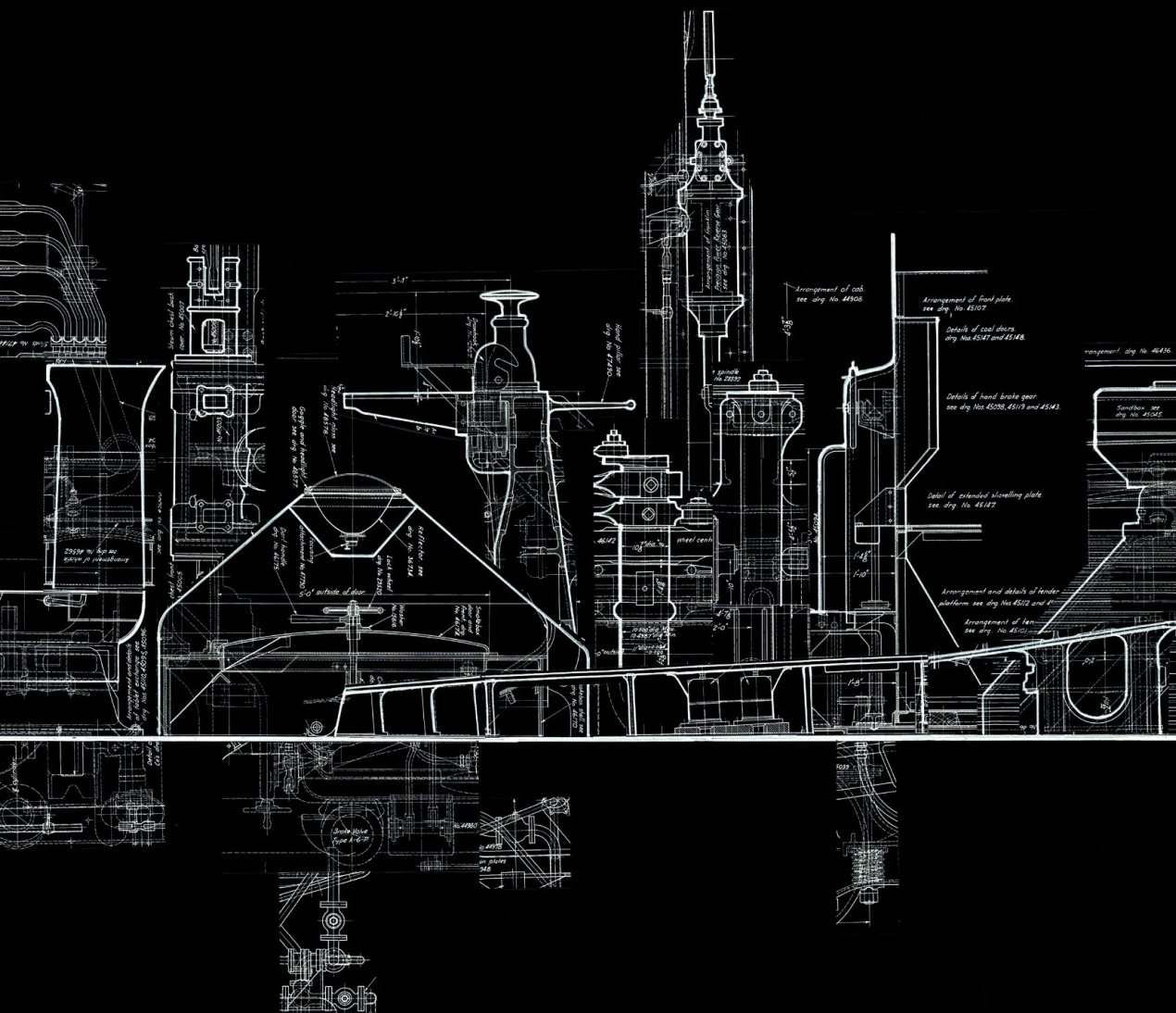


URBAN CORPORIS FOUNDATIONS



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URBAN CORPORIS **FOUNDATIONS**

Edited by
ANDREA CALIFANO
FRANCESCA LEMBO FAZIO

URBAN CORPORIS FOUNDATIONS

URBAN CORPORIS – FOUNDATIONS

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A. Califano, F. Lembo Fazio

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**A BOOK ON
ARCHITECTURE, ART,
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URBAN STUDIES
TO NOURISH THE
URBAN BODY**

