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The place and the project. The Fornace Morandi along the Brenta River: project proposals for a new park in Noventa Padovana, Italy

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Abstract

Noventa Padovana is a town in the province of Padua, located a short distance from Venice. This contribution considers the wide area, today in degraded conditions, including the ruins of a kiln for the production of tiles and bricks which was built at the end of the 19th century by the Morandi family. The furnace was definitively closed in the 1960s and the area remained abandoned for several years. In 2006, the property was acquired by the Municipality of Noventa Padovana and this made it possible some essential maintenance work, providing the basis for a project that will enable the population to fully enjoy this large green area. This subject has been recently investigated by our students at the 'Architectural and Urban Composition 2' course taught on the master's degree in Architectural Engineering at the Department of Civil, Environmental and Architectural Engineering of the University of Padua.

Keywords: Regeneration; Public Space; Environmental Values; Industrial Archaeology; Brenta River.

1. Introduction

The theme of this contribution is the area containing the remains of the Morandi furnace of the old brickworks (Figure 1) which is located by the River Brenta (Tieto, 1983) in the territory of the Commune of Noventa Padovana (Bolzonella, 2018). It is a cultural resource in the field of recreation, leisure, and free time activities characterised by the incomplete unfinished condition of the furnace today. The laboratory activity developed by our students in their investigation into the history of the place and the resulting formulation of planning proposals aimed to improve the potential resources present in this environment.

Currently in a condition of degradation, the Morandi furnace is located a short distance from the centre of the populous parish of Noventana near the point where the courses of the River Brenta and the Piovego canal cross. Owned by the Commune, it is composed of a large area of greenery (Figure 2) in which stands the remains of the furnace. It is one of several furnaces that used to be situated inside the ring around Padua, the main city in this part of the Region of Veneto in north-eastern Italy. Inactive since the 1950s, the Morandi furnace was a kiln for making bricks, and today still remains in the site which takes its name from the impressive ruins of the furnace. The furnace was one of the most important production buildings in the territory of the Commune of Noventa Padovana, starting production at the end of the nineteenth century. It is integrated by the large portico, which was reconstructed on the remains of the structure of one of the original drying rooms sheds a few years ago, by the house where the caretaker lived, and by the small neogothic architecture that was part of the managing director's villa. Most of the surface is a grass lawn but there is a slightly untidy area of trees in woods on the northern side of the remains that need maintaining so that the public walking along the footpaths can enjoy them safely.

Given that this area had a large concentration of clay, the raw material for making bricks, the furnace was used to make pantiles and bricks. It was constructed using a framework characterised by square pillars with exposed brickwork and concrete beams that supported wooden floors. The trusses of the double-pitched roof and the panels of cladding of the industrial complex were also made of wood. The central nucleus of the building was the Hoffman-type elliptical furnace which at the time was the most widely used type of furnace. The production cycle was composed of five phases and all of the operations were carried out by hand and in the open. Initially the clay extracted from the quarries was deposited in the large tanks in the open where it was processed by combining it and removing any impurities. Once ready for use, the clay was shaped in appropriate moulds. The products obtained were left to dry in the open under appropriate roofs out of the rain and shaded from direct sunlight. Once the drying process had been completed, the bricks were introduced into the furnace and fired at temperatures between 800°C and 1200°C. Once fired, they were stacked and left on racks ready for sale. One by no means secondary aspect of the furnace was its strategic position between the River Brenta and the Piovego canal, two navigable waterways that could easily be used for transport over long distances.

The Hoffmann is an industrial complex for firing bricks designed to be in continuous use, invented by Friedrich Eduard Hoffmann at the end of the Nineteenth Century, composed of two parallel tunnels with a curved or flat chamber made of refractory material.



Figure 1. The ruins of the Morandi furnace covered by vegetation, seen from the south. Current state.

