritage leads to the identification of some features of permanence that allow to establish in a new story the diachronic coherence between before and after, between yesterday, which could be more or less far, and tomorrow, closer as envisaged by the project [2]. Therefore, these characteristics constitute the essential temporal connection required to establish continuity between diverse ages, which can be expressed in various manners. At times, it manifests itself as the mere preservation of the built heritage, encompassing the complete or partial preservation of its material consistency; other times, it corresponds to the

51 rediscovery of a system of architectural rules and signs that belong to the existing buildings and are adopted by the
52 designers charged with the renovation to give life to seemingly new buildings; other times, it is the outcome of a
53 balanced process that acts as a mediator between the aforementioned topics. Consequently, the design style exhibits
54 varying degrees of coherence with the original structure and the associated transformation phases. They progress from
55 meticulous precision to the urban palimpsest, wherein the building engages in a more explicit freedom of expression,
56 with the aim of presenting a renewed image of the existing building. However, this relationship recovers the system of
57 rules that guide it or takes from the alphabet of signs that defines it.

58 Different modulations of the operational style cannot be entrusted to a mere arbitrary choice of design.
59 Nevertheless, it must be measured based on the nature of the urban palimpsests and the relationship the selected building
60 establishes with them. With this perspective, it is imperative to comprehend its significance in the urban setting and its
61 pivotal role in the narrative [3]. It is even more important if a state of abandonment of the existing buildings has led to
62 a substantial loss of meaning, considering the inevitable and evolutionary process that the palimpsest faces. Moreover,
63 it is noteworthy that certain industrial districts have undergone a transformation that is still in progress, even though it
64 has already resulted in a profoundly altered urban landscape, wherein the vestiges of industrial archaeology appear to
65 be “silent” buildings, devoid of any function. In this case, the building stands as a historical testimony, but it has now
66 lost its character as an urban living space. The renovation project aims to reclaim the abandoned spaces and reclaim
67 their “voice”, transforming them from “mutes” to “singers” through distinctive solutions that, depending on the
68 circumstances, act as a mediator between conservation and transformation [4].

69 Otherwise, a building can still be used and play a leading role in the urban setting. In such cases, the conservation
70 request typically prevails over the transformation one. However, this distinction does not exclude design strategies that
71 can also consider the renovation of the entire building or only a portion of it, with a focus on the theme of the functional
72 and technological updating of the envelope, as an essential element of the contemporary urban story, or even the new
73 arrangement of the interior spaces.

74 Among the most significant examples of the operational strategies are two works developed in Milan in the last
75 decade by the Milanese studio Park Associati: the renovation of the former General Electric factory, which hosts offices
76 and laboratories of an important company, and Palazzo Campari, a building built in the 1960s. The first one aims at
77 renovating the heritage of industrial archaeology, which is included in the urban texture, and the second one is aimed at
78 restyling buildings that need an urgent and unplayable technological and figurative renewal. Following two distinct
79 strategies, the designers adopted the same approach for both interventions, which could be described as an “evocative
80 building renewal” [5].

81 2. The redevelopment of an industrial area: the Luxottica Digital Factory

82 The renovation project of the former General Electric factory entails the search for rules that could be able to affect,
83 according to a different story of what it acquires as a narrative trace, the palimpsest of the Milanese industrial area
84 flourished near Porta Genova in the middle of the 19th century. The related building texture, organized on a road grid
85 parallel to the railway line and characterized by the large industrial blocks, is originally overwritten on the rural layouts
86 and the agricultural partitions determined by irrigation infrastructures and crops. The defining elements of the
87 agricultural landscape, such as farmsteads, irrigation ditches, borders, and fences, establish the boundaries for the
88 designation of district blocks. These blocks, since the initial urban development, have been shaped by regular forms of
89 large size with a singular function, soon occupied by both Italian and foreign industrial companies, as well as the initial
90 workers' housing and, gradually, schools and services [6].

91 In Via Toltona, at number 35, the factory of the *Compagnia Generale di Eletticità S.p.A* - an associate of the
92 multinational General Electric - was built in the 1920s to set up a plant for turbine production in an area of 30,000 m².
93 After the lively economic development of the 1960s, the industrial site was affected by a phase of decline due to the
94 transformation of production systems and the energy crises. Many factories were decommissioned and, in a few years,
95 either abandoned or subject to easy resettlement processes of other productive activities. After the phase of
96 decommissioning and disuse of the plant, at the end of the 1990s, an American group settled in the former General
97 Electric area, using the building for television production and as a data centre [7].

