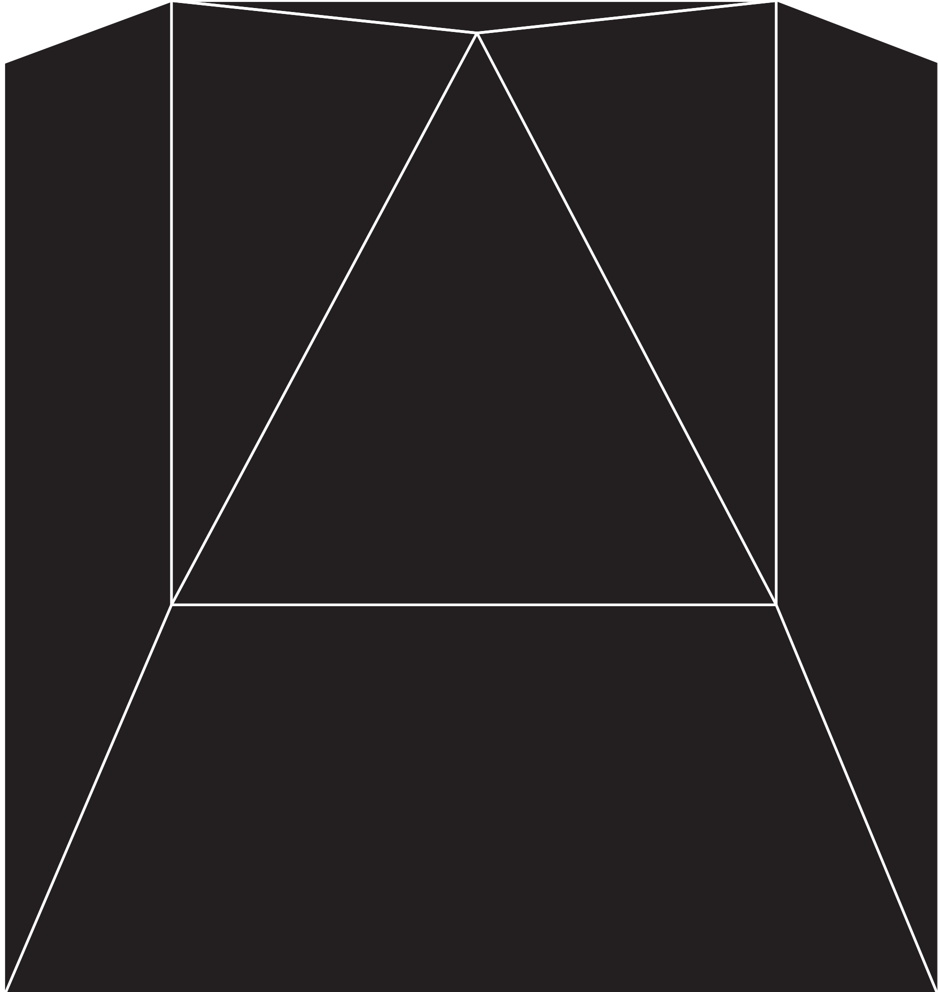


SAN ROCCO
MISTAKES
#3 Winter 2011

Registered Office
Dorsoduro 1685/A
I-30123 Venezia
+39 041 0994628

Operative Office
via Pietro Colletta 69
I-20137 Milano
+39 02 49524991

www.sanrocco.info
mail@sanrocco.info

Editor
Matteo Chidoni

Editorial Board
Matteo Costanzo, Kersten Geers, Francesca Pellicciari, Giovanni Piovene, Giovanna Silva, Pier Paolo Tamburelli

Graphic Design
pupilla grafik, Salottobuono, Paolo Carpi

Copy Editor
Krystina Stermole

Website
Michele Marchetti

Administration
Ludovico Centis

Collaborators
Chiara Carpenter, Joanie Coulet, Francesco Zorzi

San Rocco is an idea by:
2A+P/A, baukuh, Stefano Graziani, Office KCDVS, pupilla grafik, Salottobuono, Giovanna Silva

For information about *San Rocco* or to offer your support please visit www.sanrocco.info or contact us at support@sanrocco.info.

