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***PIAZZALE LORETO' IN MILAN, FROM THE '20s
TO THE PRESENT. ARCHITECTURAL AND
HISTORICAL MEMORIES FROM A SPACE OF
DIS/AFFECTION***

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Abstract: *This study aims to highlight the role played by a significant public place of Milan, 'piazzale Loreto' that, throughout time, has been at the centre of attention for many reasons, gradually becoming a place of dis/affection and contestation. In fact, the square, today, is a consequence of its painful past, and even the municipality has not been able to reconfigure it in a proper way, since it is still a huge void, an enormous square with an almost ignored commemorative monument at the centre.*

But first, it all started during the '20s, when Milan was changing, becoming a financial-cultural centre, and piazzale Loreto was a point of reference for tourists and workers who wanted a comfortable place to stay: actually the "Titanus", the biggest hotel of the city, was conceived as a monumental building, born to satisfy the practical, modern needs of its middle-class hosts. Unfortunately, opened in 1928, it was already in decline a few years later, due to the economic crisis and the international, difficult mood of the '30s, which affected several European and non-European countries, Italy included.

Then, during the Second World War, the building was given to the SS and, in 1943, bombed by the Anglo-American forces, to the point that, at the end of the conflict, the hotel was almost destroyed. Nevertheless, it became a passive witness of the 'Strage di piazzale Loreto' (piazzale Loreto slaughter) on the 8th of August 1944, when a Nazi-fascist squad killed fifteen partisans. Again, just a few months later, after the fall of the regime, the same square was chosen as the 'revenge place' where Benito Mussolini, Claretta Petacci and other fascists' corpses were exhibited in full public sight. Since even the plan conceived under the Reconstruction was not able to 'redeem' the place, after several decades, the place it is just a traffic intersection, where no one can easily pass through it by walking. All these difficulties are still demonstrated by the most recent debate, based on the (unrealized) idea that piazzale Loreto should house the Tree of Life Expo 2015.

1. A square with an unsolved identity, in a modern city

According to the most common definitions to this day, a square is actually a place where people can meet, and it is generally considered an open, public area where one can easily encounter someone, feeling included in that space. As Marc Augé wrote, "it is the pedestrians who transform a street (geometrically defined as a

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place by town planners) into a space.¹“ Moreover – as Mario Isnenghi affirms – we must consider that “Italy is the country where the *piazza* expresses itself in a great variety of historical shapes, in a long-lasting and typical way,²“ and so it has been since the ancient times.

On the contrary, piazzale Loreto is nowadays one of the ugliest, ‘unfinished’ places of Milan, first of all because it represents the opposite of a square, the opposite of its ideal identity, where the pedestrians are literally excluded. In fact, it seems to embody the reversed definition Augé gave, being an enormous urban void, even if located in a significant point of the city – not far from the historical centre, and close to one of the most important commercial area, corso Buenos Aires –, exactly between the city centre and its surroundings.

This is also because it is crossed by a huge amount of cars, driving there by day and night, and people cannot cross it without several difficulties – unless you decide to take the underground pedestrian passage, which is the only safe way to quickly go from one part to the other of the square.

The local administration, during the last decades, has been trying hard to solve this question; for example, during the summer of 2012, the traffic was distributed, in order to transform the square into a roundabout.³ But, after all, we must consider that a similar solution is almost inapplicable throughout the whole year, during common working days, and at the end of that summer it was actually abandoned.

Today, this place is still one of the main traffic intersections of Milan, where people are literally rejected, as ‘declared’ by a lot of elements: the centre of the square, which is a small green and ‘wild’ area organised over a subterranean parking lot, is basically unapproachable, considering that pedestrian crossings are disseminated along its outer limit, but not inside the area. So, the very ‘heart’ of this space is a difficult match of green, asphalt and a lot of traffic lights; moreover, there are no points of aggregation but houses and offices where people are closed in.

If we look at it with a wider and more complex perspective, we can argue that it is not a coincidence that piazzale Loreto preserves these features, considering that it is the tangible representation of a story of rejection, an historical fracture able to transform the square itself in a place of disaffection.

Here the definition of ‘contested heritage,’ clearly given by William Logan and Keir Reeves, is very useful, in order to understand what we are dealing with:

¹ Augé 1995: 79-80.

² “L’Italia è il Paese in cui in maniera più durevole e tipica si è espressa in tutta la molteplicità delle sue forme storiche la piazza”. Isnenghi 1997: 43.

³ “Su piazzale Loreto gli uffici tecnici del settore mobilità stanno ragionando da tempo su una revisione delle sue caratteristiche di distribuzione del traffico. Tanto che nel 2012 era stata fatta anche una sperimentazione durante i mesi estivi che aveva trasformato il piazzale in una rotonda” (“Concerning piazzale Loreto, the mobility’s technical offices [of the local administration] have been reflecting for a long time now, on a possible change of the traffic distribution. During the summer of 2012 an experimentation was put in place, transforming the square into a roundabout”). See: Montanari 2015.