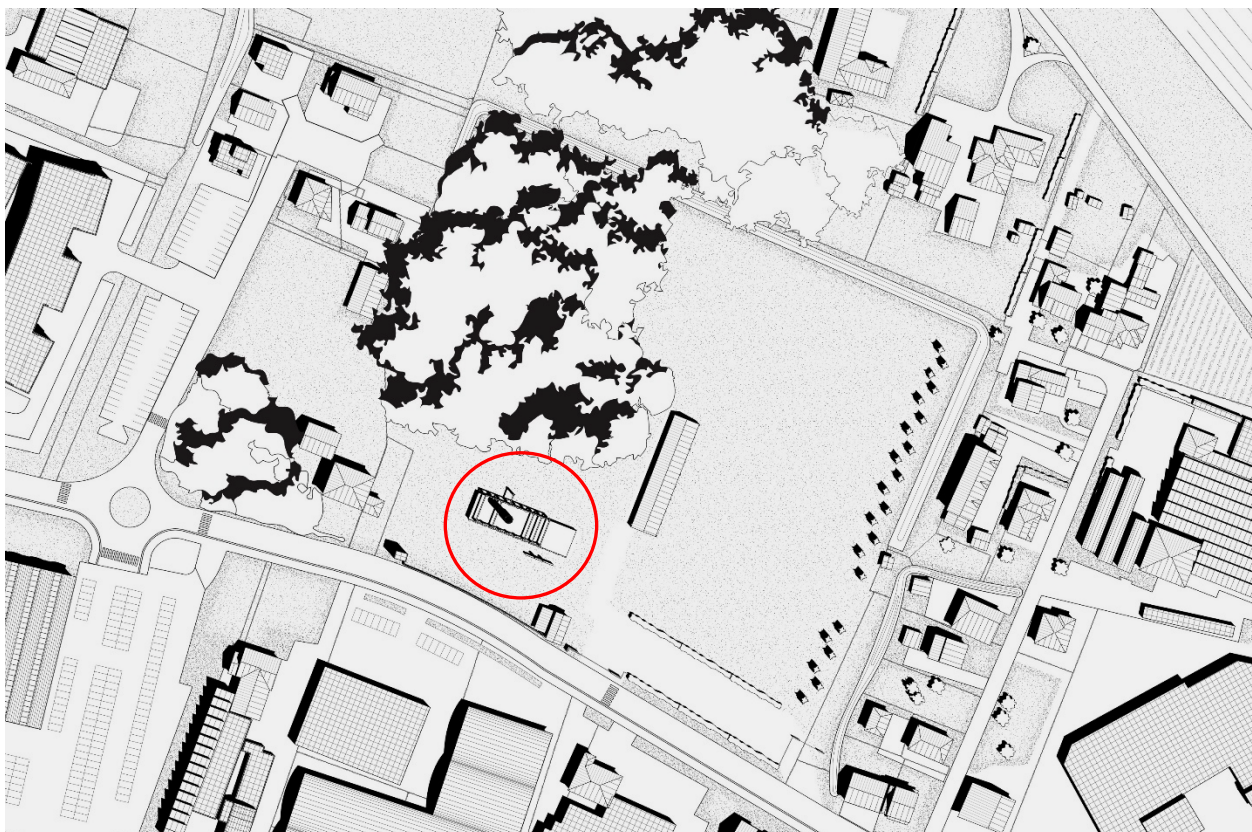


Figure 2. Planivolumetric representation of the area of the Morandi furnace situated on the northern side of the main road (from the work of the students Chiara Cesarini, Filippo Da Ru). The Morandi furnace is indicated by a circumference.

The tunnels of the Hoffmann furnaces are closed by large doors while the furnace is in use and connected by an opening on each of the headers in order to allow gases to pass. The chimney was in a central position guaranteeing the expulsion of smoke and fumes.

