

# La política en la interpretación del Diseño Urbano:

LA PROFANACIÓN DE AGAMBEN COMO ENFOQUE PARA RECALIBRAR LA INVESTIGACIÓN DEL DISEÑO URBANO

THE POLITICS OF PLAY IN URBAN DESIGN:

Agamben's profanation as a recalibrating approach to urban design research

POLITICAS SOBRE A REPRODUÇÃO NO DESENHO URBANO:

A profanação de Agamben como um enfoque para re calibrar a pesquisa do desenho urbano

**Camillo Boano**

Architect, urbanist and educator. Senior Lecturer at The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, UCL, Director of MSc in Building and Urban Design in Development.  
[c.boano@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:c.boano@ucl.ac.uk)

**Giorgio Talocci**

Teaching Fellow and PhD candidate at The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, UCL, Urban Design for Development and Critical Urbanism Studio.  
[giorgio.talocci.11@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:giorgio.talocci.11@ucl.ac.uk)

**Recibido:** 10 de Noviembre de 2013

**Aprobado:** 07 de Marzo de 2014

## Resumen

El trabajo tiene como objetivo buscar una narrativa alternativa para el diseño urbano dentro de las complejidades y las contradicciones de la producción actual en los espacios urbanos. Al hacerlo, se adopta una concepción más amplia del diseño y se posiciona la reflexión sobre el marco temático de las realidades urbanas frente a la ocupación informal. El texto presenta una elaboración conceptual en torno a la ontología de Giorgio Agamben y la política estética como un valor agregado hacia una posible (re) calibración del enfoque investigativo en la práctica del diseño urbano. Jugando con los topos y el gesto del urbanismo neoliberal, y enmarcándolo en el contexto más amplio de las tendencias actuales de proyectos urbanos cerrados y la regeneración urbana hiper simbólica, el artículo explora la noción de profanación como un acto capaz de desbloquear y mejorar los nuevos modos de política.

**Palabras clave:** Agamben, Diseño Urbano, profanación de Roma, ocupación informal, investigación del diseño

## Abstract

The paper aims to search for an alternate narrative of urban design within the complexities and the contradictions of the current production of urban spaces. In doing so it adopts a broader conception of design and position the reflection along the thematic context of the informal squat-occupation urban realities. It presents a conceptual elaboration around Giorgio Agamben's ontology and political aesthetics as an aggregate source toward a possible (re) calibration of the approach to urban design research and practice. Playing with the topos and the gesture of neoliberal urban design, and framing it into the wider background of the current trends of gated urbanisms and hyper symbolic urban regeneration, the paper explores the notion of profanation as act capable to unlock and enhance new modes of politics. Keywords: Agamben, Urban Design, Profanation, Rome, squat-occupation, design research

**Keywords:** Agamben, Urban Design, Profanation, Rome, squat-occupation, design research

## Resumo

O trabalho tem como objetivo procurar uma narrativa alternativa para o desenho urbano dentro das complexidades e as contradições da produção atual nos espaços urbanos. Ao fazê-lo, adotam-se uma concepção mais ampla do desenho e se posiciona a reflexão sobre o marco temático das realidades urbanas frente à ocupação informal. O texto apresenta uma elaboração conceptual em torno à ontologia de Giorgio Agamben e a política estética como um valor agregado em direção de uma possível (re) calibração do enfoque investigativo na prática do desenho urbano. Jogando com os topos e o gesto do urbanismo neoliberal, e enquadrando-o num contexto mais amplo das transcendências atuais de projetos urbanos fechados e a regeneração urbana hiper simbólica, o artigo explora a noção de profanação como um ato capaz de desbloquear e melhorar os novos modos de política.

**Palavras-chave:** Agamben, Desenho Urbano, profanação de Roma, ocupação informal, pesquisa do desenho.

## Introduction

The recent literature on cities, urban renewal and hyperbolic urban design development in general, tells us urban territories are being designed as an array of *augmented* gated communities, punctual and place-based *fenced* developments forming a specific urban aesthetic regime.<sup>1</sup> The action of global capitals designing toward consumption, the authorities' need for order and control, the upper class' fears and desire for security – and definitely visible and invisible divisions of class, ethnicity, race, political orientation – shape the city through the creation of inaccessible and alien environments. Planning, design and architecture certainly becomes the linchpin in this emerging order. The urbanization of politics and the increased control over developments, urban spaces, urban services, territorial boundaries and housing – fuelled by neoliberal accumulations, military urbanism and neocolonial predation – describe a city as a collection of gated environments, a multitude of fences with different thicknesses and degrees of permeability, visibility, and porosity. The urban form is generated by seclusions, epitomized in the in/out dichotomy, made of environments and artifacts employing a set of mechanisms of filter between what is included *inside* and what remains *outside* –creating the conditions for the *inside* to acquire, inevitably, a character of *otherness*, albeit in a state of potential connection with the latter.

### Camillo Boano

Architect, urbanist and educator. He is Senior Lecturer at The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, UCL, where he directs the MSc in Building and Urban Design in Development. He has over 18 years of experiences in research, consultancies and development work in South America, Middle East, Eastern Europe and South East Asia. Camillo is the co-director of the Urban Laboratory and the director of the DPUsommerLab initiative.