URBAN CORPORIS – FOUNDATIONS

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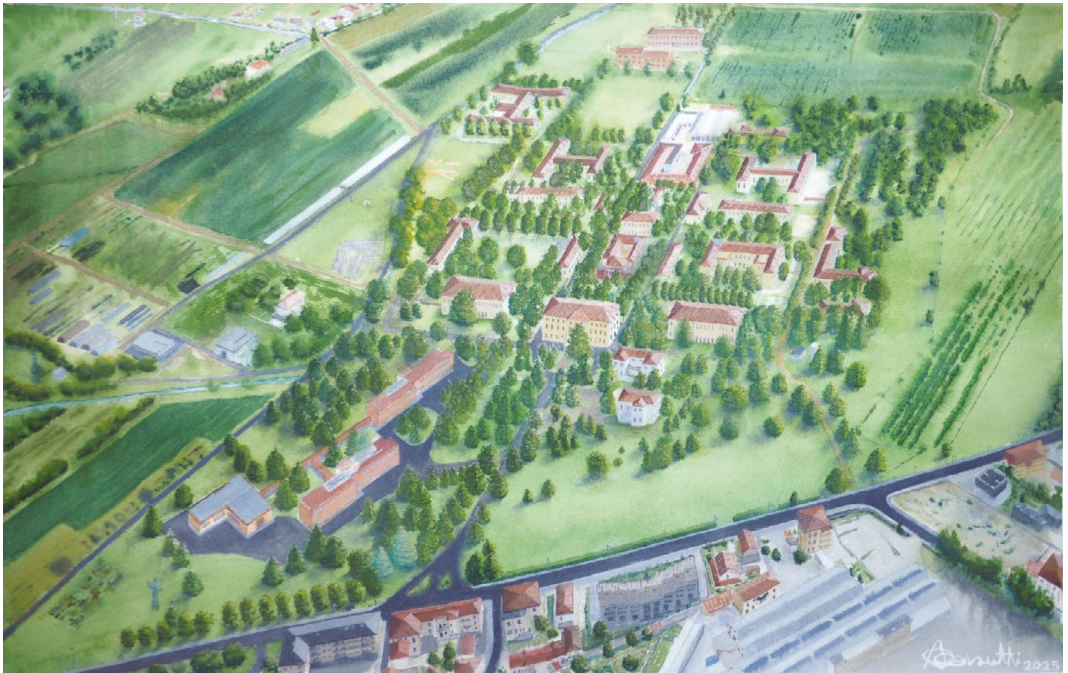
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01. Representation of the original project of the former Sant'Osvaldo asylum. Watercolor on cardboard. Author: Andrea Caisutti.

Art as a communication tool to rethink the city of health

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Keywords: Asylum, Architectural heritage, Urban regeneration, Art, Social inclusion

Abstract

The proposed theme concerns the former Sant’Osvaldo asylum in Udine. Inaugurated in 1904 as an internment facility for people with mental disorders, it presents the typical structure of psychiatric hospitals of the time, where the architecture, in its construction of the limits and internal structures of these places, recounts forms of ritualised and bureaucratised living, defined by rigid codes of behaviour and spatially defined. From a small foundation town born in an isolated context, it is now an integral part of the city’s spaces and dynamics. After years of partial abandonment, the health authority has begun a process of rethinking the area through a research agreement involving the University of Udine, to try to imagine new scenarios for the area’s redevelopment. There are many forms through which the research activity is carried out: round tables with the contribution of local stakeholders, teaching activities within the Design Laboratories, degree theses, and design workshops. Sant’Osvaldo represents one of the cases in which an attempt is being made to put the vestiges of the twentieth century back into circulation: hospitals, slaughterhouses, asylums, barracks, sanatoriums, factories are among the types of artefacts that gave structure, form and ‘modernity’ to the city at the end of the nineteenth century and move into the twentieth, and today stand as available and complex materials to be reused. Art becomes a priority tool to communicate the regeneration process that is underway and to support a project that triggers new forms of living, freeing these spaces from the stigma of remote misery, before time consumes them.

Asylums represent tangible manifestations of a reclusive, marginalized and forced condition, configuring themselves as spaces designed for the exclusion of a reality considered too uncomfortable to be considered part of social dynamics. The former asylum in the province of Udine, in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, is an emblematic case as it was the last psychiatric hospital in Italy to remain in operation. The area is located on the south-west outskirts of the city and is spread over an area of twenty-two hectares owned by the University Health Authority of Central Friuli. Inside what is now commonly called “Sant’Osvaldo park” are the remains of the original structures, partly abandoned and partly integrated over the years.

The current appearance may seem uncontrolled and sometimes wild, with elements such as hedges, shrubs and trees arranged together, but the rigid order of the pavilions testifies to a history of multiple building changes that have taken place over time. These restoration and new construction interventions have accompanied a progressive implementation and, at the same time, the progressive abandonment of an articulated complex, which functioned as a real foundation city, autonomous and independent from the surrounding territorial context. Inaugurated in 1904 as an internment facility for people with mental disorders, it presents the architectural typology of psychiatric hospitals of the time, in which architecture – in defining the limits and internal structures of these places – recounted forms of ritualized and bureaucratic living, regulated by rigid codes of behavior and precise spatial articulations (Scavuzzo, 2020).