A range of places, sites and institutions represents the legacy of these painful periods: massacre and genocide sites, places related to prisoners of war [...] These sites bring shame upon us now for the cruelty and the ultimate futility of the events that occurred within them and the ideologies they represented. Logan, Reeves (eds.) 2009: 1)

Representing a strong nationalistic power, the present and still unsolved condition of piazzale Loreto is also shown by a simple web research,⁴ whose result suggests the fragility of a space that went through a delicate past, made of injustice, assassination and historical repercussions. Then, if we accomplish a more specific web search by images, we can notice that the major part of the pictures portraying the square is directly connected to the facts that happened during the fascist regime, to the concentration camps and the death of Mussolini. These painful fragments of the past, and the events they show, are now inevitably forging the identity of the Milanese place, and influencing the opinion of different generations: both the ones who lived during that period and the others who know the facts throughout secondary sources (books, pictures, magazines...).

Finally, in order to understand the current conditions of this place, we need to step back in time, starting from the first decades of the 20th century and arriving at the present situation: more precisely, we are going through the modern history of piazzale Loreto, considering it at first, during the early 20th century, as a ‘tourist place’; then, during WWII, as an historical and controversial site, as under the regime it was a Nazi-fascist military district, and finally as an ‘unfinished space’ as it is now.



Hotel Loreto Titanus, piazzale Loreto – Milan (about 1930). Picture taken from Serrantoni 1984-1985.

2. The ‘Hotel Loreto’: from tourism to crisis, from peace to war

Throughout the first decades of the 20th century, piazzale Loreto is at the centre of a huge economic and productive interest: in fact, even if the square has already become a great traffic intersection – a roundabout, where the tram line is inaugurated at the end of the 19th century – it is still considered a point of aggregation, being experienced by a lot of workers coming in or going out of the site by national and international tourists and by the inhabitants of the city.

As a matter of fact, at that time, piazzale Loreto already has its ‘social dimension,’ embodied by a public point of reference, the ‘Albergo Loreto,’ located

⁴ See, for example: Arsuffi 2008. “Piazzale Loreto, una delle piazze milanesi più famose e importanti, eppure una delle più brutte piazze della città” (“Piazzale Loreto, one of the most important and well-known Milanese squares, and yet one of the ugliest of the city”).

in the intersection between the roundabout itself, via Padova and viale Monza.⁵ Erected during the first years of the century, since the beginning this building was conceived as a hotel, also hosting a small restaurant and a music hall called ‘Giardino Margherita Teatro varietà.’ Despite this peculiarity, unfortunately its presence is destined to vanish very soon, because we know that in 1912 the hotel has already been converted into a movie theatre, the ‘cinema teatro Loreto.’⁶ Soon after this, for a while, tourism in general becomes less important in the whole city, especially considering the national participation in the Great War, which started in 1915 and concluded three years later. Only right after the conflict, the Italian region of Lombardy – and so the city of Milan – is able to invest in tourism, as a specific, productive field, capable of improving the domestic situation.⁷ In fact – as underlined by Lara Prospero – at a moment where tourism was becoming a significant aspect of the Italian economy, Milan, between WWI and WWII, is acquiring a strong appeal in that sense, even if considered in a national – and not yet international – perspective:

After the First World War, also thanks to the enthusiasm given by the great success reached during the early 20th century in the industrial and commercial area, the city of Milan was emphasising its multi-shaped and eclectic side. But if its role as an economic centre was already perceivable, it was more difficult to establish the idea of a city linked to the tourist side. [... By the way,] a publication of the mid-Thirties introduced an assertive title: “Milan is a tourist centre!” [... Actually, at that time] the city was already equipped with a respectable hotel network, appreciable both on a quantity and quality level [translation mine].⁸

Prospero, again, argues that, starting from the '20s, the whole city is extending its middle class hospitality network, building new hotels and accommodating services in the most significant points, such as the historical centre

⁵ Several pictures of this place (and its transformations) are collected and reproduced in this website: http://www.giusepperausa.it/cinema_900.html.

⁶ The importance of the cinema as a public site in urban landscape is underlined, for example, by Brunetta 1997: 223-251.

⁷ “Conclusa la prima guerra mondiale, nell’arco di un paio di decenni il turismo ha cominciato ad essere percepito, a livello internazionale, come una delle attività industriali meritevoli di specifici investimenti al fine di migliorarne la qualità in termini di offerta [...] Con gli anni Trenta, le scienze sociali e giuridiche hanno cominciato a manifestare un relativo maggior interesse per il turismo anche nelle sue valenze economiche.” Carera 2002: 21-64.