### Giorgio Talocci

Teaching Fellow and PhD candidate at The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, UCL, where he runs the modules Transforming Local Areas: Urban Design for Development and Critical Urbanism Studio. In the framework of his PhD research, he is currently collaborating with the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, Community Architects Network and Community Development Foundation Cambodia.

In this paper we wish to look through this *heterotopic*<sup>2</sup> interpretation of fences with conceptual observations intersecting Agambenian and Foucaultian governmental and biopolitical readings and the subsequent emergence of what we called an alternative narrative for the urban. As fences become not simply spatial and physical but rather complex objects made of discourses, technologies, narratives, norms and codes of behavior, regulatory statements oblige

1 Tridib Banerjee, "Response to 'Commentary: Is Urban Design Still Urban Planning?' Whither Urban Design? Inside or Outside Planning?" *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 31 (2), 2011.

Stephen Graham, *Cities under Siege: The New Military Urbanism*, New York: Verso Books, 2011.

Boano & Martén, "Urbanism of Exception."

Alessandro Petti, *Arcipelaghi e enclave. Architettura dell'ordinamento spaziale contemporaneo*. Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2007.

2 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces." In: Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter (eds.) *Heterotopia and the city. Public space in a postcivil society*. London: Routledge, 2008.

us to think of urban design and architecture practices as embedded into a wider mechanism of government of the city and its bodies. The article builds on such an analytical strategy of widening urban design to the 'bodyness' of cities, and does so with the analysis of two complementary gestures that characterize such urban regime<sup>3</sup>: the one of *gating*, in the first part, centered on an elaboration of how the production and the government of *fences* effectively occurs; and the one of *opening up*, in the second part, whose conditions of possibility will be explored by looking at the act of *profanation* in its Agambenian language. In the pages that follows although deliberately more conceptual, the empirical evidences and the factual narratives are grounded in the direct experiences of the authors in a research by design activity undertaken in a squat-occupied spaces in the city of Rome.

We will argue that urban design is embedded in a wider governmental mechanism of the city, in its bodies and its spaces. The 'sacred' tenets of urban design<sup>4</sup> are invoked to enforce these exclusionary principles. In order to subvert such mechanisms both at the level of discourse and at the one of practice, the notion of profanation is suggested as potential to subvert such control and open up other emancipative possibilities. Borrowing the term from Giorgio Agamben,<sup>5</sup> profanation is an act that can return a 'sacred' object to the free use of mankind, after being taken away and 'separated', from it. Applying the idea of profanation to the realm of urban design, its *dispositif* and the spaces it produces, it would mean to return the practice itself to the everyday user of those spaces, and to discard the neoliberal 'fenced' logic, which lately has created 'alien' environments of the contemporary urbanisms and here is to be intended as a strategy of restoring things to the common use. The domain of the sacred according to the Italian philosopher has not disappeared with secularization but rather has been reproduced in modern political formations in which the urban regime is part. Agamben points out that "to profane does not simply mean to abolish or

cancel separations, but to learn how to make use of them"<sup>6</sup>: a diverse and distinct narrative and practice of urban design calls therefore for a counter-apparatus to restore the common use of what the secluded, colonial, military and neoliberal urban regime has separated and divided.

Acknowledging the limitation of the remit of the paper around the debate of the discipline and the practice of urban design, the space available, and the critical-theory literature adopted, the present work contributes to informing design research with an Agambenian reflection that is political, provocative and language oriented. However, acknowledging that Agamben's production has been highly influential on recent urban and spatial debates<sup>7</sup>, this paper strives to concentrate on a lesser-known incisive concept: precisely, profanation. This concept can offer a reinvigorated political possibility of the design act, outlining a new narrative and practice of design that will be playful, child-like and necessarily contrasting the diverse manifestation of the contemporary sacred. The paper considers Agamben's theoretical apparatus relevant for urban design research, as stemming from the overall Agambenian work of seeking to deactivate the apparatuses of powers in the interest of a coming community – a community open to *whatever being* – which is both present but perhaps unrealised. Adopting an integrative theoretical approach, the aim is to illustrating the richness and the powerful contribution of Agamben's oeuvre, especially in its development of the notion of power, language and the methodology of profanation, to the discipline or urban design and urbanism in general. All of which help us to develop a sort of resistance that involves challenging the contemporary place of language, specifically design language "whose hyper-trophy and expropriation define the politics of the spectacular-democratic society in which we live"<sup>8</sup>.

## Contemporary Urbanisms: Sacred Dispositifs, Other Spaces

In "*In Praise of Profanation*"<sup>9</sup>, Giorgio Agamben outline the gesture of *profanation* as an act that can give back to the free use of mankind what had been previously taken away from it and confined to the inaccessible *sacred sphere*. The contemporary manifestations of the sacred are certainly too vast to be elaborated

3 The notion of urban regime here is used instrumentally as a literary escamotage – to avoid the conundrum of the simplification of the use of urban design and in order to expand and broaden the simple form-formation and project driven reflection on the urban, incorporating it in a bigger political system which institutionalized the main logics of power. In here, regimes maintain the 'order of things' not only spatially in the position of a territorial secluded conformation, but also alluding to identities, practices, and cultural norms. As such a fenced urban regime is its ability to successfully manage, seclusions, partitions and urban privileges at large.