The Morandi plant progressively increased production, creating a characteristic local difference in altitude due to decades of excavations of the earth to make the bricks and pantiles. Favouring excavation at the time was the fact that the River Brenta flowed in a bed much further away than it does now. Until the second half of the Nineteenth Century, the purpose of the area now occupied by the Morandi furnace was mainly agricultural with a few rural buildings being present. In the 1850s the main road was outlined and now runs along the side of the area. After it was built at the end of the century, the furnace became the main production activity in the area for many years. Continuing in service until the 1950s, competition in the field of bricks became increasingly keen. The hope of reducing production costs failed and so keeping control of the market also failed, and the furnace was definitively decommissioned in the 1960s. Then the area was abandoned to nature for years. In those years new production facilities were built in the surrounding area so that the place had become very industrialised by the end of the twentieth century.

Photographic evidence helps to reconstruct the progressive degradation of the site. As a photo from 1975 shows, the site of the furnace in the 1970s had been abandoned and the buildings were in ruins. Subsequently, the building disappeared under refuse and vegetation in the early 1980s. Half way through the 1990s the abandoned construction began to cave in leaving only the structural framework made of brick and the concrete beams, and in 2008 it was temporarily left totally free of the vegetation. The area around the study site and the former furnace is mainly characterised by industrial and commercial buildings to the south while residential buildings lie to the east and west. Part of the old ditch has remained at the edge of the area. It completely surrounded the area and is now the only element of separation from the surrounding developed land.

Three main sectors described below can be distinguished on entering the study area from the south. The eastern area is composed of a large irregular grassed surface on which unkempt bushes and trees are growing. It is currently the only part of the surface accessible by the local population. The western area includes the remains of the furnace. The northern area has been occupied by a thick unkempt close-packed wood of ash and poplar trees for many years, with diseased and dangerous trees but without being closed to the public. The east and west parts are connected by the volume of the former drying room, that too was recently restored. Due to both its position and its function, the extended form of its covered space, with a multiplicity of uses, is the central focal point of the area at the time of writing. It is used to host various spontaneous activities held in the area at regular intervals such as the weekly Biological Market that has products produced by local agriculture, or to celebrate a holiday, above all in the summer months. It is also irregularly used for picnics when free.

The furnace, by now reduced to a skeleton of bricks, is currently almost entirely covered by vegetation that hides its beauty. It has been fenced off for safety reasons and is inaccessible to visitors.

2. Materials and Methods

The methodological approach, to which this writing relates, refers to the issue of regeneration of the quality of space. This idea of regeneration, according to many, can trigger virtuous processes on the economic and environmental, but also social, front. As Uwe Schröder argues: "Increasingly in the field of architecture - a discipline that generally deals with the construction of spaces - it is believed that a more consistent consideration of the spatial conception of buildings and the city could make a reflection on forms and shapes necessary and could also lead to an approach capable of resolving some of today's social issues" (Camillo, 2017). This position refers to a consolidated tradition. A trend-setting thought, that of the neo-rationalist tradition, for which the type-morphological experience (Oliveira, 2018), the enhancement of space with values that are embedded within, are the premise to a society that is not only useful, but also beautiful.

The following are all consequences to the more general premise that architecture has the peculiar purpose of creating places to live: the definition of places that occurs through the arrangement of volumes, the volumes that define spaces, the quality of the space depending on relations that volumes establish between them, the single work that is always linked to the place of which it interprets the character (be it a built place, be it a natural one). In this sense, the work contributes to building the image and the identity of the landscape in which it is inserted. This perspective moves within a more general idea that considers the theme of the landscape the theoretical cornerstone for the enhancement of space. Today, the term landscape takes on such importance that, as Marco Triscioglio reminds us, we cannot ignore it when reflecting on an architectural project: "The landscape is often a background for the architect to pay attention to during the construction of the buildings. It is a living material to be treated in the design of its architecture, a concept around which to develop part of its theoretical considerations" (Triscioglio, 2018). The notion of landscape can be understood as a view or panorama, that is part of a territory that is embraced with the look from a specific point.

