Forms of the Void: Gorizia and the Border that No Longer Exist

The city of Gorizia, for almost 60 years, has been divided by the border separating Italy and Slovenia, where on the other side, the twin city of Nova Gorica has developed. Today, these two urban realities that for many years have not been confronting on the urban and architectonic levels, negating each other’s existence, are now a continuous entity and have to find new ways to grow and develop together, even if they belong to two different nations. The University of Trieste, along with the Comune di Gorizia (Gorizia municipality) has developed a laboratory called RRR lab, with the objective to redevelop and regenerate those urban spaces and buildings that have been put back in play after the fall of the border and the new urban geography that it has created. It is a landscape made up of residues, areas and structures without use or significance, generated by the Dadaist collage of the two cities, that were, at the time of the laboratory, together, candidates for the 2025 European Capital of Culture. Starting from this specific case, a more general theme of the research deals with the void. This aspect is easily recognizable in the architectonic dimension, where for the purpose of the quality of the work, the single parts that make up a building are not as important as the spaces that are indirectly determined by them. The void then, can assume an architectonic quality and become the element on which to base the opening principle “where there is nothing, everything is possible”.

Keywords: void, borders, architecture, city, European capital of culture

Introduction

For almost forty years the Iron Curtain has divided the European continent. From 1947 the Muro di Gorizia (Gorizia’s wall) has been part of this system. It separated the city, situated on the edge between Italy and what at that time was Yugoslavia, divided into two, with the city center of around 35.000 people on one side, and outskirts and Transalpina Station on the other.

With the laying of the first stone, on June 13th1948, the city of Nova Gorica is born and its objective was to give an administrative center to the territory annexed to Yugoslavia. It is a new town, of almost 13.000 inhabitants and drawn up from a modernist design elaborated by the Slovenian architect Edo Ravnikar.

With the Slovenian entrance into the European Union in 2004, the state line that divided the two cities has disappeared and a new urban condition worth studying was born.

It is not an isolated case, the Iron Curtain had developed over 12.500 km, from the Baltic sea to the north, all the way to the Black sea on the south.
Starting from 1990 this border area, that was actually just an empty strip, has
gone from impassable to a permeable edge that instead of dividing has begun to
connect different realities.

What are the theoretic and disciplinary bases needed in order to study this
special condition?

The Iron Curtain, today, draws a new system, the European Green Belt, a
green infrastructure of continental scale where nature has taken over and has re-
appropriated these areas neglected by men.

A first research made for the environmental and landscape sciences can
lead to interesting ideas before concentrating on the specific aspects linked to
the architectonic spaces and the urban dimension.

Edges interpreted as limitations along the Iron Curtain don’t exist anymore
or are progressively disappearing, these spaces are being replaced by other
forms of spaces, more ambiguous.

The biologist Stephen Jay Gould has based his research on the
indeterminism as a premise to the majority of innovative biologic processes.
Gould distinguishes in the natural ecologies between two types of edges: limits
and borders. The limit is where things end; the border is where different groups
interact. (Gould 1980).

On the borders, the organisms become more interactive because of the
meeting with different species and physic conditions.

It is a concept also expressed by Gilles Clément in the Third Landscape
(Clément 2014) where he recognizes the margins abandoned by men as
residues that group forms of richness and biologic diversity.

Typical examples are all the resulting spaces as directly linked to the
organization of the territory and so also, but not exclusively, the edges, portions
of territory, in some cases undetermined, on the limit of national states.

These marginal spaces correspond also to edges of infrastructure or rivers,
on the border of fields, on the residues of planned areas. They are not only
natural places to protect or built environment to guard. These are places marked
by imperfections, where evolution and development, not only biological, can be
accelerated, where the mixture between heterogeneous elements can be more
frequent, where the imbalances can be emphasized, where at the beginning
indecision rules. They are sites that don’t completely belong to the city nor to
the natural environment.

These analogies of biologic and environmental nature tell us that the areas
on the edge, of any kind, can be the most stimulating from the design point of
view and for this reason must be investigated in order to understand its
potentials and developments.