⁸ “All’indomani della prima guerra mondiale Milano, sullo slancio dei notevoli successi conseguiti in campo industriale e commerciale ad inizio Novecento, andava accentuando sempre più il proprio volto di città eclettica e multiforme. Se poteva ormai essere percepibile il ruolo di capitale economica d’Italia, più improbabile era ipotizzare l’esistenza di una ‘Milano turistica’ [...] Comunque] una pubblicazione di metà anni Trenta proponeva un titolo dal tono assertivo: ‘Milano è centro turistico!’ [...] Infatti a quel tempo] la città era ormai dotata di una degna organizzazione alberghiera, apprezzabile sia qualitativamente sia quantitativamente”. Prospero 2002: 137-138. On the precocity of the Italian tourist network see also: Carera 2005.

and piazza Fiume (now piazza della Repubblica), strategic cultural and commercial crossroads of the city. (*Ibidem*)

Besides them, also, during the '20s piazzale Loreto is designed to be a pole of attraction for the more and more important middle class, interested in comfortable standards of living and travelling. Actually there, in 1928, after four years of works,⁹ the colossal Hotel Loreto opens its doors: situated in the corner between piazzale Loreto and viale Abruzzi, this is a peculiar building, first of all because it is the biggest hotel of the city. So, at a time where the architectural field passes from the private to the public and governmental initiative¹⁰ – and since 1923 we are talking about the Partito Nazionale Fascista (Fascist National Party), the extreme right wing party –, the Hotel Loreto (at least for the first part of its story) is still conceived and managed by a private company, the Società Anonima Alberghi Ambrosiani.

Member of this company is the architect Ambrogio Gadola¹¹ who, together with the engineer Carlo Urbano,¹² another stockholder of the Milanese firm as well as works supervisor, is responsible for the blueprints and the construction site of the hotel.

⁹ As stated in the archival documents concerning the administration of the Hotel Loreto, we know that the building was erected between 1924 and 1928 and that its activity already started in the same 1928. Only the following year, though, we can find its presence in the “Guide Savallo”, a famous series of guides where tourists could find information about every hotel of Milan. “Il periodo costruttivo decorrente dall'Ottobre 1924 al Dicembre 1928 [...] l'esercizio alberghiero, iniziato nel 1928”. Milan, Archivio della Camera di Commercio, Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di Milano, CO3/023/03, Registro delle ditte ZII.23.810 – Società Anonima Alberghi Ambrosiani (Alberghi Ambrosiani spa, fasc. 89460), “Verbale di Assemblea generale ordinaria e straordinaria 12 aprile 1929”. See also: *Guida di Milano e provincia* 1929.

¹⁰ See Carera 2002: 21-64; Selvafolta 1994: 283-320.

¹¹ Ambrogio Gadola (1888-1971) is born and raised in Milan. In 1912 he graduated at Politecnico di Milano (Engineering with specialisation in architecture) and, ever since, he works under the supervision of his father, owner of the company “Luigi Gadola”. In 1923 he becomes the manager of the company, succeeding his father and keeping this position until his death, in 1971. As firm's boss, he supervises several construction sites, such as the ones of Cà de Sass (built for the bank Cariplo, 1939) and the Swiss Centre (1952). After the Second World War, he is one of the protagonists of the Milanese reconstruction and member of some of the most Milanese prestigious companies (e.g. member of Camera di Commercio; president of Banca Popolare di Milano). This short bio is based on the data collected on: http://www.culturadimpresa.org/assimpredil/organi/organi_gadola.html. On the same web page are also available bibliographic references.

¹² We do not know much about Carlo Urbano, but we know for sure that he was the works supervisor of the Hotel Loreto's construction site, thanks to the archive documents: “L'azionista ing. Urbano per raccomandare che nella compilazione del Bilancio siano ben distinte le voci, e specialmente per ciò che riguarda la costruzione dell'Albergo, della quale ebbe incarico come Direttore dei lavori, sia tenuta ben distinta la spesa di costruzione da quelle successive riguardanti modifiche, aggiunte od altro”. Milan, Archivio della Camera di Commercio, Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di Milano, CO3/023/03, Registro delle ditte ZII.23.810 – Società Anonima Alberghi Ambrosiani (Alberghi Ambrosiani spa, fasc. 89460), “Verbale di Assemblea generale ordinaria e straordinaria 12 aprile 1929”.



*Giannino Castiglioni,
Monument dedicated to the
15 partisans (1960) as it is
today – Milan (2016).
Picture taken by Silvia
Colombo.*

requirements.¹⁵ “Among all of these changes, the naming issue is of particular interest, because the hotel, acquiring its second denomination as ‘Titanus,’ clearly echoes the more and more influential ‘mythology’ of the fascist regime. And even if unconsciously, it feels like in this precise passage lays the inevitable, sad future of the building.

In the meanwhile, anyway, the administration tries to solve the economic crisis afflicting the hotel and, even though this happens thanks to external events, it seems that in 1933 the situation is progressively improving: at that time, in fact, the

The size of the building is so massive at the point that its construction “required specific architectural studies, due to the difficulties of founding a nine floor building on irregular and soft land.¹³” The result is hence a majestic, tall, second-class hotel, with more than 600 rooms, a restaurant and a launderette, that – with its appearance – contributes to change the ‘skyline’ of the city. And its popularity is also confirmed by the circulation of several picture postcards of the most significant hotels of Milan,¹⁴ portraying the Hotel Loreto and its easily recognisable shape.

Unfortunately, as soon as 1929, due to the significant economic crisis spread in the whole of Europe after the American crack of Wall Street, the hotel presents several problems connected to the management of the building; and in this delicate situation neither the reduction of the room prices nor the change of its name or the addition of new services are able to solve the situation.