San Rocco is published three times a year.

San Rocco uses Arnhem and Ludwig typefaces designed by Fred Smeijers in 2001/2002 and 2009. They are published by Ourtype.

Paper: Munken Linx, 100 g/m²
Cover: Fedrigoni Tatami, 250 g/m²

Printed in December 2011 by Publistampa Arti Grafiche, Pergine Valsugana (Tn), Italy

The editors of *San Rocco* have been careful to try to contact all copyright holders of the illustrations that appear in this issue, but it was not possible to find all of them. If you claim ownership of any of the illustrations appearing in this issue and have not been properly credited, please contact us and we will be happy to print a formal acknowledgement in the next issue.

The material appearing in *San Rocco* (where not otherwise mentioned) is published under a "Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.5 Italy" licence.

San Rocco is registered at the Tribunale di Venezia (Venice, Italy), registration no. 15, 11/10/2010.

ISSN 2038-4912

Previous pages:
Pier Paolo Tamburelli, *The Wrong Pyramid.*
Translation by Salomon Frausto

CONTENTS

1 **The Wrong Pyramid**
Pier Paolo Tamburelli

11 **Editorial**

14 **Perfectly Fine for Mies**
Kersten Geers

19 **Data Centre on Lexington Avenue**
Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen

21 **Beauty and Mistakes in the Early Work of Peter Märkli**
Andrea Zanderigo

25 **Modernistic Neanderthalism**
Matteo Poli

30 **Scamozzi versus Sansovino**
Paolo Carpi

40 **The Displacement of the Grande Arche: The Story of a Surreal Monument**
Wulf Böer

46 **Santa Maria Annunziata in Roccaverano: The Misinterpretation of a Project by Bramante**
Manuela M. Morresi

55 **La Bombonera**
Giacomo Summa

61 **Hagia Sophia versus Hagia Sophia**
Ioanna Volaki

66 **Solomon, I Have Outdone Thee!**
Asli Cicek

74 **Systematic Mistakes: Notes on Leon Battista Alberti's Design Strategies**
Angelo Del Vecchio

77 **Review of the Exhibition *Emergency in Favour of Twice* at the Institute of Contemporary Art**
Aaron Moulton

83 **The Wrong Program**
BARarchitekten

88 **The Four Books of Mistakes**
Matteo Ghidoni

99 **Deliberate Mistakes: Stories of the Winchester House**
Cédric Boulet

106 **Phantoms of Monuments**
Mathieu Mercuriali

111 **Freud and Méliès**
Alexander Hilton Wood

116 **An "Aesthetics of Mistakes" in the Discourse of the "Collective Actions" Group**
Sergei Sitar interviews Andrei Monastyrski

120 **The Nightmare of Participation, or Considering the Value of Failure as a Proactive Catalyst for Change**
Markus Miessen

129 **Architecture, Dynamite and the Political Establishment**
Giovanni La Varra

137 **Try Again. Fail Again. Fail Better. On the Potential of What Goes Wrong in Relation to Modernism and Art**
Filipa Ramos

144 **Mitologia Ferrari**
Stefano Graziani

148 **Instant Paradise: A Story of Failure and Accidental Beauty**
Steven Bosmans and Michael Langeder

152 **A Lake and a Swimming Pool: Two Water Stories from the USSR**
Saverio Pesapane