In these places the use of design architectural artifice can slow or
accelerate the evolution processes of the city, knowingly orienting the
transformation.

The following study wishes to, in the first part, starting from the study of
the relationship between built object and surrounding emptiness, reconstruct a
disciplinary and theoric image in order to individuate some architectonic
strategies, functional to the operative interventions on these edge urban areas, empty, abandoned and marginal, not only geographically.

Starting from this image, in the scope of the didactic laboratory RRR lab, seven projects have been developed, the results, commented and then organized in two categories, have allowed the development of some final considerations on possible intervention strategies in these particular disused urban areas.

**Literature Review**

There are two main types of spatial structures, the constructed space from the contraposition of architectonic objects that look to one another but are separated by vast voids, and of the space generated from the opposite condition, where the shape of the established volumes is not autonomous but is determined by the empty space that is subtracted or dug from a built fabric, understood as homogeneous.

It is the classic contraposition between fullness and void traceable to the models of the Greek Agora (Doxiadis 1972) and of the Roman Forum (Corbellini 2000).

Starting from these two extremes it is possible to develop an infinite series of possibilities.

In 1748, Giovanni Battista Nolli designs the *Nuova pianta di Roma* (the new Plan of Rome), where the void is not only represented, for the first time, as a structural element of urban space, but the logic of the two spatial structures starts to become a hybrid. The reading of the city through a sequence of “empty” spaces brings Nolli to represent the streets and squares in continuity with the large internal spaces of the churches and major Roman palaces, while the rest of the built fabric becomes an indistinctive mass of edifices. The derivate is a fabric with porous margins, where the difference between the void of the outdoors and the indoor space of some buildings is continuous.

A few years later, the *Campo Marzio* by Giovanni Battista Piranesi instead, is understood as an assembly of fragments extracted from the typological repertoires of the antiquity, creating a short circuit between these two originating spatial structures, as demonstration of the possibilities of evolution of these two concepts.

In the iconography of *Campii Martii* (1762), in fact, the ancient models, taken singularly as recognizable and identifiable objects, through their specific geometries and the internal compositive logics, also determine the rules of their over-all assembly to the point of constituting a continuous and homogeneous fabric that contradicts the originating identity and uniqueness of every single manufact.

In the ‘900 the modernist movement, in its dogmatic and ideologic declinations, will recognize both models. The first will birth the concept for which buildings generate, in analogy with the principle of the relationship between figure/background of the artistic compositions, the empty spaces
around them; for example, in the case of the project for the competition of the Soviet building by Le Corbusier (Corbellini 2000).

The second model will find application in the isotropic and homogenous grids that regulate and dimension the space within which the architectonic objects are systematically repeated or are adequate formally, for example Ville Radieuse also by Le Corbusier (Gandelsonas 1999).

In 1960, Kevin Lynch publishes *The Image of the City* (Lynch 1960), a different approach, of perceptive character, to the question of the spatial models that puts the observer and the mental image of the urban space at the center of reasoning, with a particular attention to the architecture of movement, a new parameter that characterizes the modern space.

Lynch recognizes five elements that concur to define the mental image of the cities. The landmarks and the districts refer to the two originating spatial structures. To these, new elements are added, edges, paths and nodes. They are all elements of linear characteristics, in some cases closer to the world of infrastructure than that of architecture, with which our cities were being developed in those years.

In particular, the edges are elements that the observer perceives as linear interruptions of continuity, elements of separation between areas, zones, contexts, like riverbeds, railway paths, urban walls, rows of trees, limits of districts.

The paths are the “passageways”, the different “fluxes” along which the observer moves (habitually or occasionally). For many individuals, the paths are the prominent elements of the personal urban image (structural elements), streets, pedestrian ways, water ways, lines of public transportation. People observe cities moving along them, relating its image to the routes utilized through sequences and narrations. The ends of the paths are the nodes, punctual places from which and toward which the observer moves.