Actually, in 1930, “a greater respectability [was given] to the hotel, by calling it LORETO – TITANUS, improving its services and giving it a new dining room, appropriate to the clients’

¹³ Serrantoni 1984-1985: 49.

¹⁴ As resulting from a web research, the Hotel Loreto, being portrayed in several postcards of the first decades of the last century, seems very popular and on top of the most prestigious hotels of Milan, such as Hotel Aosta, near the Central Station, Hotel Metropole and Hotel Commercio, situated in the very heart of the city.

¹⁵ Viene dato “maggiore decoro all’Albergo, ora denominato LORETO – TITANUS, migliorandone i servizi e dotandolo di una nuova sala per ristorante adeguata alle esigenze della clientela.” Milan, Archivio della Camera di Commercio, Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di Milano, RS19677, “Bilancio al 31 dicembre 1929”.

The change of the hotel's name is registered and stamped on the 5th of February 1930. See: Milan, Archivio della Camera di Commercio, Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di Milano, Milan, Archivio della Camera di Commercio, Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di Milano, CO3/023/03, Registro delle ditte ZII.23.810 – Società Anonima Alberghi Ambrosiani (Alberghi Ambrosiani spa, fasc. 89460), “Denuncia di modifica.”

Loreto Titanus counts 19.823 guests. Moreover, as written in the archive documents “undoubtedly this year [1933] the trend of the hospitality field indicated a very important increase from April onwards, both for the recurring holy year and for the opening of the Triennale [a significant triennial art exhibition hosted at Palazzo dell’Arte, in Milan].”¹⁶

But then, during the following period, we witness a gradual and unstoppable decline: just to mention some examples, the ‘bagni diurni’ (diurnal, public baths) and the restaurant, directly run by the Società Anonima Alberghi Ambrosiani, are constantly negative balance sheet items (1934-1935);¹⁷ not to mention that the costs concerning staff, food and fuel are increasing, quickly vanishing all the other revenues.¹⁸

At this point, and especially with the beginning of the Second World War (Italy entered in the conflict only in 1940), the decay of the building is almost unavoidable: “this delicate international, political moment damages particularly the hospitality network, reducing the tourist movements.”¹⁹

In fact the Hotel Loreto Titanus in 1939 goes through several financial losses,²⁰ and just the following year the company certifies the minimum peak in terms of visitors,²¹ to the point that the administration is forced to reconvert some of the numerous rooms – 150 more precisely – in two apartments to rent, hence reducing the hotel’s capacity.²² However, it is only between 1942 and 1943 that important turning points occur to the hotel and, more generally, to the square: firstly the building – a part from the rooms, the apartments, the launderette, the restaurant

¹⁶ “Indubbiamente quest’anno l’andamento dell’industria alberghiera cittadina segnò un incremento assai notevole dal mese di Aprile in avanti, e per la ricorrenza dell’anno santo e per l’apertura della Triennale”. Milan, Archivio della Camera di Commercio, Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di Milano, RS19677, “Bilancio al 31 dicembre 1933.”

¹⁷See: Milan, Archivio della Camera di Commercio, Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di Milano, RS19677, “Bilancio al 31 dicembre 1934” and “Bilancio al 31 dicembre 1935.”

¹⁸ “Hanno subito sensibili incrementi tutti i costi, ed in specie quelli inerenti al personale, ai combustibili ed ai viveri.” Milan, Archivio della Camera di Commercio, Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di Milano, RS19677, “Bilancio al 31 dicembre 1934” and “Bilancio al 31 dicembre 1937.”

¹⁹ “Il delicato momento politico internazionale colpisce in modo speciale le aziende alberghiere, diradandosi il movimento turistico”. Milan, Archivio della Camera di Commercio, Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di Milano, RS19677, “Relazione dei Sindaci” [1938].

²⁰ Milan, Archivio della Camera di Commercio, Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di Milano, RS19677, “Relazione del Consiglio di Amministrazione” [1939].

²¹ “Le presenze hanno segnato il minimo assoluto dall’inizio dell’attività”. See: Milan, Archivio della Camera di Commercio, Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di Milano, RS19677, “Relazione del Consiglio di Amministrazione” [1940].

²² “In questo esercizio furono completate le opere di riforma di alcuni locali che, in conformità al permesso avuto dal competente Ministero, sono stati detratti dall’uso alberghiero per essere destinati ad abitazione civile”. See: Milan, Archivio della Camera di Commercio, Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di Milano, RS19677, “Relazione del Consiglio di Amministrazione” [1941].

and the garage – is reorganised in order to host two anti-aircraft shelters;²³ then it is confiscated by the German SS, responsible for the transformation of the hotel into a military district of the Nazi forces, and it is finally bombed by the Allies Air Forces.

The result [of the annual balance] was seriously influenced by the requisition of our hotel, executed by the German F.F.A.A.; requisition which has been made with rates valid for the year 1936 [...] We have shouldered great costs for the definitive reorganisation of our two anti-aircraft shelters and we suffered several losses for the partial and temporary suspension of the activity both of the hotel and the ‘albergo diurno,’ due to the bombings happened during February and August [1943], which have caused a lot of damages to the building and its technical equipment in the amount of 1.000.000 [...] and the restaurant is still rented [translation mine]²⁴.