4 As a matter of caution, the term design here is adopted very broadly aiming to encompass both architecture and urban design and any design action going beyond the expert knowledge: a holistic practice, loosely referred to any act or actor – Urban Social Movements, artist collectives, worker co-operatives, individuals and community associations, governmental and non-governmental organisations (see also: Till, Schneider, Awan, Spatial Agency) – that can inhabit, make, build, imagine, and strategize urban spaces. Such a definition of design, while provisional and instrumental, carries a twofold obligation related to both process and outcomes: on one hand it is meant to facilitate a comprehensive imagination of transformations and changes; on the other it implies a practice that aligns with civic interest – with the collective will and voices of traditionally voiceless and marginalized individuals.

5 Giorgio Agamben, "In praise of profanation," In: Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, New York: Zone Books, 2007.

Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009.

6 Agamben, "Profanation", 7.

7 Camillo Boano and Fabrizio Floris, *Città Nude. Iconografia dei Campi Profughi*. Milano: Franco Angeli, 2005.

Camillo Boano, "Violent spaces: production and reproduction of security and vulnerabilities." *The Journal of Architecture*. [Online] 16 (1), 2011 37–55.

Camillo Boano and Ricardo Martén, "Agamben's urbanism of exception: Jerusalem's border mechanics and biopolitical strongholds," *Cities*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2012.06.010>, 2012

8 Giorgio Agamben, *Means without end: notes on politics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, 3.

9 Agamben, "Profanation."

here: the militarized security institutions of ethnocentric regimes<sup>10</sup>, military urbanism diluted in security territorial obsessions<sup>11</sup> or the several ontologies of capitalism in the form of dispossession<sup>12</sup>. In this vein, contemporary Marxist authors such as John Holloway (2010) have conceptualized the evolution of capitalism as a 'movement of enclosing': 'capitalism, ever since its beginning, has been a movement of enclosure, a movement of converting that which is enjoyed in common into private property' (Holloway, 2010:29). In this context, neoliberalism, or the 'neo-liberal phase of capitalism' has witnessed an 'acceleration of this process of enclosure, where the accumulation by dispossession becomes the sacred manifestation pursued through expropriation and enclosure (of built environment, public services, natural resources, etc.) – presupposing capitalism's exercise of sovereign power over its outside environment in full complicity of design disciplines. In this sense, capitalism deploys a sacred gesture predicated on acts of domination to enable the process of accumulation in a twofold manner: through spaces that have been fenced out, but also through the very act of design practice itself, relegated to the role of instrument in the hands of authorities and developers and therefore consecrated to the sphere of consumption and to the paradigms of security and control. In such a context, we deem the concepts of *dispositif* and *heterotopia* to acquire particular relevance to explain the dynamics of what we have called so far urban regime.

Foucault's original definition of *dispositif* reads "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions" whose network is the *dispositif* itself, and whose nature is "essentially strategic, which means that we are speaking about a certain manipulation of relations of forces [...]"<sup>13</sup> Agamben traces it back to what Foucault himself called *positivities*, referring to what is enforced, obligatory:<sup>14</sup> *dispositifs* – as fences – are then read as mechanisms of entrapment, and defined as "literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings":<sup>15</sup> A fence is ultimately an elementary form of *dispositif*, and it is not a case that Agamben speaks of contemporary heterotopias such as prisons and madhouses, schools and factories as such. A *dispositif* though does not relate simply to the spatial and physical dimension of control, but rather all those measures that contribute to the exercise of controlling life itself: ultimately, biopower.<sup>16</sup> With such emphasis we could then certainly describe

the contemporary urban regime as well as a set of overlapping dispositifs, a collection of nested fencing mechanisms.<sup>17</sup>

Agamben<sup>18</sup> has outlined a spatial approach to understanding urban dynamics of contested spaces, territorial partitioning and place-based interventions of regeneration<sup>19</sup>. Making the paradoxical assertion that today the state of exception is the rule,<sup>20</sup> he stresses that, with time, the realm of lawlessness has become spatialised through the figure of the *camp*, highlighting the inherent spatial qualities bred from exception<sup>21</sup>. The camp could be assumed then as the paradigm par excellence of an urbanism founded on the gesture of gating subjects beyond the (archetypical) dispositif of the fence. The fence is essentially a dispositif with a door to guarantee access and control, enclosing a spatiality that develops to a certain extent as *other*, separated from what surrounds it. *Other spaces* are defined by Foucault<sup>22</sup> as heterotopias, the "kind of places that are outside all places, even though they are actually localisable"<sup>23</sup> and maintain connections with them, at all possible scales, relying upon mechanisms of *filtering*. "[H]eterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and make them penetrable"<sup>24</sup>, or in other words they allow the passage of someone or something in particular, at given times or through specific rituals. It can be possible to argue that contemporary cities are made of many heterotopic urbanisms, impregnated with such rituals: highly connected spaces – at the centre of flows of capital, knowledge and people – become day-by-day *sacralised*, and penetrable by fewer people in fewer occasions. Again, nested fenced mechanisms, heterotopic dispositifs. Dehaene & De Caeter<sup>25</sup> reinforce such tension opposing heterotopias and camp-like situations, with the latter founded on the paradigm of exclusion and control<sup>26</sup>,