On the architectonic value of linear infrastructure, new or ancient, Costantino Dardi (Dardi 1987) also goes back to the same aspects, when he talks about the roman aqueduct, the great wall of china, the Maginot line or Le Corbusier’s Plan Obus for Algiers and how they assume, on the landscape, a specific role as distinguishing elements, division thresholds, rupture lines and so, based on the paradoxical ambiguity between background/figure, even as in meeting places, relation spaces and suture lines.

In *Die Stadt in der Stadt. Berlin: ein grünen Archipel* (Ungers 1977) Oswald Mathias Unger and Rem Koolhaas propose an urban and special structure formed of large parts, a city archipelago of coherent and recognizable architectonic units, isolated in a large green connective. The question of dimension comes to play, the architectonic objects are being substituted by larger and more complex elements, entire parts of urban fabric disconnected and isolated.

At the same time, in *Collage City* (Rowe 1978), Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, develop a new and creative vision of city, linked to the poetic of the fragment.
The book cover, from this point of view is significative, it shows the panorama of Wiesbaden in Germany, where the two special models are contraposed: the compact historic city and the modern one, made up of groups of isolated buildings.

Through reading the urban form as a collage or as a collection of fragments, Rowe overcomes both, the logic of the classic models, and the modernist inventions, allowing access to a vast repertoire of architectonic figures as base materials for design, regardless of their historic or ideologic collocation.

At the same time as Colin Rowe’s studies, in 1978 twelve internationally acclaimed architects including Rowe itself and Dardi, are invited to participate to the project Roma Interrotta (Interrupted Roma).

Two-thousand-fifty years after Nolli’s Nuova Pianta di Roma (New Plan of Rome), considered the last coherent urban plan of the city, it is taken as base for twelve design interventions, juxtaposed like a collage, through the manipulation of its urban fabric from the inside. The result is the image of an unreal city but also fantastic and suggestive (Sartogo 2014).

Ren Koolhaas with Urbanisme: Imaginer le Néant (Imagine the Nothingness) (Koolhaas 1985) starts to describe a new approach to the structuring of space. The starting concept is the unequivocal: where there is the void, every design option is possible. This vision is very closely related to the oriental one (Pasqualotto 1992) that frees large quantities of creative energy and invites experimentation.

Starting from a disappointing misjudgment on the quality of the contemporary built fabric and the incapacity to be incisive with architectonic projects, Koolhaas in 1987 develops a plan for La Ville Nouvelle Melun Sénart, formally defining only a system of great linear voids, the only elements worth preserving and on which to invest design resources. Abandoning the surrounding built fabric to its doom.

According to Ludovico Romagni (Romagni 2016) instead, mankind has always used existing parts in order to recompose them in new forms. The artistic technique of the collage, but also the music one of the remixes, is based on this principle. These techniques, like assembly, montage, juxtaposition, require a possibly painful concept: the selection of the necessary parts to the new composition requires a sacrifice, the destruction of the original.

These recovered parts, usually a leftover, hold, in any case, their own origin, a past that makes them recognizable. In any case, this past cannot be completely recovered, the attempt to preserve memory always results into a selection, fragmentation and modification.

In architecture, the presence of unaccomplished, interrupted or abandoned areas push us to rethink the manipulation devices of the existing, besides the typical categories of restoration and renovation.

In Remix Theory (Navas 2012), Eduardo Navas individuates four categories, four actions to manipulate the existing.
The first category is the extension of the original manufact, by punctual manipulations in its growing areas. The second, to subtract or to add elements with the objective to adequate the originative element, integrating new functions or removing crisis elements, without losing overall recognizability of the base object. Deconstruction is the third, disassembly of the significative parts and re-composition of the same in a new organism, giving up on the maintenance of all the other parts. Lastly, regeneration, selection of the existing elements, based on their functionality, and re-composition with the loss of any link to the origin.

This logic acquires value if applied circularly, a dynamic form in continuous evolution.

These disciplinary references have been the theoretical basis for the development of the design experimentation established as a didactic laboratory according to the methodology described in the next section.