Even though the damages occurred to the hotel were repaired very soon by the local Genio Civile, the story of piazzale Loreto – and so of the entire city of Milan – is describable in a few words: desolation, destruction and ruin. We can see that reading the words of Franco Loi, one of the intellectuals who gave us some of the best (or the worst, depending on the point of view) descriptions of the city at that time:

I have a terrifying memory of the city of Milan in August 1943 [...] When we came back, they stopped us at Rogoredo and we finished the trip home partly on a horse-drawn carriage, until corso Lodi, and then on a truck up till Piazzale Loreto and then on foot to our house. The buildings gutted, the train tracks bent skywards, and dust and shouting all over the place, and dogs and people gasping among the rabble [...] Another roundup [of the Germans] was on the Corso Buenos Aires. They blocked the entire avenue from Porta Venezia to Loreto [translation by the author].²⁵

In a sufficiently short timespan – the first four decades of the 20th century – the square passes from a positive, social dimension to a negative condition, forcedly imposed by the political and historical circumstances. It is exactly at this moment that piazzale Loreto, still dominated by the Hotel Loreto Titanus but already abandoned by tourists, starts becoming a large void within a ghostly, desperate city. Nevertheless the worst part of its story is still yet to come.

²³ “Per contro il bilancio ha dovuto sopportare una notevole spesa per la costruzione dei rifugi antiaerei”. See: Milan, Archivio della Camera di Commercio, Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di Milano, RS19677, “Relazione dei Sindaci” [1942].

²⁴ Ha influito enormemente sul risultato la requisizione del nostro albergo da parte delle F.F.A.A. Germaniche, requisizione che è stata operata con prezzi vigenti nel 1936 [...] Abbiamo dovuto sostenere una spesa non indifferente per la sistemazione definitiva dei nostri due ricoveri antiaerei ed abbiamo subito una notevole perdita per la parziale sospensione temporanea dell’attività dell’albergo e dell’albergo Diurno in seguito alle due incursioni aeree del febbraio e dell’agosto che hanno causato danni al fabbricato ed agli impianti per circa 1.000.000 [...] il ristorante è sempre concesso in affitto.” Milan, Archivio della Camera di Commercio, Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di Milano, RS19677, “Relazione del Consiglio di Amministrazione” [1943].

²⁵ Loi 2008: 68-69. The book is translated from Italian; the original version is entitled *Aria de la memoria*, and has been published by Einaudi (Turin) in 2005.

3. A place for fascist and antifascist repercussions

Even though an armistice was signed between Italy and the Allies (8 September 1943), the Partito Nazionale Fascista – with the help of the German troops – continues to be the dominant component of the totalitarian government, especially in North Italy, not yet released by the Anglo-American armies.

Actually in the northern regions of the country, a more and more difficult coexistence between two opposite political forces takes place: from one side the Repubblica di Salò (or Repubblica Sociale Italiana, 1943-1945), wanted by the Nazi-fascists and still lead by Mussolini; from the other, the antifascist movements organised by the partisans within the Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale (National Liberation Committee, 1943-1947), principal voice of the Italian Resistance.

On a minor scale, this tension is present and intensely perceivable also in Milan, where the last part of World War II reaches a climax of inconceivable violence: within a year, this violence is able to literally explode on two different occasions, both of them against the background of piazzale Loreto.

But let us start from the beginning. 8 August 1944: two explosive devices are placed on a German truck parked just outside the former Hotel Loreto Titanus, now occupied by the Wehrmacht; at the moment of the explosion 12 people are injured (the driver included) and other 11 civilians die.

According to the Nazi forces, this event must be considered a terrorist attack ascribable to the partisans; and it is no coincidence that, only two days later, they are ready to call their revenge, under the leadership of Theodor Saevecke, then known as ‘boia di piazzale Loreto’ (executioner of piazzale Loreto).

That day, at dawn, 15 partisans²⁶ already incarcerated for being antifascists are conducted outside the Milanese prison of San Vittore in order to be relocated – they say – to a German forced-labour camp. Totally unaware of what would have happened in a few hours, they are instead conducted to piazzale Loreto: then, placed in front of a fence, just outside the petrol station Natale Battaglia, they are shot by the Nazis, and their corpses left there for the whole day, one on top of the other.

As easily imaginable, the German condemnation of the antifascist groups, being expressed in such a cruel and violent way, creates a shocking reaction among the common people, but also among the intellectuals. Lucia D’Ambrosio – a Milanese woman recently interviewed by a national newspaper –, for example, perfectly remembers the event and she recalls the horrific situation by saying

on the 10th of August 1944 I met the terror in piazzale Loreto [...] the flies covered the corpses, the fascists prevented the victims' families from tending to their loved ones; instead, they provoked – with weapons in their hands – the commuters coming into Milan or the ones leaving the city to go back home, to stop and look at the

²⁶ They are, in alphabetical order: Antonio Bravini, Giulio Casiraghi, Enzo Del Riccio, Andrea Esposito, Domenico Fiorani, Umberto Fogagnolo, Giovanni Galimberti, Vittorio Gasparini, Emidio Mastrodomenico, Angelo Poletti, Salvatore Principato, Andrea Ragni, Eraldo Soncini, Libero Temolo, Vitale Vertemati.

victims carefully, as they must remember that the real murderers were the partisans, not the Germans²⁷ [translation by the author].