10 Eyal Weizman, *Hollow land: Israel's architecture of occupation*. London: Verso, 2007.

Haim Yacobi & Oren Yiftachel, "Urban ethnocracy: Ethnicization and the production of space in an Israeli 'mixed city.'" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 21, 673–693, 2007.

11 Graham, "Cities under Siege."

12 Ugo Rossi, "On the Varying ontologies of capitalism: embeddedness, dispossessions, subsumptions," *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol.37(3), p:348–365, 2012.

13 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.

14 Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of knowledge*. London: Routledge, 2002.

15 Agamben, *Dispositif*, 14.

16 Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007

17 Boano & Martén, "Urbanism of Exception."

18 Agamben has not discussed architecture per se, but he has certainly been greatly inspired by Aristotle and Plato's reflections on the polis as spatial reference.

19 Boano & Martén, "Urbanism of Exception."

Paolo ve. mi, 2007. *Topologies. ing Architecture* Giaccaria and Claudio Minca, "Topographies/topologies of the camp: Auschwitz as a spatial threshold." *Political Geography*, 30(1), 2011, 3–12.

John Ploger, "Foucault's Dispositif and the City," *Planning Theory*, 7, 2008

20 Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005: 64.

21 Bülent Diken and Carsten Bagge Laustsen, *The Culture of Exception: Sociology Facing the Camp*. NY: Routledge, 2005

Richard Ek, "Giorgio Agamben and the spatialities of the camp: An introduction." *Geografiska Annaler B*, 88(4), 2006, 363–386.

22 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces." In: Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Caeter (eds.) *Heterotopia and the city. Public space in a postcivil society*. London: Routledge, 2008.

23 Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 17.

24 Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 21.

25 Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Caeter, "Heterotopia in a postcivil society." In: Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Caeter (eds.) *Heterotopia and the city. Public space in a postcivil society*, London: Routledge, 2008.

26 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

Foucault describes how the two paradigms of urban management, during the Middle Ages, were crafted onto a partition stemming from disease control. On one hand, the extreme measures of control in the city against the plague, through partitions, inspections and continuous registrations; and on the other,



and grounded in the state of exception in which the city – rather than present and ‘linked’ – is theoretically annihilated.<sup>27</sup>

## The Dispositif Urban Design and the Creation of Heterotopic Types.

Such annihilation manifests in products of the contemporary practice of Urban Design – inaccessible condos, gated communities, exclusive gentrified central neighborhoods, satellite cities, acupuncture of public spaces interventions, infrastructural landscaping, all traded according to their level of fenced sacredness, visual, symbolical, mystical as well as its level of safety and exclusivity. Such urbanisms as seen are portrayed in the literature as *military*<sup>28</sup>, *splintering*<sup>29</sup> or even *carceral*<sup>30</sup> and simply tangible when looking at cities such as São Paulo, Singapore<sup>31</sup>, Los Angeles<sup>32</sup>, Istanbul<sup>33</sup> just to quote some. At the core of such urbanisms lies the dispositifs of fencing themselves, whose wall “is a reminder of how spatial typologies and social tensions contribute to shape an urbanism of exception”.<sup>34</sup> Types, typologies and typological urbanisms certainly lever on the concept of heterotopia while at the same time hardening both its fences and content, making it inflexible, impenetrable and governed through principles of hyper control and securization. As pointed out by Grahame Shane, the type “offers designers the advantage of a speedy response and a standardised product”<sup>35</sup> being at the same time uncontrollable and unshapable by the users, a heterotopia whose use has been displaced toward a higher level, *sacralised*.

---

the measures of exclusion against lepers trying to enter the city, through borders and protection from the outside. This dual paradigm has been inherited, in different forms and conceptions, in the evolution and morphology of modern cities: either controlling stability at all costs by purging inner contestation, or protecting the whole from external menaces, but in any case fencing out and partitioning territories.

27 Agamben, State of Exception.

28 Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, “Cities as Battlespace: The New Military Urbanism.” *City*, 13 (4), 2009, 383-402.

Graham, Cities under Siege.

29 Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, “More than ducts and wires: post-fordism, cities and utility networks. In: Healy P. et al., *Managing cities. The new urban context*. Chichester: Wiley, 1995.

Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering urbanism: networked infrastructures, technological mobilities and the urban condition*, London: Routledge, 2001

30 Edward W. Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 2000

Soja borrows the definition of Archipelago from: Mike Davis, *City of quartz*, London: Verso, 1990.