Methodology

The objective of the architectural design laboratory is to individuate and re-design strategic spaces of the city by intervening on the areas that need requalification or regeneration in order to re-activate life cycles through the re-distribution of functions, resources and architectural fabrics not yet efficient, that is, individuating new solutions for deconstructed places, left without residual values.

As it is an architectural design integrated laboratory of architecture and of the built environment, other disciplinary modules are part of the curricula. Some include: Architectonic Composition, Advanced Survey Techniques and Plastic Modeling, Requalification of the Built Environment, Architecture of Big Infrastructures and Infrastructural Complexes along with numerous seminars and workshops, all taught by different professors.

The didactic activities have been divided into two semesters, the first is more lecture based where the students experience a combination of multidisciplinary lessons and the focus is to provide a theoretical basis for the more hands-on approach of the second semester, the students are divided into small groups and are asked to propose a design solution to an area of their choosing.

The two semesters have been further broken down into lectures, seminars and workshops.

The first exercise has been titled “Atlante”. The titan Atlante, after the defeat of Cronus in the Theomachy has been obligated by Zeus to withstand the weight of the globe.

Because every project begins with the elaboration of information, it is at this stage that the students have been asked to begin to recognize the possible themes of the project they will be developing, through the collection of useful examples and theoretical references of which they were instructed to create and
organize a collection of materials. The assembly of this Atlas is the first act on
which they will be sustaining their project. The Atlas will be constructed by the
thematic collections of significative projects selected by the groups of students
and the editorial and graphics aspects will be determined by a coordination
group.

On the final day of the first seminary, a presentation will be organized,
defined and directed by the coordination group, where each group of students
will present their collection of projects.

The second exercise, “Filling Voids” sees the void as content, objective
and design instrument. The students are asked to design the void between
abstraction and figuration. The outcome will be a first theoretical-design
“synthesis”, an urban-architectonic morpheme, a pre-dimensioning and a first
review of the functional program. Practically the students are expected to
produce a model of the voids for each study area of Gorizia, highlighting the
existing and design condition along with a general planimetry of the seven
study areas of Gorizia/Nova Gorica showing where every project is located.

To mark the end of the first semester, the summary workshop “Laboratorio
Gorizia: Masterplan” will be organized by the students. There is only one
defined assignment: to elaborate, a synthesis masterplan that foresees the
overlap of Antonio Lasciac’s 1913 plan for Gorizia and the seven new study
areas developed, along with a critical selection of parts of the city added or
removed after the First World War.

This way a new map will be developed, able to highlight the contact
points, able to resolve interferences, able to recognize and make most of the
shared elements, constructing a unified and coherent design, starting from the
way each project area relates to its context. The students have set up one of the
classrooms as an interactive “museum” where the materials form the previous
seminars will also be shown, creating a coherent narration for the birth of each
individual project while still maintaining a united image. The Comune di
Gorizia (Municipality of Gorizia) was also invited to participate.

The second semester was highly characterized by the beginning of the
pandemic and Italian lockdown from march 2020. As a consequence, all the
activities planned underwent some changes in order to adapt the curricula to the
impossibility of classroom work. Each group of students was asked to keep
developing their project and each week an online group revision would be held
with all the students and all the teachers in order to guide each project in a good
direction. At the end of the semester an online workshop was organized
alternating lectures open to the public via streaming, working hours and
revisions. On the final day, the students organized an online presentation of all
seven projects. Sometime later the students have been asked to re-present their
projects, after some minor adjustments, in view of “Outcomes” a one-day
seminary that would be evaluated as the final exam where the Comune di
Gorizia was also invited.
Findings

Here are the seven projects developed during the course of the laboratory:

Group 1, Transport Interchange

The project is located where once was Gorizia’s tram depot, it is an infrastructure-based and connects the modern-day Italian railway station, the public transport system and the hospital. A pedestrian passageway directly connects the station with the building of the hospital along with a series of new constructions. These include car parking, bicycle parking and a hybrid building that hosts a series of services and facilities in support of travelers along with study and reading area dedicated to student commuters. The bicycle parking is designed as a ribbon with two levels and covered by a large canopy.