3. Results

Various planning experiences developed by the students on the Architectural and Urban 2 course at the Department of Civil, Environmental, and Architectural Engineering of the University of Padua are now presented. The first project, developed by the students Alessia Gabbanoto and Martino Zadra, values the partly abandoned space by using new project volumes related to the existing historic phenomena and the surrounding nature (Figure 3). The project aims to redevelop a degraded area in a place of social association (Musco, 2009). All of these are brought to fruition by creating a multifunctional centre, a meeting place for people of different ages. The solution provided for the furnace area aims to define places in which various activities take place to promote integration and social life. The project is composed of three different buildings of which two already exist. The first, the furnace, restored as a centre of association for the young, the second being the drying room equipped with facilities for an integration centre for the elderly. The playroom represents a new building on the far side of the wooded area. These places are connected by a large central space that becomes the compositional fulcrum of the project from both the spatial point of view as it is at the centre of the composition, and the functional point of view since this place is symbolic of the social relationships (Gaddoni, 2010). The green space placing the three buildings in relationship is designed to be a place for hosting social events.

The second project, by the students Anna Campagnaro and Martina Giorio, is a multicultural centre developed by starting from axes obtained from the existing historic buildings following the arrangement of the furnace and the drying room (Figure 4). The planning proposal is the result of the interaction between new and existing buildings. Access to the new complex is through an initial environment that distributes the flow of visitors towards the conference room and towards the cylindrical building that contains the services and the stairs to climb to the upper floor. The cylindrical volume is also the lynchpin between the glass construction that borders on the ruins of the furnace, used to hold temporary exhibitions on the two floors, and the prisms, whose superimposition on the conference room is staggered, and the large room on the upper floor. The latter gives rise to a large piazza underneath characterised by a series of pillars with square sections arranged along the axes of the existing structures. These are accessed through a distributive perimeter space. The upper room functions as a cinema and a theatre.



Figure 3. Alessia Gabbanoto, Martino Zadra, project proposal of the Morandi furnace park in Noventa Padovana. Planivolumetric plan, views and street façade.