31 Marc Angelil and Cary Sires, “Cingapura: Cities in Circulation.” *Log*, 27, 2013.

32 Soja, *Postmetropolis*.

33 Tansal Kormaz and Eda Ünlü Ücesoy, “Istanbul: Once an Imperial City, Now a Global One.” In: Tansal Kormaz et al. (eds.), *Istanbul: Living in voluntary and involuntary exclusion*. Diwan, IABR, Refuge, 2008.

34 Boano & Martén, “Urbanism of Exception,” 3. The authors refer to the wall between Israel and Occupied Territories, which rises as paradigm of urban fencing mechanisms,

35 David Grahame Shane, *Urban Design since 1945 – A Global Perspective*. Chichester: Wiley, 2011, 128.

As an illustrative example of this semantic and typological shift, we can look at Campo Boario in Rome,<sup>36</sup> a space born as a fence for breeding animals then destined to the next slaughterhouse, and then – after its abandonment by the Municipality in the late 70s – squat-occupied by Kurds, Palestinian, Gypsies, Roman activists and a group of *cavallari*,<sup>37</sup> who settled either in the thickness of its borders or in its courtyard. Enacting this way a very serious parody of the archetype of the Persian Garden cited by Foucault, “a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world”.<sup>38</sup> In the current climate of speculation – that well represent the urban aesthetic regime described above, composed of formal and informal development practices, relationships and ethical ambiguities negotiated between the party, the state, the market and other urban actors – authorities, investors and developers are leveraging on both the heterotopic character of such a fence and on its typological one: the fence is undergoing a transformation toward becoming a citadel for the arts and the alternative economies – again, interestingly a ‘garden’ where many cultural traditions will meet, but not prior to having erased the previous ones.<sup>39</sup> The project has already led to the eviction of both Roma and Palestinians and to partially weaken the activity of the cultural centre (linked to the antagonist Left) run by Italian activists whose name, inspirationally, is still Villaggio Globale (Global Village). Campo Boario’s complex and heterogeneous community stemmed out from a highly heterotopic space, and got later normalized through re-applying and emphasizing the same fenced type which made its birth possible. That fence has been now retrofitted to accommodate consumption and urban Spectacles: lying beyond this operation, not only is there an inevitable tension toward urban capital-driven development, but also an attempt to ‘cleanse or decant’<sup>40</sup> city differences away from the city center, while the city itself was keeping such differences hidden, in a spatially segregated situation of social discrimination and oppression.<sup>41</sup>

36 Stalker, “The Big Game of Campo Boario.” In: Blundell Jones, P., Petrescu D., Till, J. (eds) *Architecture and Participation*. London: Taylor and Francis, 2005.

37 Cavallari is the Italian term used in Roman dialect to name the drivers of touristic chariots (*botticelle* in Italian). The group is traditionally described as politically close to right-wind positions, and hostile to the other groups populating Campo Boario.

38 Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 19.

39 On the City of the Arts see: <http://www.lc-architettura.com/index.php/2004-nuova-sede-dellaccademia-di-belle-arte-di-roma-allex-mattatoio-di-testaccio/>. Or: <http://www.laboratorioroma.it/progetti/Strutture%20ocultura/Ex%20Mattatoio/scheda%20citta%20delle%20arti.htm>. And on the City of the Other Economy: <http://www.lc-architettura.com/index.php/2005-2007-citta-della-tradizione-economia-allex-mattatoio-di-testaccio-in-roma/>

And, on the current lull of the project: [http://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2013/12/24/news/ex\\_mattatoio\\_ancora\\_stalle\\_e\\_degrado\\_nella\\_citt\\_dell\\_arte-74372702/](http://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2013/12/24/news/ex_mattatoio_ancora_stalle_e_degrado_nella_citt_dell_arte-74372702/)

40 Edward W. Soja, “On the Production of Unjust Geographies.” In: Edward W Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.

41 John R. Short, “The social area: class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality.” In: Short, J.R. (ed.) *The urban order*. Oxford, Blackwell, 1996.

Mustafa Dikec, “Justice and the Spatial Imagination,” *Environment and Planning A*, 33, 2001, 1785-1805.

Soja, “Unjust Geographies.”

Development pressures, and design ‘tools’ are therefore only the most visible cause of an urban transformation that is made of a dispositif of conflictive discourses and ideologies, racial and ethnic discrimination, exclusive and seclusive logics, constantly overlapping with private property-obsessed urbanisms.<sup>42</sup> Following Bridge & Watson is worthy to remark how the city can no longer be read as a field where dominant groups and institutions in cities are attributed “the prerogative to allow or disallow difference from the so-called norm”,<sup>43</sup> but rather, in the definition of Alsayyad and Roy,<sup>44</sup> as a domain of multiple overlapping and competing sovereignties, whose exercise translates into an agglomeration of spaces whose degree of permeability at both social and spatial levels is ultimately very low. Along with the privatopias<sup>45</sup> of secure types indeed – gated communities, shopping malls, entertainment complexes, hotels, luxury housing and office towers<sup>46</sup>, representing a capitalistic hegemony over urban space<sup>47</sup> – the urban dispositif has produced slums, *barrios marginales* and blighted neighborhoods or, extremely, camps in all their declensions. Spaces whose degree of openness is as well very low, and where the different and conflictive sovereignties – because of their need to exercise their power and control over space – most clearly establish the *State of Exception* in its military, splintering character.