98 In 1983 a process of transformation and regeneration of the industrial quartier began: the first example, the creation
99 of Flavio Lucchini's Superstudio in the locomotives' garages of the Porta Genova station and a bicycle factory, was
100 followed starting from the 1990s by the redevelopment of the Ansaldo area, the establishment of the Domus Academy
101 in via Savona, the Armani Theater in the Nestlé factory, the Arnaldo Pomodoro Foundation, etc.

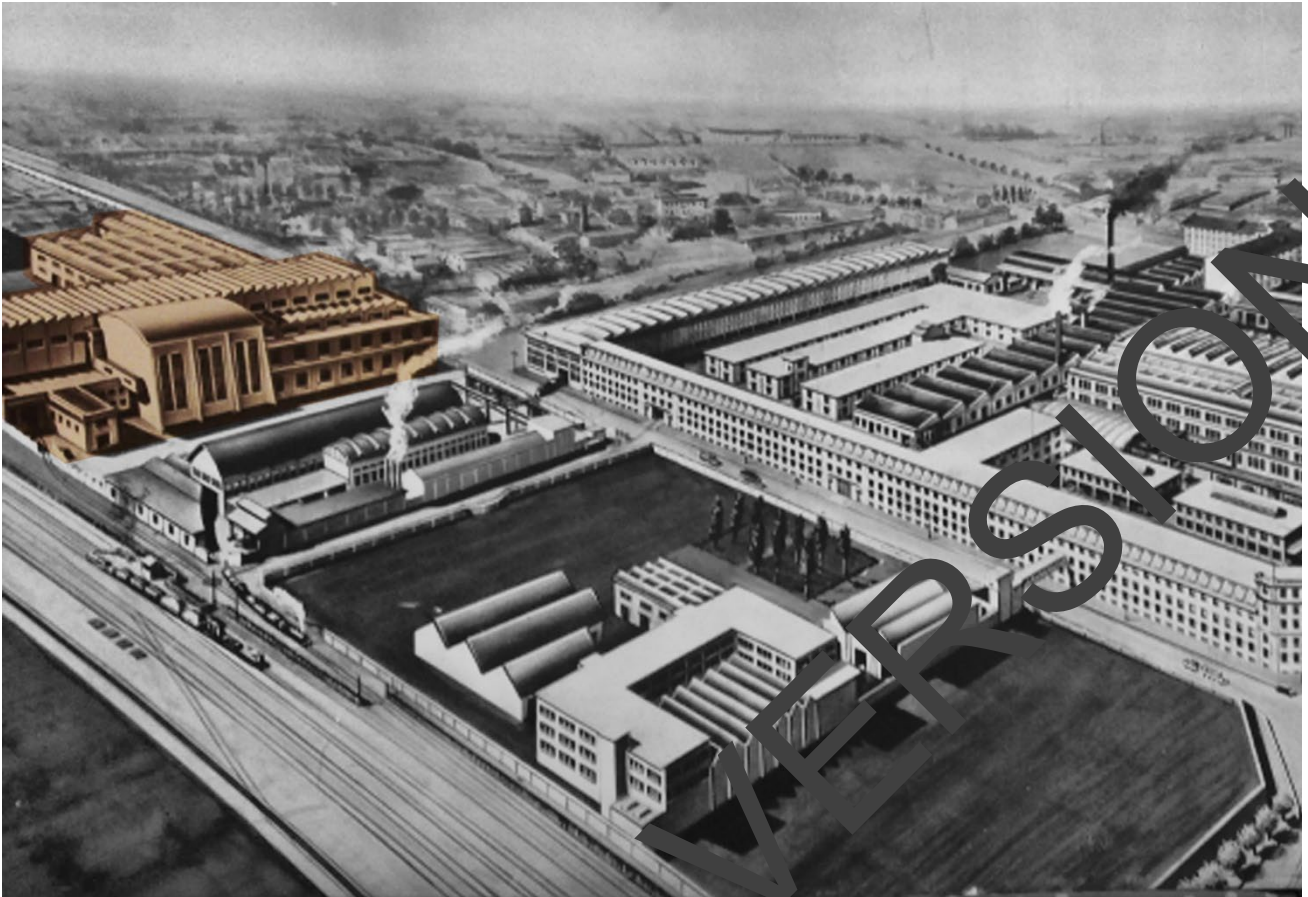


Figure 1 - The former General Electric factory in the industrial district close to the railway station of Porta Genova and the factory before the renovation design (© MUMI Ecomuseo MilanoSud).