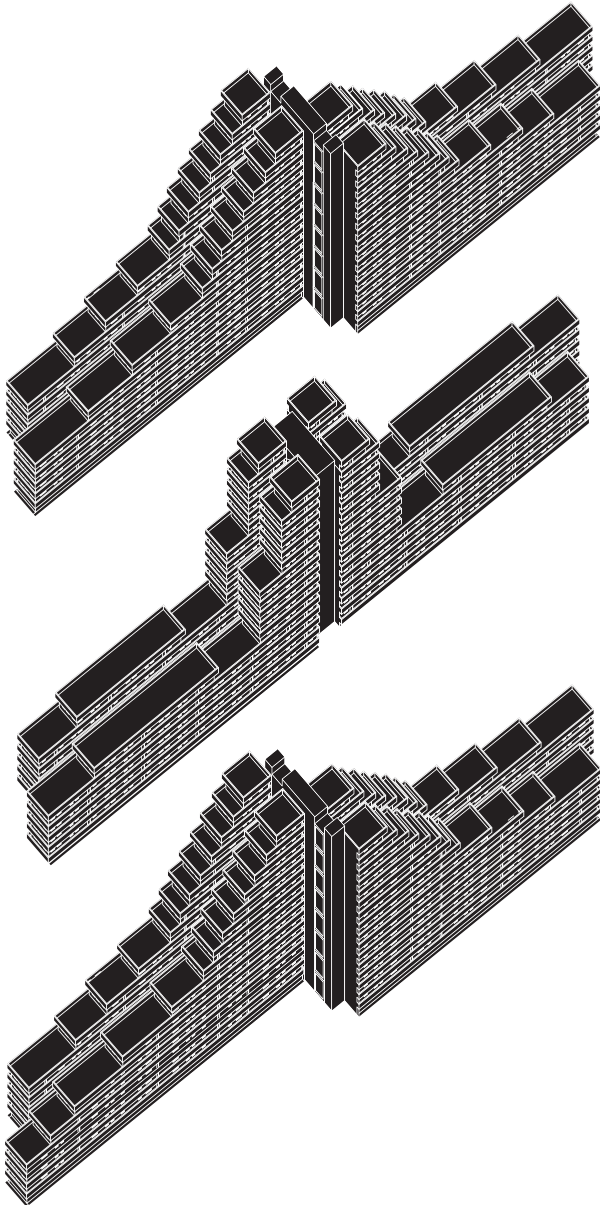
160 **A Mistake of Principles: The Principles of Architecture Are Eleven and Immutable**
2A+P/A

164 **A drawing by Alexander Brodsky**

169 **Fuck Concepts! Context!**
Call for Papers

ARCHITECTURE, DYNAMITE AND THE POLITICAL ESTABLISHMENT

Giovanni La Varra



I.

"We used what was the requisite quantity of dynamite, about 150 kilograms. We've being operating in this line of business for twenty-five years and never before had anything of the like happened. We blew one of the two base supports of the building to make sure it would fold over in the right direction. What happened instead was that the concrete slab remained mysteriously in place." These are the remarks of Beppe Zandonella, the owner of Tecnomine, a firm from Piacenza, Italy, engaged to demolish one of the "Vele" buildings in Scampia, Naples ("vele" is the Italian word for "sails", a nickname derived from the triangular shape of the huge Neapolitan buildings).

It was 12 December 1997, and at a window in the building facing the Vele in the Scampia quarter of a suburb of Naples, Neapolitan mayor Antonio Bassolino was waiting to see one of the Vele collapse. The intention was to demolish two of the seven Vele structures, and news of this had been announced to the press, which had thus turned out to witness the event. It was the first time in Italy that a residential building built with planning authorization was to be demolished using dynamite.

The local Neapolitan government had a plan to tackle the difficult quarter of Scampia, an area of the city beset by acute problems of urban decay (drug dealing, squatting, etc.), problems that had thus plagued the seven Vele (designated as A, B, C, D, F, G and H) from the time of their construction. The plan involved demolishing Vele F and G, adapting Vela H to house the Civil Defence and Emergency Service on the basis of a design by the firm of Gregotti Associati and restoring the others to provide new premises for the university.

The Vele are one of the major public projects of Italian architecture from the 1970s, much like the Corviale in Rome, the Zen in Palermo, the large Rozzol Melara court complex in Trieste, Calabria University in Cosenza and Cagliari's Sant'Elia quarter. Public residential building, in what were its final years, had gone in for huge structures housing thousands of apartment dwellings and, in almost all cases, the signs of urban decay were evident from the start: squatters moved into the flats before they were completed, rents went unpaid and the agency charged with the structures' maintenance failed to get access to flats with the result that tenants could end up living for years without a lift in a fourteen-floor building.