From another point of view, also, in the same year 1944, the artist Aligi Sassu,²⁸ strongly moved by that scene, decides to paint the artwork *The Martyrs of Piazzale Loreto* (*I martiri di piazzale Loreto*), now preserved at Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome. This painting is the visual and personal reinterpretation of a dramatic public scene, tragically inspired by one of the most well-known photographs of the slaughter, frequently reproduced in the newspapers in association with the motto “Milanesi, ricordate” (“Milanese people, please remember”). The condemnation of the Nazi troops, here, is quite clear, especially if we consider the word “martyrs” used in the title; the most poignant description of the artworks, anyway, comes from Sassu himself, who affirms:

I painted *I martiri di piazzale Loreto* in August 1944, just after I saw the mockery the fascist reprobates made of our comrades' corpses. But still, despite the revolt and anger I felt, despite my trying to express what I saw, there was in me peace rather than hate, but also an immense sadness about that fratricide. From those bleeding and lifeless bodies there came a warning: peace, peace [translation by the author].²⁹

Another example of that ‘flood of remembrance’ is well-represented by a poem by Franco Loi, written in local dialect and dedicated to piazzale Loreto; here the square, dominated by the damaged building of the Hotel Titanus, is personified by a hand covered by dead skin and both of them – the square and the building – are derelict testimonies of an unfair slaughter, where the author himself lost his teacher and his best friend's father.

... piassa Luret, serva del Titanus

²⁷ “Le mosche si accanivano sui corpi, i fascisti impedivano a familiari dei morti di far loro una carezza e invece incitavano, armi in pugno, i pendolari che arrivavano a Milano o da lì partivano per tornare a casa, a fermarsi e guardarli bene, perché fosse chiaro che gli assassini erano i partigiani, non loro”. *Ibidem*.

²⁸ Aligi Sassu (1912-2000), born in Milan, in the first part of his career joins the Futurists thanks to this friend, Bruno Munari. Then, between the '20s and the '30s he gets close to daily-life subjects, like sportsmen or cars; being arrested, at the end of the '30s Sassu starts to collaborate with the antifascist group Corrente, but he still prefers to work and exhibit by his own. During the following decades, he works with different materials and techniques such as ceramic and murals. In 1996, when Sassu gives a significant amount of artworks (356) to the city of Lugano, the Fondazione Aligi Sassu and Helenina Olivares opens its doors to the public. For further information see at least: *Sassu: catalogo generale della pittura 2011-2012 Sassu e Corrente 1930-1943* 2012.

²⁹ “Ho dipinto *I martiri di Piazzale Loreto* nell'agosto 1944, subito dopo aver visto il ludibrio che la canaglia repubblicana faceva dei corpi dei nostri fratelli. Eppure vi era in me, nel fuoco e nell'ansia che mi agitava, nel cercare di esprimere quello che avevo visto, una grande pace e non odio, ma una tristezza immensa per la lotta fratricida. Da quei corpi sanguinanti e inerti sorgeva un monito: pace, pace.” Aligi Sassu in <http://www.aligisassu.it/schtxtit/sch034.htm>.

ti', verta,
 me na man da la pell morta
 i gent che passa par j a vör tuccà,
 e là, a la steccada che se sterla,
 sota la colla di manifest strascià,
 l'è là che riden, là, che la gent surda
 la streng i gamb, e la vuriss sigà [...].³⁰

The situation is so delicate and devastating that even Benito Mussolini in person condemns the inhumanity of this extreme action, thinking that this episode is a huge mistake for the Italian politics: actually, empathising with the partisan victims, for the major part of the Italians would have been easier and more predictable than taking the side of the fascist parties (both German and Italian). Moreover, according to Mussolini, this would have negatively affected the political favour towards the Partito Nazionale Fascista and, on the contrary, reinforced the antifascist groups. In the end, the leader of the PNF is able to trace a lucid prediction of what could have been happened: hate by the Italian people towards national and German armed forces; increasing of the number of partisan rebels; desertion organised by the workers within their offices. (Franzinelli 2012.) But, as Franzinelli underlines, Mussolini forgot a fourth, essential consequence: “the gradual accumulation of the lust for revenge, with the consequent preparation [...] of further killings, also realised [...] ‘in a convulsory way and without any rules’” (*Ibidem*) [translation by the author].

And in fact, the Milanese people did not forget what happened at that time: only eight months later, in April 1945, piazzale Loreto is again at the centre of the international attention, but for another reason. On the 25th of April, Italy is finally released from the fascist regime: Mussolini and his lover, Claretta Petacci, are stopped by the partisan forces near the Italian-Swiss borders, while they are trying to escape.