Design, in its urban territory of expression is a handy tool for the perpetuation of such *exception*, for the separation of spaces from the rest of the city and for their consecration to the use of people whose behaviors, income, social status (or ethnicity and political orientation) are deemed as complying with certain codes. It is though only one of the many discursive practices that contribute to the “Janus face”<sup>48</sup> of the governance arrangements that have solidified over the last two decades. The necessity for an urbanism to calibrate freedom against control gives rise to intersecting and overlapping areas of multiple configurations of gestures, design and control – which in reality, back to Foucault, are an aggregate of physical, social and normative infrastructure, including urban design, put into place with a strategic and governmental aim. As seen, Foucault terms this aggregate dispositif.<sup>49</sup> We found the dispositif to be a very powerful theoretical model for the sake of our argument, not only to explain what we thought being a generalized governmental condition of urban control and population control through design interventions, but also, and more importantly, because in its very essence it already contains the germs to overcome its governmental power, allowing room for the obsolescence of its structures (and

therefore flight<sup>50</sup> from those) and for undertaking against it that special form of negligence that Agamben calls *Profanation*.<sup>51</sup>

## Neutralizing the Sacrality of the Fence: Profaning the dispositif

As a particular form of negligence toward this sacred and the *religio* of its norms, Profanation is presented by Agamben as an act of play: early traces of this powerful and suggestive concept can be found in *State of Exception*, where Agamben suggests “[o]ne day humanity will play with the law as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good”<sup>52</sup>. It is clear that the ‘end of the law’ requires that a change of use — a use that Agamben associates with the activity of children ‘at play’ — occurs. In this light, what follows is an initial exploration on the political function of the relationship between play and the sacred in Agamben’s thought, adapted to urbanism and urban design processes and set up at stake with the contemporary challenges of the urban whole.

Agamben suggests that the term *religio* does not derive from *religare* (the binding together of the human and the divine) but, rather, comes from *relegere*, a term that “indicates the stance of scrupulousness and attention, [...] the uneasy hesitation (the rereading [rileg-gere]) [...] that must be observed in order to respect the separation between the sacred and the profane”.<sup>53</sup> The paradigmatic shift from the profane to the sacred is, in the religious context, a *sacrifice*, an act that removes the victim from the profane sphere: for Agamben, sacrifice represents *separation* in its pure form, and in this sense it can be understood as an apparatus (a dispositif) that founds and maintains the division between the sacred and the profane – in our case the fence that marks an enclosed spatiality, ‘sacrificing’ it from the rest of the urban realm. Separation is pushed to the extreme, Agamben suggests, through the sphere of consumption, in contemporary capitalism – the economic form of modern biopolitics. We have seen already how these patterns of capitalistic consumption turn Urban Design into a commodifying machine and at the same time into object of commodification<sup>54</sup> – creating environments which are separated from the free use of men, of all citizens.

42 Soja, “Unjust Geographies.”

43 Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, “Reflections on division and difference.” In: Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (eds.) *The New Blackwell Companion to the City*. Oxford: Blackwell.

44 Nezar Alsayyad and Ananya Roy, “Medieval Modernity: On Citizenship and Urbanism in a Global Era.” *Space and Polity*, 10 (1), 2006, 1-20.

45 Evan McKenzie, *Privatopia: Homeowner Associations and the Rise of Residential Private Government*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994

46 Banerjee, “Whither Urban Design.”

47 David Harvey, *The Urban Experience*. Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

48 Erik Swyngedouw, “Governance Innovation and the Citizen: the Janus Face of Governance-Beyond-the-State.” *Urban Studies*, 42(11): 1991-2006, 1991, 2005.

49 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*.

50 Gilles Deleuze, “What is a dispositif?” In: Timothy Armstrong (ed.) *Michel Foucault, philosopher: essays*. Taylor & Francis, 1991.

Gilles Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975-1995*. New York: Semiotext(e), 2007.

Stephen Legg, “Assemblage/apparatus: using Deleuze and Foucault,” *Area*, 43 (2), 2011.

51 Agamben, “Profanation.” Agamben, *Dispositif*.

52 Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005: 64.

53 Agamben, “Profanation,” 75.

54 Michael Gunder, “Commentary: Is Urban Design Still Urban Planning? An Exploration and Response,” *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 31(2), 2011 186.

Ali Madanipour, “Roles and challenges of Urban Design,” *Journal of Urban Design*, 11 (2), 2006

Emily Talen, “Design That Enables Diversity: The Complications of a Planning Ideal,” *Journal of Planning Literature*, 20, 2006.