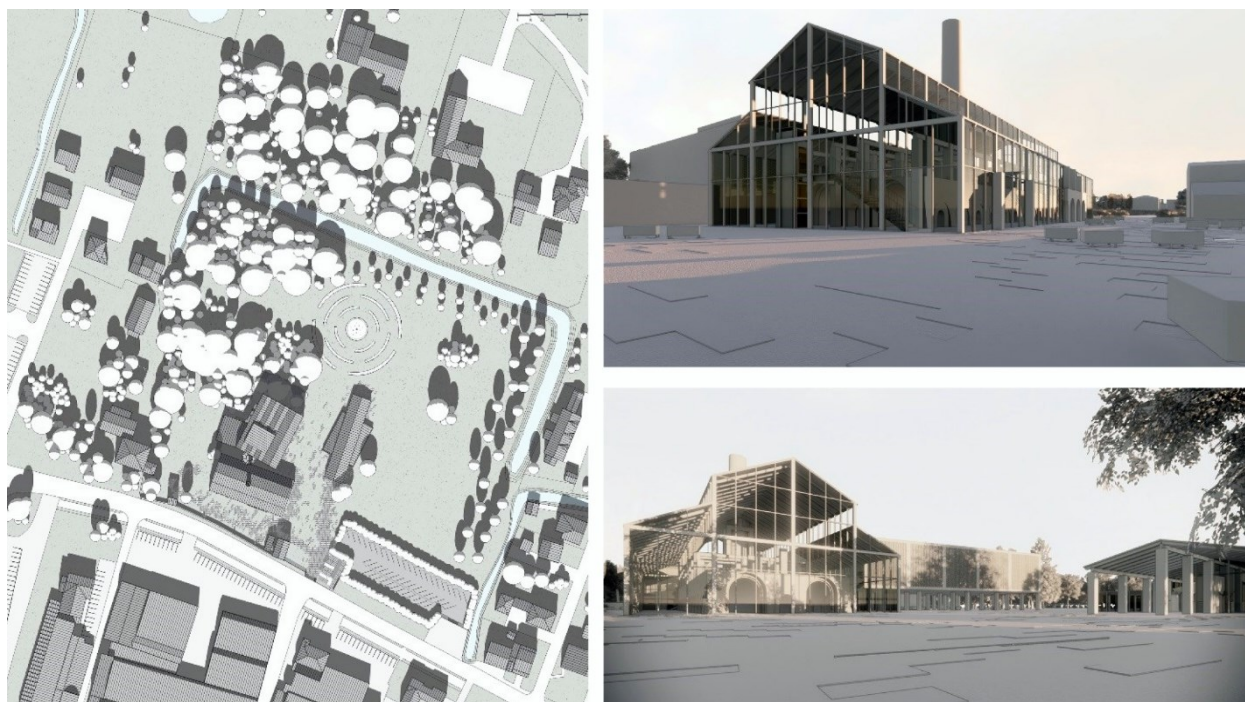


Figure 4. Anna Campagnaro, Martina Giorio, project proposal of the Morandi furnace park in Noventa Padovana. Planivolumetric plan and views.

The project proposes a disposition of volumes that respects the natural site. The new volumes evoke the architectural forms of the existing buildings in the former brickworks. In fact, the roof faithfully repropose the profile of the furnace when it was constructed. The project also preserves the old chimney and is imposed on the floor plan of the existing building. This purpose to preserve the form of the existing structure (Ferlenga, 2015) doesn't renounce to represent its own era by using different materials respect to the original ones. The theatre on the upper floor is composed of a prismatic rectangular-shaped volume. The option chosen to cover this volume is a continuous profile of several pitches only interrupted by a cubic body housing the stage of the theatre projecting upwards.

The project proposal provides for the drying room to be intersected by a new cubic volume placed at a lower height than the existing one. The insertion of the new cubic volume allows the form to be given a new environment used for a bar and restaurant. The kitchen is positioned in the internal part so as to leave the perimeter free to dialogue with the architecture of the furnace and generally the area. The parts outside the surfaces of the old drying room are at the height of the lowered floor consequently favouring the staggering of the roofs and the view of the green surroundings.

The third project enhancing the Morandi furnace site, proposed by the students Arianna Mazzochin and Luca Menin, aims to create a biological orchard characterised by three buildings which are set in relationship (Figure 5) so that they define a courtyard facing which are a covered market, a conference room, and a study room. The biological vegetable garden is formed of cultivatable plots, that is, allotments. The small volumes in rows accommodate a greenhouse for the plants, a storage room equipped for the allotment tenants, and accommodation for the employee of the Commune who supervises the allotments. The drying room is used during the weekend as a covered market where the vegetables grown in the vegetable gardens can be sold. The volume of the conference room is arranged in line with that of the drying room and accommodates both the entrance hall with services and the conference room itself. Lastly, the study room with axes orthogonal to that of the drying room is articulated in an entrance hall, a study room, a space for a small specialised library, and a hall for exhibitions. Only normal maintenance, cleaning, and safety measures are provided for the brick furnace, the drying room, and the wooded area lying behind them.

The project is based on the theme of the urban vegetable garden. Proposing the idea of agricultural management by cultivation, it transforms and distributes quality products in urbanised contexts (Mastropiero, 2013). Furthermore, it offers a recreational pastime and learning opportunity for anyone of any age, facilitating the development of interpersonal relationships. It is a means of defining a community. An urban vegetable garden is a green space owned by the Commune and of varying sizes whose management is entrusted to an individual citizen for a defined period of time, usually brought together in specific associations.