Figure 1. Group 1, Transport Interchange, General Plan

Source: Elaboration by Collenz M., Di Ferro S., Lauricella L.

Group 2, Casa Rossa

The Casa Rossa project fills the large void of the forecourt of the old checkpoint, born as service to the Slovenian border crossing of Casa Rossa. The new park is made of many open spaces and elements.

On one side a large terracing along the hill of the university overlooking the state line, as a sort of land art piece that takes direct inspiration form the Cretto di Gibellina by Burri.

At the center, it is possible to see a large covered area dedicated to open air markets or other events.
The abandoned building of the Casa Rossa border breach is being monumentalized by a large slit that connects the two sides of the state line and it is transformed into a museum of itself.

The project is designed by slots and phases, adding a layer of feasibility where the construction stages have also been developed.

**Figure 2. Group 2, Asa Rossa, General Plan**

Source: Elaboration by Barbiani P., Ladrero M., Morgera I.

**Group 3, Points, Lines and Volumes**

Points, lines and volumes is the title of this project and is located on the Piazzale della Transalpina.

It takes into consideration the scenario of Gorizia/Nova Gorica as European Culture Capital for 2025 and so the infrastructure along the border line is constructed by functional elements used as support for the events.

Useful connections are added, able take the user from the two cities all the way to Piazzale Transalpina.

These passageways are particularly symbolic as the Transalpina station is a place of great symbolism as it physically connects the two cities.

It was a station of the trainway that connected Vienna to Trieste.

After the new border definition for both Slovenia and Italy, the Transalpina station remained on the Slovenian side while the Piazzale right in front of it is in Italy.
This project revolves around traces, it deals with a primary connection axis between the city of Gorizia and the access to the highway, that passes through the state line and reaches the capital of Slovenia, Ljubljana.

Beside its relationship with the highway, the area is intersected by the sediment of the railway and individualizes a series of areas, in-between these two traces that are underdeveloped. In particular, a large ex-military area that is now in the process of disposal.

The project foresees a series of new architectonic interventions and, at the same time, a series of new open-air spaces and parks of different nature. Its objective is to overcome the limit of the railway tracks with pedestrian walkways and to redevelop these bands of unqualified terrain with the insertion of new buildings, characterized by a variety of uses, residential, commercial, and all the necessary facilities to serve both.

These spaces, bands, stripes, are in some cases very narrow and the project develops them as an opportunity to modulate their transversal section and create spaces of different qualities dedicated to traffic fluxes and pedestrians and slow mobility, that become linear parks.
**Figure 4.** Group 4, A New Boulevard, General Plan

Source: Elaboration by D’Onofrio L., Ridolfi P., Zei G.

**Group 5, via Terza Armata**

In correspondence of an empty area also next to the state line, along with via Terza Armata, axis of commercial and industrial development in Gorizia, the project presents the hypothesis of the realization of a new commercial center integrated in the landscape.

A large commercial building that in a way reinterprets and respects the void characteristic of the area. The building is mainly developed underground, under an artificial hill that is at some point dug up by the central distribution devices of the building. It is almost invisible from the outside and it is only possible to see it once inside. It is possible to access the building through a system of overhead pedestrian walkways that pass over the main roadways that service the commercial center.

**Figure 5.** Group 5, via Terza Armata, General Plan

Source: Elaboration by Brun L., Tomasin G., Zotti F.
Group 6, Vision of Equilibrium

Vision of equilibrium, developed over Gorizia’s ex Fiera and next to one of the main traces of the territory, the Isonzo river.

This location is particularly symbolic because the river crosses the border, and joins the territories of Slovenia and Italy. In this case the hypothesis is to rethink and redesign this area by creating a connection between an existing sports center and the Isonzo, interpreted as a privileged area for free time and sports.

Figure 6. Group 6, Vision of Equilibrium, General Plan

Source: Elaboration by Buccino D., Requena L., Romanzin A.