Following the initial blast with dynamite, Vela F remained standing for several days. The mayor, the town councillors, the engineers,

the journalists and the tenants of the other Vele stared in disbelief at the building, which was tilted at an angle and suspended, precariously poised but tenaciously resistant. After four days the decision was made to use a crane and a large metal wrecking ball to complete the demolition of the building, now a spent shell.

So the anticipated event of the building's collapse had not occurred as planned. The mistake the demolition firm made was to underestimate the quantity of iron in the reinforced concrete. There was more than had been expected, and, naturally, the original drawings of the structures had disappeared before the demolition plans were made.

Some months later, the second Vela was demolished with a more robust charge of dynamite. The urban restoration plans that should have followed in the wake of its demolition, however, remained a dead letter. To date, the four surviving Vele (Vela H was demolished in 2003) continue to be run-down, and the living conditions there are as difficult as ever, although some local associations have begun to take action at a community level and push for the improvement of the area.

Vela F, left hanging and suspended for a few days to the surprise and dismay of the authorities and local people, eloquently betokens the considerable uncertainty on a national level about how to view a period of building that had yielded works which were extraordinary and courageous in their intentions but a total write-off in terms of their outcome.

The very idea of a partial demolition appears to reveal this uncertainty. The plan was to demolish two Vele out of seven: a prudent demonstration of force, but a limited one designed to create an event that was geared to the types of interests the media has in town planning issues.

The question as to what should be done with these works is still unresolved today – to demolish them, to upgrade them, to change their use under planning law or to intervene with a "bottom-up" or "top-down" approach.

II.

The short-lived season of large-scale Italian buildings was ushered in by a sense of expectancy in which three elements overlapped. The first was faith in new technologies and in forms of building industrialization, a theme that characterized Italian architecture of the 1960s and was derived from news about experiences in Japan and the English-speaking world.

The second was the idea that economic planning could become a territorial, community-level matter. New disciplines linked to the social sciences, to the urban economy and to land planning issues became the backdrop for the thinking of a substantial number of Italian architects.

The third was the possibility that concurrent with a politically progressive outlook there might be a new landscape of large-scale buildings tasked with controlling the urban form of towns and their broader surrounding area. In other words, in the mid 1960s a body of Italian architects retreated from the battleground of the town and turned their focus to the territory as the new war front.

However, one very real expectation met with disappointment: the possibility of a dialogue between architects and the political establishment. No sooner were the work sites in operation than the politicians sensed that the management of these works required rigour, earnestness, precision and transparency. It soon became clear that architecture in which the formal aspects were emphasized would be matched by the need for a greater commitment in the management of the final structure. The response from political circles was an equally rigorous and radical project: constant and methodical neglect.

All the major works of Italy's large-scale building period encountered a lengthy succession of obstacles. The Zen and Corviale buildings, in Palermo and Rome respectively, were taken over by squatters before completion. Following the 1980 earthquake in southern Italy, the Vele came under siege from the evacuees, who were ready to take up occupancy even in cellars without lighting. And for its part, Calabria University was never completed. In all cases there were disputes with the construction companies, work stoppages at the sites and major design variations (to simplify them and to force down costs, which, nonetheless, mysteriously grew). The squatting was universally tolerated. The political establishment saw these buildings as a sort of release valve, or as a way of handling social hardship. Judged from this standpoint, the efficacy of the Zen, Vele and Corviale complexes was exceptional. From the outset, the nature of these big structures seemed beyond the political establishment's ability to run and manage them. Unsuccessful in its attempt to run these buildings as they were conceived to be run (as huge *machines à habiter* or as monuments for controlling urban expansion), the politicians managed them in quite a different sense: by facilitating their decay and tolerating unlawful conduct on their premises.

Facing page:
Photograph by Luciano Ferrara

These large-scale structures brought about no change in the thinking and action of politicians. Rather, it was the political establishment with its machinery for control and management that changed both the nature and value of this type of architecture. The introduction of the principle of laissez-fairism into Italy can be traced back to long before the surge in interest in non-interference by the state during the 1980s.

Large-scale structures built in the 1970s like the Vele – including other, less well-known ones – represent an unresolved trauma experienced by architectural thinking in Italy. Large buildings were put up throughout the world during those years, but elsewhere the efforts made by architects were backed up by the firmest rigour in the management and maintenance of these large *machines à habiter*, and when the management of such projects was complicated by social conditions, a radical choice was made: to demolish and rebuild.

