



MATEO PIAZZA



SANTI CALECA



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BEPE GARBINO



WALTER NICOLINO



ERNESTA CAVALLO

← Clockwise, starting top left:

- Panetteria Princi, Milan, 2004 (Claudio Silvestrin Architects)
- Galleria Massimo De Carlo, Milan, 2003 (Mutti&architetti)
- Gasthof Bad Dreikirchen, Barbina, 2003 (Lazzarini Pickering Architetti)
- Caveau OpenCare/Frigoferi Milanese, Milan, 2003 (5+1 architetti associati)
- Appartment, Turin, 2004 (carlorattiasociati)
- 75 cm' attic apartment, Turin, 2002 (Michele Bonino, Subhash Mukerjee, Federica Patti, Martina Tabò)

News from the Italian interior

Italy 2004 and its hidden pollen of vitality

Mirko Zardini, curator of the Italian exhibition at this year's Venice Biennale, describes what's taking place behind closed doors.

ITALY — TEXT: MIRKO ZARDINI, COURTESY INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITION/BIENNALE OF VENICE

A constant, light background noise can be detected behind the apparently unchanged facades of our cities. It corresponds to a continuous change inside our houses, offices, factories, schools and theatres. An incessant bustle is transforming our inhabited spaces, our places of work, study, social life and entertainment from within. It is a reflection of a profound change in our way of life.

This is mostly taking place behind closed doors. Protective masks hide today's faces, which are so different from those of a few decades ago. Over the threshold, and behind apparently unchanged facades, new and constantly changing Italian interiors reflect a profoundly different society. The face of Italy is now composed of these numerous facets. They correspond to different stories and aspirations, but are only rarely expressed or directly perceptible on the outside.

The phenomenon is not only affecting private spaces, houses or offices. These temporary transformations very often produce new community spaces in the city. Abandoned factories, churches, stations or ancient buildings host the new rituals of community life for longer or shorter periods. Art, fashion, design and architecture are the pretexts for settings that are suddenly available as extensions of the traditional public space. They are an amplification of the gaze we are used to directing toward shop windows. For longer or shorter periods — a few hours, days or months — buildings and spaces that have lost their original connotation become the backgrounds for new settings, installations and designs. At times traces of these new uses also make their appearance outside in the form of minimal signs of occupation (a curtain, a carpet, a lawn) that betray the presence of a hidden pollen of vitality.

Italy seems to have found an alternative to the traditional process of modernization that typified post-war reconstruction and which, until the 1970s, led to the country equipping itself with infrastructure, houses, state-owned housing, factories, offices and schools. Now, though, a phenomenon of gentle transformation can be perceived, a constant redesign of the internal and external spaces of the urban world. This is surprising in quantitative terms. It is much more significant than the big urban projects that remain on paper for years or even decades; more important than many projects that prove unsuited to the new conditions; more relevant even than the legal or illegal constructions that submerge the peri-urban area, or those few still-intact fragments of our territory, our landscape.

More than thirty years after the exhibition at the MoMA in New York entitled 'Italy: The New Domestic Landscape', this panorama describes not so much the domestic spaces as a genuinely new urban landscape and strategy. An urban, social, political, architectural and anthropological transformation is taking place. It provides the chance to match the urban or metropolitan system to new needs through a multitude of projects and flexible, reversible adjustments. A continuous change, growth and readjustment of spaces, places and situations can actually be seen beneath, or behind, a skin that is apparently unchanged, but that actually has a few small wrinkles.

It is not a question of cosmetic surgery — of nose jobs, lip modifications or breast implants — but of the wholesale replacement of internal organs, intended to improve the performance of the entire urban system through the sum total of small actions. So there is no triumph of surface

or appearance, but the exact opposite, the triumph of an apparently hidden world, that of the interior space. It is ephemeral, fragile and transformable, but also extremely solid, because it is able to provide an answer to our new needs, our new identities, our numerous faces in terms of spaces, services and identities. Indeed, we can thus make use of a double identity. On the one hand that of the apparently unchanged, stable facades of the buildings; on the other the ever-changing identity of their interiors. It is precisely the permanence of those walls that guarantees the possibility of these continuous internal transformations.

A different relationship is thus defined between space, time and architecture. The concept of design, with its particular idea of duration, describes this strategy well. The city consists not only of its external spaces, but primarily of the endless totality of its interiors; it is an assembly of stages ready for continuous redesign, for countless, small, short-lived metamorphoses. At times these are destined, like all temporary things, to last a long time. But durability is not their premise.

The use of these spaces is also different. It is no longer based on the cycles (the canonical eight hours) and rhythms of the 'modern' day, but is guided by an articulated, flexible time in which activities are mixed and overlapped. This overlapping of activities and the fragmentation and recomposition of time (for work, rest, entertainment, leisure, study) also entail a transformation in the nature of the spaces. Furthermore, an analysis of a typical Italian day shows that things no longer happen in their appointed places. The idea of the domestic has been overturned by the home's absorption of many previously extraneous activities. At the same time, traditional work and leisure places tend to take on domestic features. Public and domestic, home and office, home and cinema, museum and factory: uses, places and natures merge and mix.

This results in combinations that are unexpected, not so much from a spatial or formal point of view as from the atmospheric. The striking thing in these places is the merging of different worlds with their new designs, uses and inhabitants, tied to the old walls and the memory of old uses. There is a combination of different characters that at times plays on similarity, at times on contrast, at times on repetition. Our attention is skilfully directed, not to what these reduced and constant metamorphoses represent, but as if in a theatre, to the ways and means used. Lights and smoke, sound and materials communicate a new environmental condition, consisting not only of technical, climatic or spatial adjustments, but mainly of new atmospheres. Atmospheric metamorphoses are hidden between the folds of the existing, but that does not make them any less significant to our daily lives. ←

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