At the time of its foundation, this structure presented itself as a state-of-the-art hospital, designed according to modern criteria, consisting of pavilions that guaranteed residential care spaces and services for organized therapeutic treatment. These spaces were superficially delimited by a simple metal gate, creating a visual and perceptive continuity with the surrounding landscape. It represented a symbol of a care colony that also included work as an integral part of the therapy: patients could engage in manual work, more or less rewarding, or carry out maintenance activities, thus offering an alternative to the starvation imposed by the daily segregation in the pavilions.

According to the building and health regulations of the time, and in continuity with the first nineteenth-century experiments that went beyond the model of the monobloc hospital, the various departments were organized in distinct pavilions, characterized by different architectures in shape and style, in such a way as to adapt to the specific functions of each. These pavilions differed from each other, but maintained a stylistic unity through the use of construction techniques, materials, green areas and coordinated decorations. The structure constituted, to all intents and purposes, a “building organism designed for the custody and treatment of people suffering from mental disorders, considered dangerous for themselves or for others, or in any case susceptible to public scandal”, as provided for by Article 1 of the Royal Decree of 14 April 1904 n.36¹, a rule operating until the entry into force of Law 13 May 1978 n.180, known as the Basaglia law², the main inspiration for that reform.

Among the eighteen largest psychiatric hospitals in Italy, this structure represented an architectural, urban and landscape heritage that has come down to the present day, practically unchanged in its essence, even after the official closure between the end of the 90s and the beginning of the new millennium, following the approval of the Basaglia Law in 1978. Currently, some buildings housing health services, in particular related to mental health, remain active, taking into account the social evolution of people’s rights (Baratta, Conti and Tatano, 2019). In former psychiatric hospitals, memory takes on the role of a warning: it is essential to remember so that situations in which architectures of exclusion are built are no longer repeated. In addition to the documentary heritage, there remains the architectural heritage consisting of

real fenced citadels, whose buildings, over time, have potentially become available to be redeveloped or reopened to the city (D'Agostino, 2017). The reuse of these spaces can represent a strategic opportunity to promote urban regeneration processes, while preserving a historical heritage of great civil, social and architectural value.

Sant'Osvaldo represents one of the cases in which an attempt is made to put the vestiges of the twentieth century back into circulation: hospitals, slaughterhouses, asylums, barracks, sanatoriums, factories are among the types of artifacts that gave structure, shape and "modernity" to the city at the end of the nineteenth century to enter the twentieth century and today are available and complex materials to be reused (La Varra, 2023). Art becomes a priority tool to communicate the process of regeneration that is underway and to support a project that triggers new forms of living, freeing these spaces from the stigma of remote miseries, before time consumes them. The idea of placing art at the center as an element to rewrite the destiny of Sant'Osvaldo emerges from the observation of a large painting in one of the meeting rooms of the former psychiatric hospital. The large image represents the area as a whole, shortly after the inauguration: all the distinctive features of the original project emerge, with the individual buildings inserted in the precise design of the garden and park. Thanks to this work of art it is possible to have a testimony of the area in its original form and hence the intention to resume the artistic path as a factor to narrate and describe the regeneration process that is underway inside the former psychiatric hospital, following a European call for tenders that assigned the project for the regeneration of the entire area (Conti, 2023)³. Art is understood as a human activity aimed at creating works to which an aesthetic value is recognized, by means of shapes, colors, words or sounds, but we can also speak of art as reuse, if we consider the relationship it seems to have with the ability to reuse things that are or seem to have been designed for other primary purposes (Velotti, 2016). Artistic storytelling becomes the means to propose proactive scenarios and visions for the future of buildings and open spaces. Through art we reimagine the static, frozen present, projecting it into a dynamic and innovative future. The great value of artistic images is that of evoking something invisible and unspeakable not yet tamed by words, a world of concepts, conventions and affections that overcome the material limits imposed by man (Descola, 2024). The design process therefore opens up to creative visions that through theory can guide the practice of architecture to achieve regenerated spaces.

The artistic production activity is mainly developed within the activities carried out at the Dalt research laboratory⁴, within which internship activities are activated with multiple objectives. Specifically, the artistic work focuses on the painting technique of watercolor, which starting from an initial phase of redesign of the 1904 project, moves on to the drawing of the current state and finally hints at possible developments for the design of the entire area, in particular for the open spaces of the park. The species present are studied with the aim of identifying the native ones to be presented and possibly increased. The watercolor drawing, deliberately inserted in the images in the form of a sketch, expresses the potential of a technological and environmental project for the recovery of natural elements, to redesign the area of the Sant'Osvaldo park starting from the layout of the original garden. The graphic elaboration process is in the execution phase and will include further landings by the author to experiment with possible urban regeneration scenarios for the city of health. The construction of buildings dedicated to mental health is planned, as well as places for collectivity that make the area an open, inclusive and accessible space for all.