Figure 2 - The façade along Via Tortona and the interior space of the GE factory placed next to the building block redesigned by Alfredo Beretta and Matteo Thun (© Park Associati).

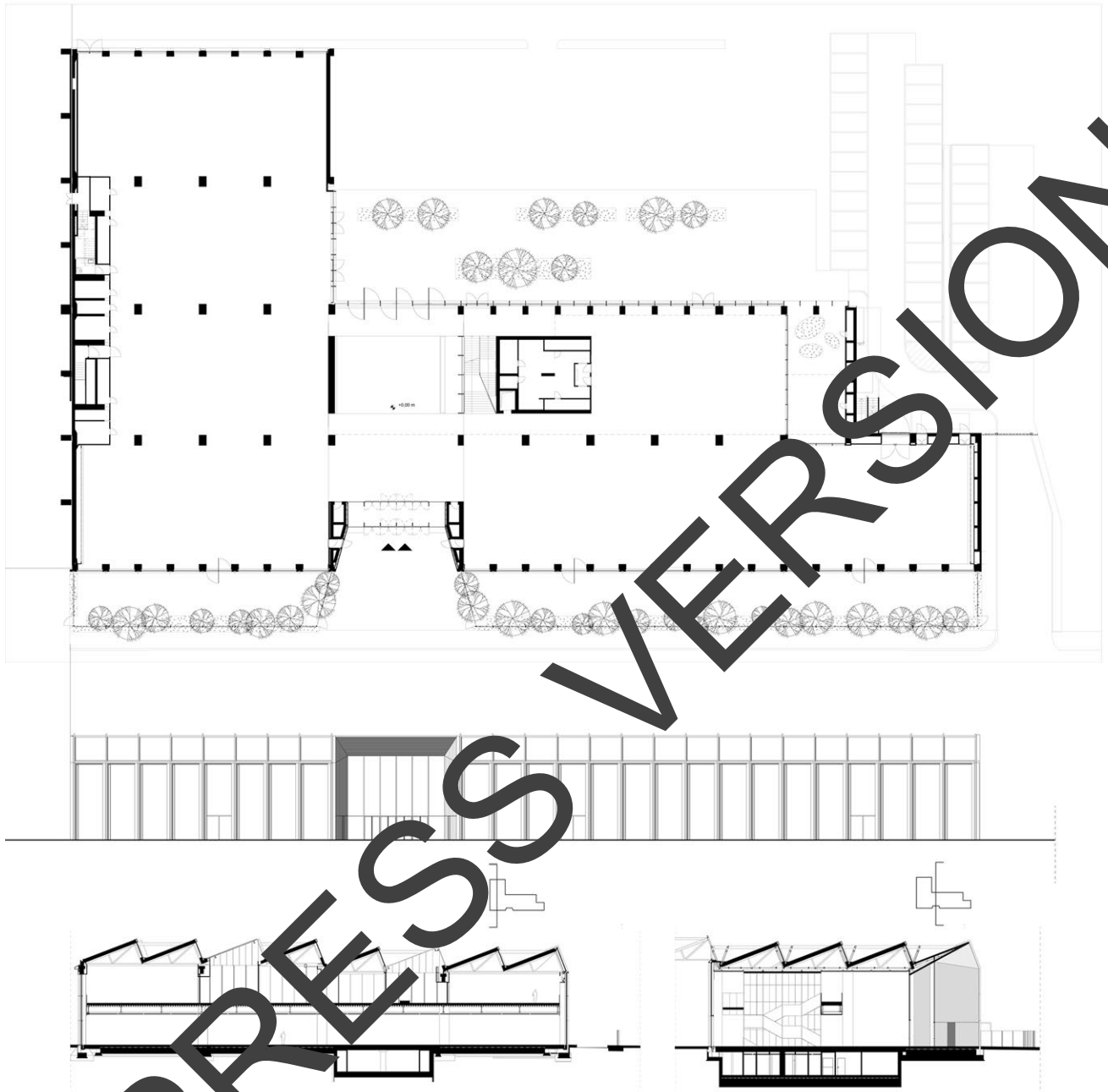


Figure 3 - The layout of the building designed by Park Associati that replaces the former GE factory (© Park Associati).