Figure 5. Arianna Mazzochin, Luca Menin, project proposal of the Morandi furnace park in Noventa Padovana. Planivolumetric plan, views and street façade.

The beneficiaries - typically not professional farmers – receive these spaces as a franchise for one or more predetermined purposes, first and foremost the production of flowers, fruit, and vegetables serving to meet the needs of the allottees.

Although an urban vegetable garden can be located anywhere in land owned by the local public authority, they are usually found in suburban areas, that is, where the Commune can award the management of small plots of land through a public announcement and at little more than symbolic rent (Di Sivio, 2004). Therefore, the action plan gives new life to the existing site and new vitality to the area in which it is situated (Settis, 2013). This intention is realised by converting and restoring the furnace as much as possible and the construction of four new buildings that together with the furnace will complete the central system of the urban vegetable garden.

The existing furnace and drying room define two orthogonal axes with the new buildings being developed along these axes, physically divided but with dialogue between them through the central piazza and the paved circular footpath. This path is not only an architectural element but also represents the change in designation of the use of the buildings according to a logic relating to the propagation, growth, and consumption of agricultural produce. The knowledge learning path completely immerses the visitor in a place where he or she can become sensitive to agricultural processes and understand the origin and quality of the food they consume.

Various buildings are arranged around the central piazza, which follow anticlockwise starting from the Museum of Biodiversity connected on the south-eastern edge of the area in a position symmetrical to the furnace building. The Museum of Biodiversity is an interactive place: the visitors enter the pavilion and by following some simple instructions, they can plant a seed in a tub. Once the visitors inside the Museum of Biodiversity have gained the initial ideas about the world of plants, they can test themselves in practical activities both inside the building that accommodates the two teaching laboratories and outside in the vegetable gardens.

Each teaching laboratory covers an area of 75 square metres. When the plant has grown and borne fruit, the agricultural products are distributed by selling them in the covered market. The profits are used to pay off the cost of constructing the new buildings and will provide a financial return in the future.

A unique environment defines the covered market: two rows of fruit and vegetable stalls are aligned along the sides of the glass enclosure they are accommodated in and end where the checkout is located.



Figure 6. Chiara Cesarini, Filippo Da Ru, project proposal of the Morandi furnace park in Noventa Padovana. Planivolumetric plan, views and street façade.

The drying room can accommodate those who want to spend a day in the park consuming the produce cooked on the barbeques on the north side of the covered market. Having bought agricultural products, the visitor can choose to take them home or consume them in the building designated the “Refreshment area”. Refreshments can also be enjoyed by visitors in the park independently from the urban vegetable garden system. The building has an eating area of approximately 150 square metres subdivided into space for tables for people to eat and a space for consumption of produce from the stalls. A small kitchen can be used to prepare hot food with the bar service. The knowledge learning path about the traditional agricultural process concludes in the last volume. Once inside the greenhouse placed in a building that envelops the Morandi Furnace, the visitor can learn about an agricultural innovation developed in recent decades, that is, hydroponics, sustainable cultivation which uses an inert substrate such as clay instead of soil and optimises the consumption of water.

The hydroponics greenhouse is placed above what was once the chambers that received heat from the furnace oven. It is reached by going up a ramp of steps positioned inside an annex to the west of the remains of the furnace, a new building open to the park but roofed by the same glass roof covering the greenhouse. Besides the greenhouse, the complex houses a permanent exhibition in the tunnels of the furnace about the history of the Morandi Furnace in Noventa Padovana. Furthermore, having seen the hydroponics greenhouse, the visitor can go out onto the terrace of the greenhouse and admire nature or go to any conference being held in the Museum of Biodiversity. Cycle and pedestrian paths are provided inside the park. From the moment of going into the wooded area, the path divides into two, one at ground level and the other elevated at about 2.5 metres, reached by walking up a 6% slope.