The project foresees the development of a park that, through a system of passageways physically connects the existing sports facilities with the river along with a series of buildings in order to enhance the sportive vocation of the area. The buildings host different uses, a sports hall for volleyball, a sports medic center, a rock-climbing gym, and a series of commercial activities as support. The project is read as a large park with a series of emerging architectonic objects with a strong sculptural connotation. Also in this case, part of the project has been developed as a schedule in order to answer to the demands of the city administration, along with a program for the management and maintenance of the park.

Group 7, Archipelago Park

Archipelago park is the title of the project placed in the area of the former civil hospital, situated close to the border and is completely abandoned and its characterized by a series of buildings, distributed over a large green area as if they were islands that make an archipelago. The project foresees the substantial
demolition of these buildings with the exception of the sanatory, the building with the most history and architectonic value and prestige. The area’s scope is completely dedicated to mental and physical wellness.

The park is requalified, and a series of new buildings are added in order to repurpose the area. The sanatory becomes a hotel, replacing the ex-hospital, a wellness and spa center is designed, and the area closest to the state line becomes an exposition center. The project deals with three different interventions, all alternative to one another. On one side a scientific restoration of the existing building and on the other the insertion of new architectures with a contemporary aesthetic. The spa and wellness center are based on a system of aggregating buildings guided by a growth matrix that can be modulated based on the functional program and realization phases. In the area, the element of water gets re-introduced as historically the area had humid characteristics, documented by the dried fluvial traces and this distinguishing feature gets re-interpreted to connote the entire area, starting from the creation of an artificial lake in the center of the park.

**Figure 7.** Group 7, Archipelago Park, General plan

![Figure 7](source: Elaboration by Bearzotti G, Cepach D., Ferletti A.)

**Conclusions**

There are more than seventy state line walls in the world, from the Hungarian barrier against migrants, to the barbed wire line between India and Bangladesh, to the boarder line between North and South Korea, to the separation between the United States and Mexico, or between Israel and West Bank. In the last thirty years their number has quadrupled.

Similarly, the boarder that divided Gorizia, that was believed to be definitively removed, has been quickly re-established during the pandemic. A
new fence, made from metallic grids and cement prefabricated elements, has 
onece again divided for many months the two cities for sanitary reasons.

The results of this laboratory have been appreciated by the Municipality of 
Gorizia, that has decided to finance a new laboratory in order to enlarge the 
acquired outcomes.

The final presentation of the projects underwent an evaluation by an 
enlarged group composed of the laboratory teachers, guest teachers form the 
University of Ljubjana, councilors, executive and civil servants from the 
Municipality of Gorizia.

The aesthetic of the void and residue as a design material to be used in 
projects, its way of reading the study areas, and its declination through the 
technique of compositive collage, of the remix, mash-up and the found footage, 
have been stimulus that have allowed the groups of students to release their 
creativity, obtaining projects different from one another, with great biodiversity 
of forms and content.

The discussion has allowed, on the basis of the themes and principles 
illustrated in the literature review, of categorizing the seven projects in two 
great families: Fragments and Traces.

The fragments are those projects that are developed over a clearly marked 
area, that have internal constructive rules, like a sort of DNA, allowing possible 
expansions and growth. The projects of groups 1,2,5,6 and 7 are part of this 
category.

The traces on the other side, are linearly developed projects, they are born 
in correspondence to physical limits of the city, made up of the state line, but 
also of the limits of the existing infrastructure. The projects of groups 3 and 4 
are part of this family.

Fragments and traces that have been individuated, have then been re- 
composed into a unitary drawing, that has allowed to re-construct the identity 
of a complex urban system.

On the basis of these first encouraging results, the University of Ljubjana 
has also decided to embark on a twin study, on the other side of the state line, 
in order to share and compare the obtained results with a cross-border 
collaboration.
Gorizia and Nova Gorica, even if they belong to two different states, continue to imagine themselves as a single city. The scenario speculated by group 5 is an example, since in December 2020 the allocation of the title of European Capital of Culture 2025 has been shared by the two cities.

References