It is the end of the month and they are immediately shot – without any process – just outside a villa of Giulino di Mezzegra, near Como, together with other 16 fascist representatives. This episode suggests not only the vindictive intention shown by the local Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale, but also marks the final chapter of the Italian fascist regime.

Not to mention that, in order to fully accomplish its revenge, the CLN decides to bring all the fascists' corpses in Milan and, more precisely, in piazzale Loreto. In that way, on the 29th of April 1945, 18 corpses of the most significant representatives of the Partito Nazionale Fascista are thrown and then hung upside down in a symbolic place, the same petrol station where – a few months before – 15 partisans were unjustly killed for a crime they did not commit. As written by Stephen Gundle, “Mussolini’s dead body was turned into a spectacle in retribution for the blood Fascism had spilled or caused to be spilled by its taking the country

³⁰ “Piazza Loreto, dominated by the Titanus/you, open/like a hand covered by dead skin/seem that you want to touch the people passing by/and there, near the damaged fence/under the glue of the ripped up posters/is there that they laugh, there, that deaf people/tighten their legs and would like to scream [translation by the author]”. See: Loi 1975.

into war [...] His ignominious death symbolised the end of an enchantment, while the public display of his cadaver ensured that there could be no doubt whatsoever that he would never return.” (Gundle 2013: 241-2.)

4. ‘Piazzale Loreto’ and its historical condition: erasing the past, avoiding the future

At the end of the Second World War, piazzale Loreto becomes a symbol of the national liberation from a totalitarian regime but, in order to definitely erase its painful past, the square needs to change its aspect, becoming something different, a modern point of reference of the city, where there are no signs of the previous wounds. In that way, during the reconstruction conducted immediately after the conflict, in piazzale Loreto several changes occur, giving it its present identity as ‘unfinished place.’

First of all, the Hotel Loreto Titanus – bombed, occupied by the German SS and then, in 1945, sell to the Pirelli company³¹ – between the ’50s and the ’60s is finally demolished³² from the ground and, in a decade, it will be substituted by a huge office building in glass, iron and concrete (which is still in place), designed by the architect Claudio Dini.

Moreover, during the same period, the whole piazzale is dismantled, due to the subterranean construction of the subway green line – and the dismantling process was huge, if we consider that now the Loreto stop is one of the most populated of the entire city, as it is the intersection between the green and the red line.

From another, different perspective – a past-oriented one –, the desire to recall the partisans’ slaughter is since the beginning materialised in a first, simple but significant commemorative monument, erected exactly where the partisans were shot: a memorial stone, where all the victims’ names are engraved on the surface, surrounded by several garlands. This “intentional monument,” quoting Andrea Pinotti (and before him Alois Riegl³³), being the representation of a tragic fact, is

³¹ “Infatti il 26 maggio 1945, con Decreto n. 72, la Commissione Militare Alloggiamenti Alleati requisiva la parte dello stabile destinato ad albergo a favore della Pirelli – Società per Azioni, per uso uffici. Detta Società ha posto mano alla sistemazione che è tuttora in corso”. Milan, Archivio della Camera di Commercio, Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di Milano, RS19677, “Relazione del Consiglio di Amministrazione” [1945].

³² Even if the timeline is not so indisputable, according to the archival documents it seems that the building of the Hotel Loreto Titanus is demolished in 1960, when the headquarters of the Pirelli company are moved from piazzale Loreto to piazza Duca d’Aosta. “Nella nostra ultima relazione vi avevamo informato dell’imminente trasferimento nel nuovo Centro Pirelli degli uffici della Pirelli S.p.A.” Milan, Archivio della Camera di Commercio, Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di Milano, RS19677, “Verbale di deposito di bilancio” [1959]. Different is the indication given by Panizza in his thesis, but there are no other bibliographical or archival references: “Nel 1950 fu demolito l’Hotel Titanus.” See: Panizza 2010: 40.

³³ “Richiamando il carattere ‘intenzionale’ evochiamo qui, necessariamente, un testo fondativo della teoria della monumentalità: il celeberrimo e ormai più che centenario ‘Culto moderno dei monumenti’, sorta di premessa gnoseologica che Alois Riegl volle apporre al suo *Progetto di un’organizzazione legislativa della conservazione in Austria* (Riegl, 1903). Qui lo storico austriaco distingue fra monumenti intenzionali (gewollte), cioè oggetti

also meant as something able to raise a reaction of the public and to officially martyr the victims of the slaughter.

A few years later, the artist Giannino Castiglioni is called to realise the final version of the monument that, in the end, is not able to leave a mark on the square³⁴: a sort of thin and long *stèle* realistically representing the martyr San Sebastian on one side, and bearing the names of the victims on the other.



Present conditions of piazzale Loreto during a summer day – Milan (2016). Picture taken by Silvia Colombo.

piazzale Loreto changed a lot, even if it is still ongoing, and yet incomplete. This is clearly demonstrated by the renaming process encountered by the square after the two global conflicts: after WWII, and for a short period, piazzale Loreto is called ‘piazza dei 15 martiri’ (15 martyrs square), with a clear, political aim; more recently, in 2005, Stefano Zecchi, then a council member, proposes to change its name in ‘piazza della Concordia’ (Harmony square).