The soul of the fourth project, developed by the students Chiara Cesarini, Filippo Da Ru, is the covered market that enhances and improves the activities of the already present Biological Market currently held once a week under the roof of the former drying room (Figure 6). A semi-open architectural organism has been designed for this building whose roof is divided into three portions with the central one being partially glazed to allow sufficient light to enter. Many products are sold in this market including fruit, vegetables, fish, meat, and various types of bread with each module being equipped with the services needed, for example, refrigeration, work benches, and storage. There are several support buildings arranged around this building to create a small biological pole. There is a tasting room where small exhibitions of the produce of local farmers can be organised.

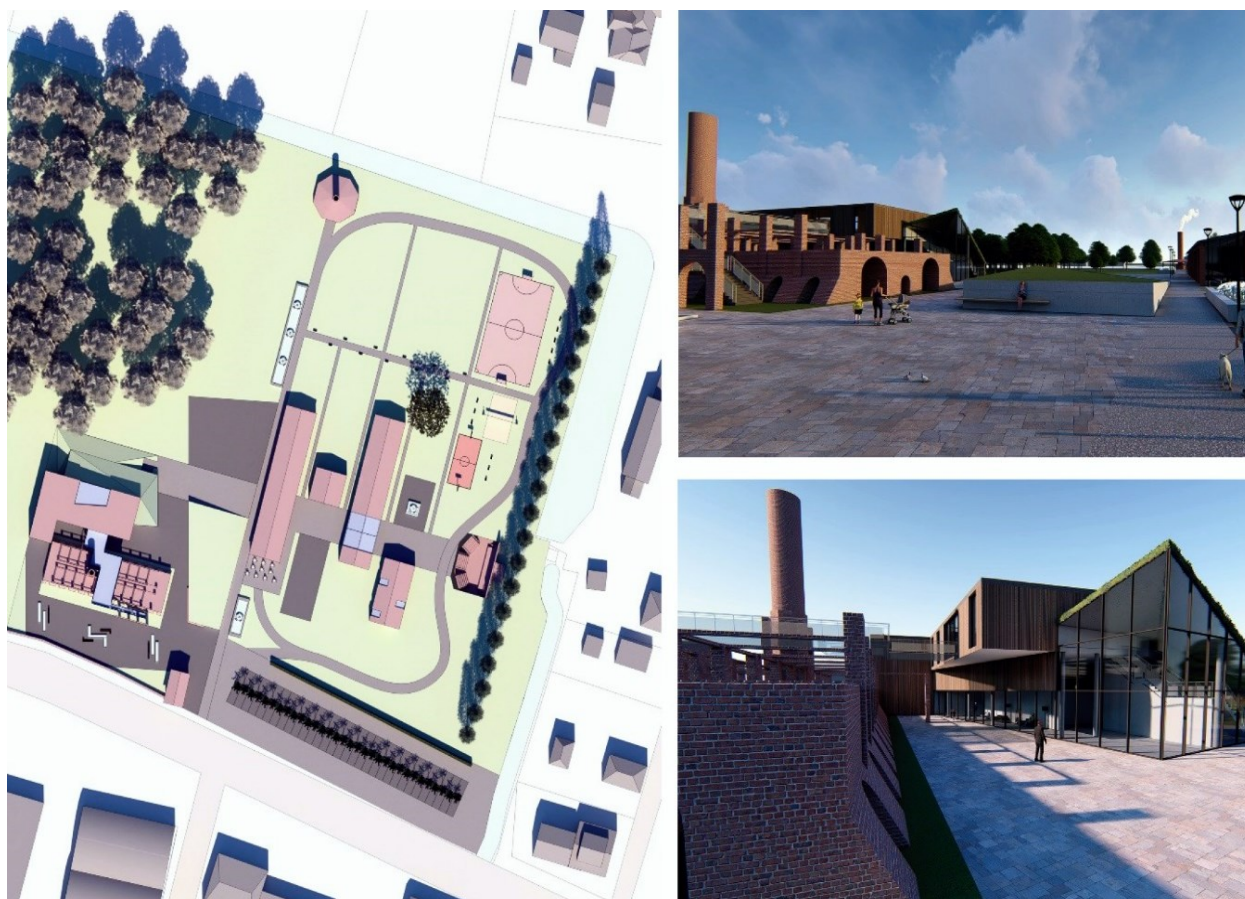


Figure 7. Kelly Pagan, Edoardo Panizzolo, project proposal of the Morandi furnace park in Noventa Padovana. Planivolumetric plan and views.