In the initial phase of this design experimentation, developed within an educational internship of an architecture student, art is, at first, a tool for historical and philological investigation,



02. Representation of a bulding to be regenerated. Watercolor on cardboard. Author: Andrea Caisutti.



03. Representation of some tree species. Watercolor on cardboard. Author: Andrea Caisutti.

as evidenced by the included images that reflect the outcomes of the current development of research activities. Subsequently, a second phase will be opened, in which art transcends its role as a narrative of the current state, seeking to become a communication tool for the new project. The intention is to build a narrative as the foundation of the project while also envisioning transformative possibilities that have not yet been explored. Certainly, a possible future development of the proposed methodology will involve the attempt to make art a design tool for the enhancement and regeneration process of the entire area of Sant’Osvaldo. Art manifests itself as a narrative process of the past, present and future of the former psychiatric hospital, in a continuous evolution of new forms, new thoughts and new projects.

Notes

1. Law of February 14, 1904, no. 36, available at the following link: <https://www.normattiva.it/atto/caricaDettaglioAtto?atto.dataPubblicazioneGazzetta=1904-02-22&atto.codiceRedazionale=004U0036&atto.articolo.numero=0&atto.articolo.sottoArticolo=1&atto.articolo.sottoArticolo1=0&qId=590fe6fb-0142-42c7-b218-f9a-13c78ab11&tabID=0.11971659887118868&title=lbl.dettaglioAtto>. (Last accessed 30/11/2025).
2. Law of May 13 1978, no. 180, available at the following link: <https://www.normattiva.it/atto/caricaDettaglioAtto?atto.dataPubblicazioneGazzetta=1978-05-16&atto.codiceRedazionale=078U0180&atto.articolo.numero=0&atto.articolo.sottoArticolo=1&atto.articolo.sottoArticolo1=0&qId=54b82085-0228-4dcd-adbo-d517293e57d1&tabID=0.11971659887118868&title=lbl.dettaglioAtto> (Last accessed 30/11/2025).
3. In 2024, the Azienda Sanitaria Univrsitaria del Friuli Centrale – ASUFC launched a call for tenders for a “European open procedure, pursuant to art. 71 of Legislative Decree no. 36/2023, redevelopment of the former psychiatric hospital of Sant’Osvaldo in Udine”. The text is available at the following link: https://asufc.sanita.fvg.it/bandi-gara/2024_GARA-EUROPEA-A-PROCEDURA-APERTA-PER-LAFFIDAMENTO-DI-SERVI-ZI-TECNICI-DI-INGEGNERIA-E-ARCHITETTURA-FINALIZZATI-AGLI-INTERVENTI-DI-RIQUALIFICAZIONE-DEL-COMPRESORIO-EX-OSPEDALE-PSICHIATRICO-DI-SANTOSVALDO-A-UDINE (Last accessed 23/09/2025).
4. Dalt is a research laboratory, of the Polytechnic Department of Engineering and Architecture, University of Udine. Dalt promotes research on environmental accessibility, inclusive design and “design for all”. Scientific coordinator Prof. Christina Conti. Student trainee Andrea Caisutti, Bachelor’s Degree in Architectural Sciences, University of Udine, scientific coordinator Prof. Christina Conti.

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A BOOK ON ARCHITECTURE, ART, PHILOSOPHY AND URBAN
STUDIES TO NOURISH THE URBAN BODY.

The contemporary city retains its past not through explicit narratives, but by silently inscribing it within its material structures: in urban layouts, construction details, surfaces, and the techniques that have shaped its form. The twentieth century, marked by profound social, ideological, and technological transformations, produced a new urban body in which visions of the future and historical stratifications coexist in an often fragile balance.

This volume of *Urban Corporis - Foundations* examines the relationship between ideology, planning, and architectural design, analysing the transition from the historic city to the contemporary city through the study of new towns and planned urban fabrics. Starting with the Second Industrial Revolution and the emergence of reinforced concrete as the predominant construction method, architecture and urban planning became central tools for shaping new forms of habitation and collective aspirations.

From an international perspective, the volume compares experiences of new towns and planned cities, highlighting analogies, divergences, and contradictions among different urban models, cultures, and identities. The material traces of the last century - situated between utopian ambitions and enduring legacies of the past - thus become the subject of critical analysis, engaging with issues of conservation, abandonment, and contemporary reappropriation.

Through contributions addressing both planned outcomes and organic developments, this collection examines the role of planned cities in the present and future, offering a nuanced interpretation of the twentieth century as an ongoing urban laboratory.