

The shape of time

He felt the current of time streaming round his temples and brow when he was up here, but perhaps, he added, that is only a reflex of the awareness formed in my mind over the years of the various layers which have been superimposed on each other to form the carapace of the city.

In the year that he died, W. G. Sebald left us one of the most extraordinary reflections on memory and its gradual metamorphosis.¹ The protagonist of his novel, Jacques Austerlitz, is a professor of architectural history with a fascination for places (military buildings, railway stations, prisons) which especially in the nineteenth century, overloaded as they were with symbolic meaning, unintentionally assumed visionary forms. Buildings are often shrouded in symbolism, but over time this is transformed or sent in other directions so that its meaning is completely altered.

Architecture, symbolic value and memory are the key terms in a research project launched in 2005 by the artists Rossella Biscotti and Kevin van Braak. In the course of a journey of discovery through Italy's *colonie marine* (seaside holiday homes), their work creates a network of links between these themes, from an angle midway between documentary interest and the artistic gesture. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards the *colonie* were built in seaside resorts for a charitable purpose, namely to fulfil urban working-class children's need for fresh air and physical exercise during the summer months. During the fascist dictatorship the *colonie* assumed the clear purpose of educating children in the Duce's doctrine of order and military discipline. Fascinated by the link between space and ideology, but above all by the modern appearance of the buildings, which were designed in a period of extreme optimism regarding the future, Biscotti and Van Braak set out to investigate their spatial value and their present condition.

The *colonie* built between the 1920s and 1930s were an extraordinary laboratory for Italian and international rationalist ideas. They were usually commissioned from young architects and were devoid of the typical rhetoric of 'regime architecture'. The planning of places that were highly symbolic but at the same time detached from any pre-existing context resulted in completely innovative solutions, encouraged by the fascist regime as examples of a new visionary rigour symbolising a new architecture for a new people. Biscotti and Van Braak's work discloses the latent meaning of the buildings. Archive research, direct experience of the buildings and details of earlier interpretations are filtered and restored by a process of analysis and reassembled in a visual archive that captures all the different suggestions, transformations and interpretations. In the Colonia Torino in Marina di Massa, Van Braak temporarily rebuilt a monumental stairway, a fundamental but subsequently eliminated feature of the original design by the architect Ettore Sottsass senior. This intervention emphasises the authentic experience of the building and the contrast with current perceptions of it: completion as a critical gesture.

Their journey and their research into the architecture of the fascist dictatorship inevitably took Biscotti and Van Braak to Rome, where they concentrated on the Foro Italico (formerly known as the Foro Mussolini), and the Rome Universal Exhibition (EUR), a district designed for the World Exhibition which was due to take place in 1942 but was cancelled because of the Second World War. They mainly focused on the Palazzo degli Uffici, the Casa della Scherma and the Piscine Coni, aiming to gain an understanding of the logic (including the bureaucratic logic) whereby these places were transformed. The Palazzo degli Uffici, which was the first EUR building to be completed and hence was particularly charged with symbolic political meaning, is currently being restored. Biscotti and Van Braak became personally

involved in the dynamics of change of the building, and decided to intervene actively with impromptu gestures that would trigger a reflection on the role of architecture within a wider debate on changes in the identity of buildings.

The aim of the EUR SpA company's project is to restore the building to its original form, acknowledging the intrinsic value of the architect Gaetano Minucci's design, and to render the structure suitable for present-day use by eliminating the internal partitions between the offices. Some of the changes made just after the collapse of the fascist regime – such as the removal of two large bronze busts of Mussolini and King Vittorio Emanuele III, which were originally on display in the Sala del Pubblico – are still considered acceptable, even though they radically alter the intended perception of the original design. The artists' proposal to put the two busts back in the Sala del Pubblico (if only temporarily) and to preserve part of the original structures *in situ* is a testimony to the various transformations of the building and a critical reflection on the role of architecture as an expression of power. The photographic documentation, the file records of the bureaucratic correspondence and the reconstruction of certain accessories, such as Gio Ponti's original handles, form an interpretative atlas of the building.

A black-and-white photograph and a colour photograph of a staircase in Luigi Moretti's Casa della Scherma, both taken at the same moment, immediately short-circuit our perception of time. The staircase, whose appearance has not been improved by successive restorations – the handrail, a police box and an appalling small picture – confront us directly with the change in the purpose of the building, the friction between the envisaged monumentality of the original and its improvised reuse. The Casa della Scherma, initially meant to celebrate physical exercise as a fundamental element of modern man, was abandoned for two decades and then became a special courthouse which was used

for all of Italy's terrorist trials, from the murder of Aldo Moro to the assault on the Pope. In the aftermath of fascism, rationalistic architecture came to be seen in Italy as symbolic of a dictatorial ideology, and whereas in other countries it was used as a model for public housing, in Italy it was viewed with suspicion, not to say embarrassment. Now that such architecture has been artistically rehabilitated, the building may be converted into a museum. Biscotti and Van Braak's work records the courtroom before its subsequent metamorphosis, abandoned to its fate amid electric cables and iron bars.

Finally, the Piscine Coni in the Foro Italico is recorded while a group of workers are slowly carrying out maintenance work on it. The surface of the mosaic is burned with acid to make it shine, showing unmistakably how every act of restoration involves the removal of something, the erasure of traces, and how the original radiance, the initial experience of the place, is inevitably lost forever. Rossella Biscotti and Kevin van Braak take us on a journey into memory, in pursuit of the stratifications of meaning. Like Austerlitz they start out from a void, but eventually they begin investigating their own traces: street by street, object by object, photograph by photograph, there emerges an ever-present past which we feel we have always carried within us like a series of negatives that have yet to be developed.

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I. W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, Random House, New York 2001: 277–278.