For Italy, there was no Pruitt-Igoe.

This trauma has weighed heavily on the development of architecture in Italy, and its effects have been felt in two ways. On the one hand, architects have been overwhelmed by disenchantment. The enormous opportunities of the 1970s led to the creation of negative landmarks. As the possibility of controlling local land development through large-scale structures unravelled, any and all enthusiasm for local planning evaporated. The abandonment of the project was abrupt and uniformly supported. At the start of the 1980s, the scale of building projects changed, as did the nature of society's expectations with regard to architecture. On the other hand, society had begun building cities in which the "do it yourself" approach was fashionable. Nowhere in Europe did as many people get in on the act of building the urban landscape as in Italy. Sprawl in its Italian incarnation released Italian society's pent-up individualism. Local planning was delegated to countless people, and en masse Italians became the owners of single-family homes and small craftwork and industrial structures.

III.

The formal nature of buildings like the Vele is rich and complex. The issue now, after the intervening years, is to decide what the outlook for them is, not just to conduct research into their past.

What, therefore, is to be done? What view can we take today of these buildings? There are three mainstream approaches. The first, which is the most disagreeable and extreme, is that they should be demolished and that they need to be replaced with other forms of

residential accommodation. Managing and maintaining them is costly and complicated. From this point of view, the only solution is to do away with them, given that they are no longer conceivable within the contemporary context of towns and neighbourhoods that would willingly have done without these elephantine buildings in the first place. The new run-of-the-mill building recently put up in the place of the demolished Vele perfectly exemplifies this attitude.

The second approach implies a romantic vision. It argues that these structures, to a degree, are evidence both of an era and of a philosophy regarding towns and cities. It is thus essential that they survive as proof that "cities of another kind are (were) possible". Defeats, too, after all, create monuments. However, as with all forms of romanticism, the risk inherent in this vision is that it is private, abstract and difficult to share with thousands of people living in strained social conditions without any prospect of improvement. For them, the idea of living in a monument is a non-starter.

A third approach is to take a closer look at these large architectural creations, to see them for what they are rather than viewing them according to the negative connotations with which they are associated. This is the only approach that has attempted to discern a new narrative for these buildings. It is an approach that gets down to work, that intuits the possibility of mounting a project that can in some way be assimilated into the architecture and that maps out the threads of the social relationships in these places. The outcome of this approach is a project that domesticates; it represents the discovery that within these micro-cities there is life and there are human relationships, and that a fragile sort of community has taken shape there. It is an unbiased and realistic approach that uses the social resources available to get more out of structures like the Vele and to reassemble them in a new scenario.

In different ways, each of these three approaches impedes the possibility of restoring these buildings by starting from their form. The first approach physically eliminates the structures, the second one tries to freeze their appearance by maintaining the buildings' current state, and the third leaves the question of form in the background, perceiving buildings like the Vele as a sort of theatre in which living is an adaptive and flexible exercise.

However, the destiny of these structures lies in their form, which is exemplified – and not by chance – by nicknames or analogies that invariably derive from something unrelated: "the large serpent",

"the bridge", "the dam", "the sail", "the kasbah". These huge edifices have brought the possibility of living differently to Italy. This feature of theirs, their exceptional form, needs to be considered afresh and worked on. Oddly, taking a new interest in these huge buildings would involve thinking, once again, about cities and territory in terms of architectural form.

A fourth approach must be brought to bear on the architecture of these large artefacts as well. The materials with which such a project would start are buildings that are characterized by both ample dimensions and problems, and that are also saddled with a public image that is difficult to change. The operation in question is one of adaptation (through architectural redesign) and architectonic reinvention (of type or layout), but also of the cultural reinvention of a new relationship between architecture and politics. The current economic conditions necessitate a careful appraisal of how to give new value to public areas, and this new value could be endowed by an architectural project than can impose a new way of doing things on the political establishment.

If dynamite is not the solution, then we should make a new attempt through architecture.