He takes therefore profanation as an urgent task, as “the political task of the coming generation”.<sup>55</sup> The shift toward separation and sacrifice, indeed, is not a one-way avenue: virtually any object can be made sacred and, conversely, profane. Profanation “neutralises what it profanes [...] deactivat[ing] the apparatuses of power and return[ing] to common use the spaces that power had seized”.<sup>56</sup> All Agamben’s voluminous body of works, through a transversal architectural and spatial reading, reveals at its core the pursuit of the deactivation of devices of power in the interest of a *coming community* that is present but still unrealised. Profanation, we will see, is what can neutralise the sacrality of a *dispositif*, at the same time not entailing an abolishment, an erasure, of the religious core itself. Drawing again on the example of Campo Boario and an urban practice intervention made by Stalker (a collective of artists and architects from Rome)<sup>57</sup> with the Kurdish community<sup>58</sup> we can observe the leveraging on the sacred nature of such space, involving the community in a series of games and in so doing grasping its essence from within. The designer places himself inside the fence, understands its sacred character, plays with its elements to restart connections with the wider urban environment without undermining the nature of the fence, fundamental for that community itself to survive: games such as the making of a flying carpet, growing a garden, setting up a collective lunch, creating alternative borders, materialise and translate in a spatial strategy that Agamben presents as profanation: a very special form of negligence toward the *dispositif*, or “an entirely inappropriate use (or, rather, reuse) of the sacred: namely, play”.<sup>59</sup>

Play, according to Agamben, occurs in the form of either wordplay (*iocus*) or physical play (*ludus*). Agamben emphasises the close connection between the gesture of playing and the sacred, a connection seen in the fact that “everything pertaining to play once pertained to the realm of the sacred”,<sup>60</sup> as in the case, for instance, of many games, which originally derive from religious ceremonies, rituals, and practices. The act of play is a very powerful one because it is able to transform and alter structures of

power in events<sup>61</sup> – in other words, enacting a particular situation for a limited time, during which power relations get reshuffled. In Stalker’s work, for instance, a community is given the power and the confidence to imagine and build its space: the designer acts as silent (re)calibrator of this process, trying, through play, to let all voices emerge beyond the ones of the leaders – while at the same time fostering the collective and individual imaginations through games and actions. Stalker’s Campo Boario experience elaborates exactly a tension between the *ludic* action – the physical play that enacts rites – and an almost archaeological endeavour in finding out the community’s past, in writing its myth in a collective *iocus*, a word play. The time dimension, respectively, shrinks to zero and grows toward infinite, in the latter case re-writing the timeless myth that the rite is supposed to stage, to reproduce. Profanation itself is a *gesture* that separates the two spheres of rite and myth, respectively “drop[ping] the myth and preserv[ing] the rite”<sup>62</sup> or “effac[ing] the rite and allow[ing] the myth to survive”<sup>63</sup> in this way never erasing the sacred core which targets. But what does he mean exactly with *gesture*?

## Opening Up the Fence, Unlocking New Uses and Modes of Politics: The Act of Play

Poetry and Philosophy, for Agamben, have a common history and destiny that for the Italian philosopher are related to the notion of gesture, which we see as very powerful toward a rediscovery of design and architecture’s potentiality. Agamben comes to define gesture via an alternative reading of the two sides of Aristotle famous distinction between action (*praxis*) and production (*poiesis*) in which gesture is neither a production nor an enactment but is “undertaking and supporting [...] breaking the false alternative between means and ends”.<sup>64</sup> Positioning profanation as architectural and design gesture is stressing it as the display of mediation, the making visible of means as such and its potentiality of making something other-than-itself. This attitude toward the ‘making visible’ makes us able to frame design as a *messianic* vocation:<sup>65</sup> profanation as a gesture can unlock the potentialities of the actual world, and envision a new one. Ac-

Emily Talen, “Response to ‘Commentary: Is Urban Design Still Urban Planning?’” *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 31(2), 2011.

Matthew Carmona, “World class places or decent local spaces for all?” *Urban Design International*, 14, 2009, 189-191.

55 Agamben, “Profanation,” 92.

56 Agamben, “Profanation,” 81. Agamben notes that secularisation “leaves intact the forces it deals with by simply moving them from one place to another. Thus the political secularisation of theological concepts (the transcendence of God as a paradigm of sovereign power) does nothing but displace the heavenly monarchy onto an earthly monarchy, leaving its power intact” (Agamben, “Profanation,” 77). Secularisation then merely shifts the locus of power, ultimately “guarantee[ing] the exercise of power by carrying it back to a sacred model,” (Agamben, “Profanation,” 77) as Carl Schmitt recognised in his claim that all the fundamental concepts of the modern theory of the state, both historically and structurally, are secularised theological concepts. See Carl Schmitt, *The nomos of the earth in the international law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, NY: Telos Press, 2003.

57 One of the prominent figures of Stalker is Francesco Careri, then co-founder of LAC - Laboratorio Arti Civice, which has co-organized the workshop at Campo Boario, object of the last part of the paper.

58 Stalker, *Big Game*.

59 Agamben, *Profanations*, 75.

60 Giorgio Agamben, “In Playland. Reflections on History and Play.” In: Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: Essays on The Destruction of Experience*, London: Verso, 70, 1993.