104 This process of regeneration continued with additional significant private interventions, which were subsequently
105 supplemented by public initiatives that significantly altered the role and image of the district [8]. In this scenario, the
106 area of the former GE industry was also interested in 2006 by the renovation of the tall block located on the edge of the
107 production site to host the Nhow Hotel designed by Alfredo Beretta and Matteo Thun and by an architectural
108 competition call for the design of the Luxottica Digital Factory. The winning project, which was developed by Park
109 Associati in collaboration with MSC Associati, best exemplifies the identity principles of the client, which include
110 utmost care for quality and technological innovation of materials, exploration of avant-garde architectural solutions,
111 and acknowledgement of the unique values of the location, taking into account the social composition of the
112 neighborhood that will host the new functions [9].

113 The project area has a depth of 64 meters and a length of 113 meters, wherein the shed pavilions are arranged side-
114 by-side. Additionally, the continuity of the front, which is 13 meters high, is clearly visible on Via Tortona. The
115 structural typology of the original building - a large single or double-span block - characterized by reinforced concrete



Figure 4 - The transparent facade on Via Tortona with the upper part shaped as the backward roof of the previous industrial building (© Park Associati).

116 frames and a roof built of truss beams to facilitate the movement of bridge cranes, was strongly compromised by the
117 refurbishment works in 1995.

118 The interior space of the pavilions was divided, with the construction of several floors catering to the functional
119 requirements of the new television broadcasting. This also influenced the darkening of the skylights and the new
120 arrangement of the window system, resulting in a significant reduction of the symbolic identity of the former industrial
121 plant and the assumption of the anonymous character of a service building situated in the outskirts.

122 The objective of the project was to identify and restore, through a careful critical and interpreting process, all those
123 elements that were capable of ensuring a comprehensible re-reading of its past, even recent, and to identify those that
124 were capable of advancing in the narration of a contemporary tale through fresh and coherent episodes to reinterpret
125 traces, logics and intentions. Two rewriting keys were used: an “introverted” one, which concerned the return of the
126 original free internal space, and the “extroverted” one, which involved the maintenance of the original shape on which
127 the episodes of the contemporary project were grafted. The strategy of preserving the external volume shape and re-
128 reading the structural elements of the building resulted in precise design choices that primarily focused on the front of
129 Via Tortona. The compact shape of the old factory was underlined and emphasized by the opaque envelope that marks
130 the head profile and the depth and height of the two walls, forming the large and squared fornix to mark a different
131 relationship between the building and the city. The façade, which is shaped by full-height windows and separated by
132 dark, slender columns constructed from bronzed metal, reinterprets the metric of the previous structure. It accentuates
133 its verticality by doubling the structural elements and following the rhythm of the shed beams, which propose the same



Figure 5 - The façade on Via Tortona treated as a continuous shop window and the internal courtyard with the permeable roof built of steel trusses (© Andrea Martiradonna).

135 The building's exterior envelope was the result of technological and structural research, which resulted in maximum
136 transparency and brightness; the same transparency applied to the interior spaces, made with precious materials that
137 emphasize the monumental character of the internal naves facing the enclosed courtyards, designed by the landscape
138 architect Marco Bay.

139 Regarding the correlation between material preservation and novel functional requirements, a reconstruction of the
140 structure was anticipated, preserving a portion of the original pillars that were appropriately reinforced. In the latest
141 functional layout, the incorporation of an intermediate floor aimed at supporting high overloads necessitated the
142 incorporation of essential steel structures of the deck. Relevant interventions were undertaken on the ground floor
143 underlie the existing foundation plinths and construct the basement. With an overall and integral retrofitting project,
144 the building is then suitable for the parameters of safety and sustainable living with the adoption of the LEED protocol
145 and the attempt at a GOLD class certification [10].

146 The factory hosts a meeting place for production and use, showrooms with commercial spaces on the ground floor
147 and the Digital lab with the high-tech innovation centre on the upper floor, according to a distribution model that
148 foresees two cores of lift systems and stairs covered in burnished brass. Around them, the whole internal space is
149 organized. It remains possible to establish novel and unexpected visual connections by precisely dosing transparency
150 gradients between the wings of the internal courtyard, the surfaces and textures of the steel and beam, and the metric
151 of the glazing of the new façade with the city.