This is the body of the building with a pointed, gabled roof transversal to the market with a façade entirely made of glass looking onto the piazza and two openings on the side where people exit the building under a portico. Besides the tasting room, there is a learning vegetable garden for schools and education centres to explain the importance of cultivation and consumption of local food. Being enclosed between two buildings, it is autonomous thanks to the entrance being placed near the pedestrian paths.

Lastly, a third building is directly connected to the teaching vegetable garden and is used as an auditorium for seminars on the health benefits of nutrition, which can be organised together with the small exhibitions, and can also be used as a laboratory for teaching children. The role of the portico that connects the auditorium and the tasting room is both as a covered passage between the spaces and to bring the façade into line with the former drying room. There is a bar restaurant in the main piazza of the park and a covered picnic area, important meeting-places for people and essential for breathing life into the whole area. The building of the furnace is rethought as a pub and restaurant so that the area can also enjoy some night life.

The latter planning proposal, presented by the students Kelly Pagan, Edoardo Panizzolo, particularly affects the green area and the remaining part of the area beyond the market. In general, attempts have been made to protect nature in the park (Figure 7). The trees present have been respected in terms of their positions. Following on from the historical analysis and the study of the current situation in the area where the remains of the Furnace are found, the project aims to enhance the function of the area, a purpose that the Commune of Noventa Padovana credits to the lottery, identifying added value as a meeting-place as a result of this. Maintenance work for the furnace is provided, without restoration or additions: the life of the park is articulated around what remains a strong symbol of the history of the place.

The drying room will be used as a refreshment area. Furthermore, the wooded area is enhanced by designating additional areas for planting. New spaces, both open and closed, are hypothesised as services for the park and the city: a museum area, an area with multifunctional buildings, and an area purposed for sports facilities for the young (Russo, 2005). The museum is dedicated to the Morandi furnace, the history of furnaces found around Padua, and the history of Noventa Padovana and its cultural heritage. The museum is envisaged in relation to the furnace. It is an autonomous building related to the furnace through large areas of glass and through a panoramic terrace that

passes above the remains of the furnace itself. Additional environments are provided such as a multipurpose room for parties and meetings, a play area for children, a study room, and an open-air theatre for shows.

4. Discussions and Conclusions

The project experiences presented here propose solutions that consider space as a motor for regeneration of place. Redevelopment is realised by arranging the volumes in the space and in the relationships that these establish with the pre-existing historic environments and the surrounding rural countryside.

Empty containers, abandoned parts of the city require new uses in order to adapt to the changes that society requires. Functions that enhance sociality, the exchange of relationships, a possible way of revitalising a degraded area with domino effects on the rest of the city is shown in the projects presented. Paths that pass through, hark back to, and reproduce the archeological past, places forgotten by the collective memory, becoming moments that stitch together non-dialoguing environments, separated by the transformations through time.

The impact of each individual project must always be evaluated in terms of achieving complex purposes composed of preserving and taking care of the quality of the economic, cultural, and natural heritage. The widening of specific laws immanent to all construction and building work and free aesthetic research should go in hand in hand with taking care of tackling the relational aspects of the work and in resolving them socially in an ecologically sustainable way. The discipline active in the field of construction must always consider that the organisation of space has long-term consequences on the health and behaviour of those who live in it, and moreover the aims must include promoting the well-being of future generations as much as possible (Emery, 2007).

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