But in the end, despite all the debates, the square still keeps its historical name, coming from an ancient church, built there during the 15th century (then demolished), and all the proposals are just an evidence of the cultural and commemorative instability of that place.

Evidence which is furthermore confirmed by its present situation: after several decades, it is inevitable that the square reveals itself as a consequence of its past; but, in the end, the Milanese municipality hasn’t been capable of reconfiguring its identity in a proper way.

Quoting again Andrea Pinotti,³⁵ the result is that piazzale Loreto, nowadays, is a huge square with an almost ignored commemorative and paradoxical monument in it: conceived to remember something, it has been promoting the oblivion (or, in

Comparing the result with the historical facts, we can say that this monument is an ‘accommodating souvenir’ of what actually happened; and this is partially ascribable to a ‘delayed timing’ (the monument is inaugurated in 1960) of the public administration, and partially to the position of the monument, moved away from its original position and then located at the corner of the square and via Doria.

Since then, the identity of

volontariamente ed esplicitamente progettati e realizzati a fini monumentali, e monumenti non intenzionali (ungewollte)”. See: Pinotti 2014: 19.

³⁴ Giannino Castiglioni (1884-1971) is a painter and sculptor born in Milan and lived between this city and Lierna, near Como. One can find his works – just to mention a few examples, in the Cimitero Monumentale in Milan, in the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana and Duomo di Milano. For further information see: Guglielmi 2016.

³⁵ Pinotti 2014.

certain cases, neo-fascist reactions) of a significant historical episode of the Italian past.

Moreover, the square is most of all a traffic intersection, hence for bikers and pedestrians it represents a barrier, a difficult place to live in but also to pass through. Also from the aesthetic point of view, the square bears an unsolved problem: if you look at it, you can see that it is a simple aggregation of buildings conceived during different periods, put one next to the other, without a rational planning. The consequence is that it is a space full of contradictions: it is repulsive, but it is almost inevitable passing through it; it is a commemorative place, but it has no evident signs of remembrance, and it is a square being at the same time a breaking point of the city.

Difficulties are still demonstrated by the most recent debates about it: the web, for example, is sprinkled by articles disapproving the present, unsatisfying situation of the square and – on the other side – proposing planning solutions of a possible configuration of the space³⁶.

One of the most recent and corroborated proposals talks about the possible relocation of the Tree of Life, a huge installation conceived by the entrepreneur and producer Marco Balich for Expo 2015 (hosted by the city of Milan), into the centre of piazzale Loreto. Still in this case, the main problem is directly related to the commemorative side of the square, as we can read in this article: “Does the Tree of Life imply the risk of blurring the need to remember [...] or [...] would it be a way to replace the feeling of death of that place with a symbol of life?³⁷” Again, reporting the opinion of the ANPI (the national association of the partisans): “That would be just a confused note, capable of creating only disorientation: the symbol of piazzale Loreto already exists and it is the monument remembering the 15 partisans.³⁸”

For now, even if it seems that this solution will not be put in practice, since the Tree of Life is still in place and functioning in the Expo area, a change of perspective and a definitive plan for the whole area is urgent and clearly still needed by the citizens and the inhabitants.

In conclusion, today piazzale Loreto is a contested place with a lack of identity, also because of an extremely heavy historical and cultural baggage. After being a point of connection for the inhabitants and the tourists, at the beginning of the last century, with the events occurred during the Second World War – the slaughter of piazzale Loreto and, then, the brutal end of the fascist regime – it experienced a deep collective fracture.

After the conflict, neither the efforts by the ANPI, with the monument entitled to the partisans, nor the Comune itself, which attempted to transform the square in a crucial point of the city, were able to find a proper urban and spatial

³⁶ See, for example, Panizza 2010.

³⁷ “L’Albero della vita rischia di offuscare la necessità del ricordo [...] oppure [...] sarebbe un modo per sostituire il senso di morte legato a quel luogo con un simbolo di vita?” De Vito 2015.

³⁸ “Sarebbe una nota stonata che creerebbe solo confusione: il simbolo di piazzale Loreto c’è già ed è il monumento che ricorda i 15 partigiani.” Morosi 2015.

reconfiguration. The problem is not yet solved and the still ongoing debate about piazzale Loreto demonstrates that: a change is needed but the solution is not clear or, at least, it does not seem unequivocal.³⁹ Maybe in the next future, when the historical distance from the wounds of the past will become more objective, someone will be able to reconfigure the square, possibly keeping the historical memory of its past and, at the same time, giving a new perspective towards the future.

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³⁹ Sala, the Mayor of Milan, in a recent article says: “di fatto la ristrutturazione è un po' in corso, ed è un tema su cui ci sono visioni un po' diverse. Il mio sogno [...] è che la vera ristrutturazione dovrebbe essere di questa piazza, piazzale Loreto, che è una piazza simbolo di Milano e meriterebbe di più.” See: “Eccidio piazzale Loreto, Sala: ‘Sogno di poter trasformare questo luogo.’”

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