152 **3. The new building dress in the city centre: “the Palazzo della Serenissima”**

153 The “Palazzo della Serenissima” restyling project was mainly aimed at renewing the ambitious urban concept of the
154 “Gran Milano”. The building overlooks the Via Filippo Turati, which connects Piazza della Repubblica with Piazza
155 Cavour. The current layout of the road axis is due to the provisions of the City Plan, which was drawn up in 1863 by
156 engineer Garavaglia. A long series of following changes starting from the mid-nineteenth century, which well describe
157 the process of transformation of the historic city and, consequently, the overlapping of the urban palimpsest according
158 to the rules and methods of a “modern” language [11]. The district that arose around Via Turati mainly developed
159 during the kingdom of Umberto I of Italy. The residential buildings and the headquarters of the Society for Fine Arts
160 and the Permanent Exhibition filled the area's capacity in the early 20th century.

161 In the first years after the First World War, three significant architectures changed the configuration of Via Turati.
162 The first one, in 1922, was the Cà Brutta, designed by Giovanni Muzio, a singular building in terms of size, height, and
163 eclectic style of the façades [12], followed in 1931 by the new monumental Central Station designed by Ulisse Stacchini
164 according to “Teutonic typological models” [13], and completed in 1936, by the “Palazzo della Montecatini” by Studio
165 Ponti-Fornaroli-Soncini with its smooth and compact façades, clad by marble slabs and marked by the rhythm of the
166 flush-to-wall windows [14].

167 The transformations of the 1930s were followed by those of the 1950s and 1960s, favoured by the building
168 replacement with volumetric increase foreseen first by the 1949 Reconstruction Plan and then by the 1953 City Plan.
169 Some of the transformations concerned the building of well-known architectures in the Milanese scenario: the thirteen-
170 storey tower of Montecatini designed by the Ponti-Fornaroli-Soncini studio and inaugurated in 1951; the two towers
171 at the entrance to Via Turati, designed by Giovanni Muzio and his pupil Luigi Mattioni. Another important building,
172 the Palazzo della Serenissima, played a significant role in the dynamics of the transformation process of this late 19th-
173 century Milanese district. The building, conceived by the brothers Eugenio and Ermenegildo Soncini, who had
174 previously worked in the same urban area, initially acquired its name from the real estate firm that promoted its
175 construction to replace two residential structures situated adjacent to the Turati Tower [15]. It was completed in 1969
176 and it housed apartments and office spaces of some international companies - including Campari, indeed it was also
177 known as the “Campari building” - until its recent purchase by a foreign real estate fund, which favoured the
178 refurbishment.

179 In 2008, the building complex was incorporated into the real estate portfolio of Morgan Stanley Sgr, prompting the
180 announcement of a design competition for a comprehensive renovation that included both structural and energy
181 retrofitting. The restricted competition process concluded in January of the ensuing year with the triumph of the
182 Milanese studio Park Associati. The management of building works and the structural and plant design was entrusted
183 to the engineering company General Planning [16].

184 The Park project was focused on the redesign of the façades. Between the extremes of conservation and
185 modernization, the designers sought a third way capable of preserving the complex of symbolic and characterizing
186 values of the building, without renunciation with respect to use and market values.



Figure 1 – The original office building “La Serenissima” placed on Via Turati and designed by Ermenegildo and Eugenio Soncini (© Park Associati; Archivio Soncini – © Comune di Milano – CASVA; © General Planning).

187 The building is, in fact, based on the replacement of the original envelope; its texture is reinterpreted in the project
188 to create a “new architectural dress” that fits the dimensional and proportional metrics of the Soncini building and, in
189 particular, of its structural layout. For the new envelope, the designers selected non-standardized solutions based on
190 distinct schemes on the street fronts of Via Turati and Via Cavalieri, as well as the internal courtyard.

191 A preparatory phase for the transformation of the curtain wall was the recognition of the “regulatory” value of the
192 steel structure, designed by the Soncini brothers with the company Società Anonima Elettificazione di Lecco and
193 characterized by the repetition of an exposed structural pattern, which consists of single span frames oriented in the
194 short side of the building facing Via Turati [17]. This “regulatory weft” was entirely preserved, with the exception of
195 limited reinforcements and remediation for asbestos. It was exposed with the removal of the curtain wall to serve as a
196 syntactic rule, thereby guaranteeing continuity between the old and new narration by overwriting the urban palimpsest.



197

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*Figure 7 - The façade, the porch and the internal courtyard of the building “La Serenissima”
(Archivio Soncini – © Comune di Milano – CASVA).*



Figure 8 – The new layout of the offices and the project of the two main façades showing the relationship with the other buildings of the urban context (© Park Associati).

199 The steel weft was transformed on Via Turati into an exposed lattice with a glass surface placed backwards,
200 characterized by an updated composition of vertical and horizontal elements to reconfigure a contrasting image with
201 the stereotomic rules of the close Cà Brutta and to achieve a renewed analogy with the tectonic principles followed by
202 the adjacent buildings. The structure established the design modularity of the new façade, which was interrupted and
203 arranged by incorporating a perforated aluminium panel that was appropriately proportioned to the coupled columns
204 and variedly repeated, introducing asymmetry and dissonance with novel formal guidelines. The addition of new steel
205 elements provided further flexibility for the partition walls, and the integration of an LED lighting system allowed the
206 building to transform into a large “lantern” during the night.

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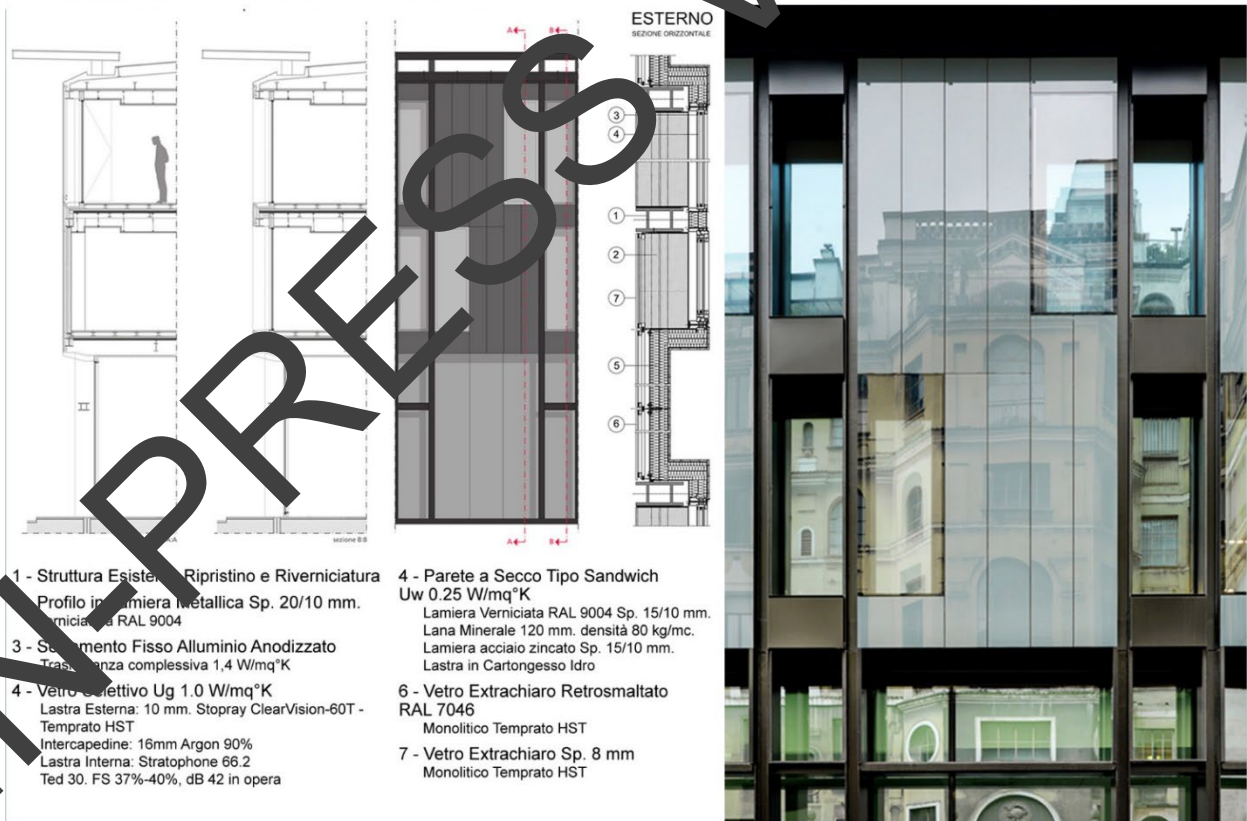
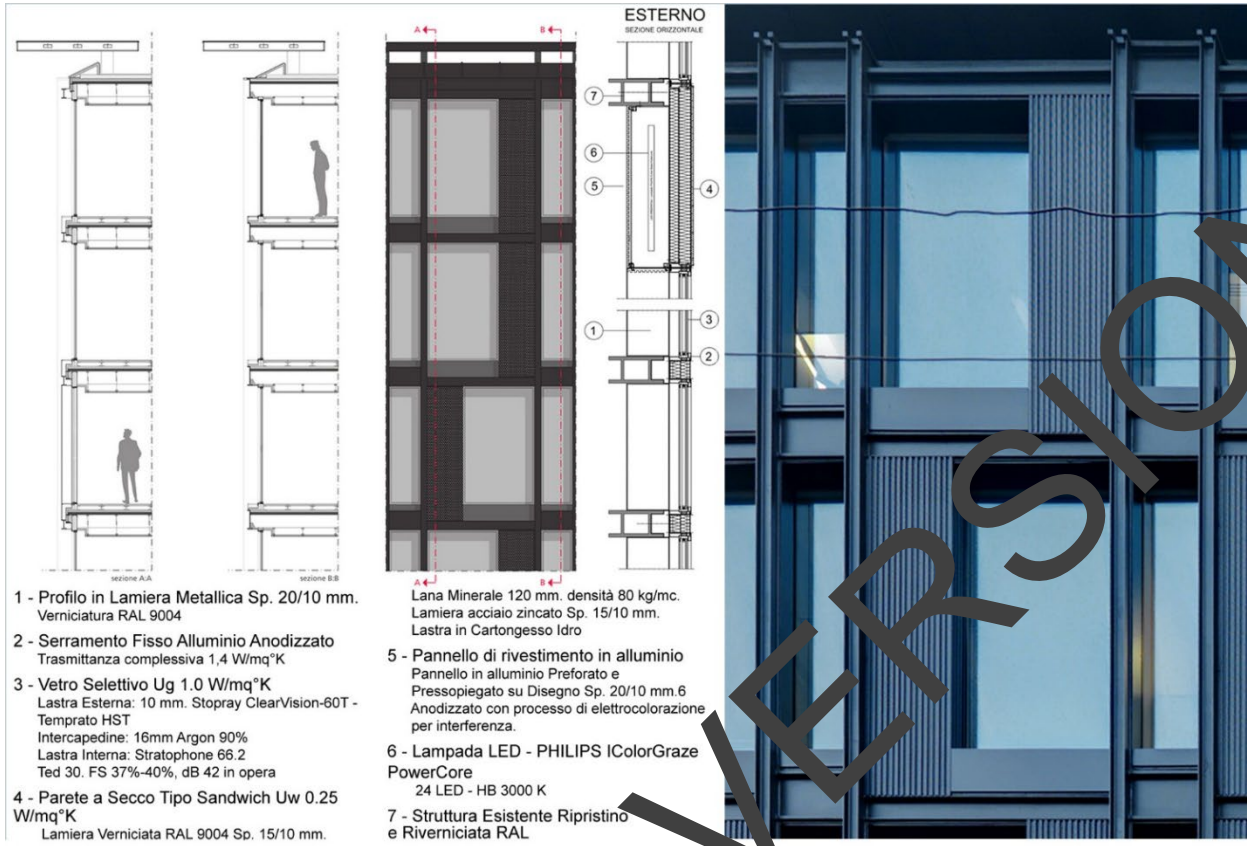


Figure 9 - The two façades respectively conceived for the blocks of Via Turati and Via Cavaliere with a different relationship between steel frame and glazing (© Park Associati; © Andrea Martiradonna).

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210 A similar arrangement of the façade was proposed for all fronts of the courtyard, but it was based on a different position
211 of the glass, which was shaped as a flat surface with all coplanar components. This strategy ensured maximum
212 penetration of light and enhanced the visual relationship with the garden. It was designed with the advice of landscape
213 architect Marco Bay and made visible from the outside by a large atrium shaped in the covered walkway of the porch
214 [18-19]. A different strategy was adopted for the building envelope located in Via dei Cavalieri, originally designed
215 for residential use and characterized by a prevalent opaque front to guarantee the necessary privacy. A distinct
216 arrangement of the ground floor resulted in a more seamless connection with the principal structure and a modification
217 of the porch height. Moreover, a novel reflecting and flat glass façade proposed a direct dialogue with the side of Ca'
218 Brutta. Even in the new façade arrangement, the choice of coupled columns was confirmed as a regulatory pattern for
219 the window module, which was repeated according to different rules [20].

220 The renovation design involved a new definition of the crowning element, which was proportioned to the new
221 volumetric arrangement. The biggest overhang of the projecting roof allowed the integration of the glass cleaning
222 system, and the different façade sides were marked with a deep shadow line.

223 The retrofitted façade enhanced the energy efficiency of the envelope by combining an opaque and transparent
224 module, resulting in a reduction in heat dispersion and superior acoustic insulation. The commitment of energy
225 resources was confirmed with the achievement of LEED Gold certification and the transition from G to B energy class
226 with a halving of specific building consumption [21].

227 The revised functional layout of the “La Serenissima” building resulted in a available area of approximately 15,000
228 m² for the underground floor and about 8.000 m² for the upper floors which were distinguished by open space offices.

229 4. Conclusions

230 The project on existing buildings appears to be a valuable practice that could regenerate a story aimed at continuing
231 and representing the architectural heritage in a coherent temporal configuration. The new narrative must establish a *fil*
232 *rouge* between urban dimensions, arranged in chronological order, referring to distinct moments in the creation of the
233 palimpsest.

234 The two case studies illustrate the dynamic character of the “Gran Milano” entrepreneurial spirit, which tries to
235 preserve its roots without renouncing them to promote its image through a contemporary architectural narrative. As per
236 the definition of an “evocative building renewal”, the project adheres to the development of a dual design register that
237 can be tailored to the functional and technological update in accordance with the principle of control and sustainable
238 management. Furthermore, it also collaborates in the writing of the urban palimpsest, particularly expressed through
239 formal codes of the façade elements, restoring a distinct narrative of the public space inherited from the “dusty”
240 industrial districts or the elegant quarters of the late 19th century.

241 The city’s regeneration is an actual practice that involves the awareness of updated assessments of needs and spaces
242 and the definition of vulnerability and potentiality aimed at its sustainable management. It is also linked to the
243 opportunity to reactivate the transformation process that, with the persistence of certain conditions, spontaneously
244 generated the “enormous deposit of signs and practices” of the palimpsest, which “stratifying, overlapping, deforming
245 and sometimes contradicting itself, has produced surprising and often barely interpretable results” [22]. In an
246 unpredictable time frame, the evolution and transformation of the palimpsest transpired in accordance with a natural
247 chronology, acquiring the characteristics of a self-regulating process. Taking into account the actual complexity of the
248 problems and the variation speed of the urban dynamics, the work on the urban palimpsest should involve the character
249 and method of “an active process that reports an effective and constant suitability to experiment and to explore the
250 various plots of relationships compatible with what can be called the ‘edge of the possible transformation’, namely the
251 ability to vary and the suitability to change without compromising the continuity of which any notion of identity, even
252 the weakest, cannot fail to feed on” [23].

253 Therefore, “to design for the existing buildings” can identify the perspective overturning in which the choice or
254 indeed the need for one or more categories of the design work - restoration, refurbishment, reuse, redevelopment, etc.
255 - represents the coherence of a methodological approach with the dimension of foreseen operations that must be chosen
256 case-by-case. The interpretation, namely “to say of the saying” which “has remembrance as its own dimension, as a
257 factor that is able every time to raise the hidden potentiality in the primitive object reached by memory”, shapes a
258 different and possible condition of the pre-existence according to a “faithful and free project at the same time: it has to
259 be faithful because it is compliant with what has already been said and free because it gradually adds that much which
260 is recognizable as virtually included in the original saying” [24].

261



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Figure 10 - The new configuration of the steel building that reaffirms the contrast with the eclectic façades of the Cà Brutta (© Andrea Martiradonna).

263

264 5. Acknowledgement

265 We thank Filippo Pagliani and Michele Rossi, founders of the studio Park Associati, for providing the documentation
266 of the projects carried out in Milan and Elisabetta Pernich of the CASVA Archive in Milan (Centre for Advanced
267 Studies on the Visual Arts) for the consultation of the Soncini Brothers' documents.

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