61 Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: Essays on The Destruction of Experience*. London: Verso, 1993. Agamben calls for rediscovering the dimensions of the messianic time (see also: Giorgio Agamben, *The Church and the Kingdom*. London: Seagull Books, 2012). The messianic vocation for Agamben is the one allowing to hollow any experience and factual condition to open it to a new use: to profane then, the messianic visualization of ‘new worlds’ is needed, and in our argument the designer’s role can be interpreted as, precisely, a messianic one. Similarly, messianic time transform chronologic time without abolishing it (as well as profanation plays with the sacred and do not abolish it): while playing, during a ludic event or a mythological account, the dimension of time either decreases to zero or goes toward infinite.

62 Agamben, “Profanation,” 75.

63 Agamben, “Profanation,” 76.

64 Giorgio Agamben, *Means without end*, 155.

65 See note 61.

ording to Agamben,<sup>66</sup> this could be done only through the work of art – and then allowing ourselves to an expansion, through design. Design as gesture acquires a role of instrument finding cracks and fissures in the narrative of the dispositif and profaning its narratives – opening up its fences working precisely on the uses of what fences themselves enclose, protect or conceal, playing with them and with their content. We must not forget that the “sacred and the profane represent the two poles of a system in which a floating signifier travels from one domain to the other without ceasing to refer to the same object”:<sup>67</sup> we put forward a call to reconfigure urban design acts exactly as gestures of profanation which are able to intercept such floating signifier, and to move it back toward the realm of the profane through play. In this way, the operation of profanation gets closer to the Situationist *détournement*,<sup>68</sup> in its subverting an original meaning and making it available for future re-significations. Play is the fundamental component of an Urban Design that is finally given back to the citizens, that looks at their aspirations being aware of their everyday life, needs and wills, that rethink their environment and tackles its issues mindful of their individual and collective memories, that involves them in the process of design and empower them for the sake of driving it by themselves in the future.

In Agamben the centrality of the work of art (and then of design) seems inevitable, as the supreme means to unlock those new modes of politics<sup>69</sup> that for instance constitute, simply, a space. As such an interesting parallel here can be made with Jacques Rancière<sup>70</sup>, for whom, opening up space means creating politics and new forms of life, forms that do not belong to the existing order.<sup>71</sup> The act of opening up corresponds to unlock new modes of politics that, as in Rancière, are able to resist the *givenness* of the place, what designates “either some form of social fixity (for example an identity imposed upon an individual or group) or material orderings of space, or even established ways of thinking that draw limits between the possible and the impossible”:<sup>72</sup> Politics, for Rancière, is about challenging such limits, shifting a body from the place assigned to it or changing the use (the func-

tion, in Rancière’s words)<sup>73</sup> of a place, and this definition is terrifically similar to what Agamben writes on profanation as *ludus*. The same can be said for the *locus*, for the myth that is going to make visible what was unseen, to make readable or hearable what before was only ‘noise’:<sup>74</sup> Politics disrupts the previous order, is negligent against it, opens up new spaces, or rather inaugurates space. Profanation as physical play, as *ludus*, strives also to achieve this enactment, to experiment equality challenging the current rules and structures of power, and hinting toward new modes of politics. In order to illustrate the above, the following part of the paper will briefly elaborate on the authors’ experience undertaken in a squat-occupied space in Rome, Porto Fluviale, where design interventions and participatory design research reconfigured new uses of the sacred alluding to a possible ‘coming community’:<sup>75</sup>

## Rome and the Galaxy of the Squat-Occupations: Latent Profanations?

Operations as the one of Stalker at Campo Boario are profanations which manage to *play* separating the two spheres of rite and myth, respectively “drop[ping] the myth and preserv[ing] the rite”<sup>76</sup> – when they overcome (or, rather, harness) struggles between actors and manage to re-enact a forgotten rite of community collaboration – or “effac[ing] the rite and allow[ing] the myth to survive”<sup>77</sup> – when they collect and bring back to life the memories of a community to re-write its mythology. As we saw, the sacred core is ‘hit’, but not destroyed. Rather, it is put to another use: communities are not undermined by the design intervention, but properly ‘read’ and then ‘involved’ in the intervention itself, becoming the first actors of a transformation that in this way will be able to go on in the longer term. Profanation can then become a strategy, a design strategy restoring thing to the common use, and the use of common.

In September 2012, as part of a collaborative design research, the authors worked with the community of the squat-occupation Porto Fluviale as part of long-term relationship and collaboration with Laboratorio Arti Civiche. Porto Fluviale belongs to the galaxy of squat-occupations in Rome, a network – led by three main social movements<sup>78</sup> – that from the early 90s onwards has kept growing and transforming adapting both its

66 Giorgio Agamben, “On Potentiality.” In: Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999.

67 Agamben, “Profanation,” 78.

68 Debord, G. E. & Wolman G. J., *A User’s Guide to Détournement*, 1956. Available from: <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/usersguide.html>

69 Agamben, “On Potentiality.”

Claire M. Colebrook, “Agamben: Aesthetics, Potentiality and Life,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 107 (1, special issue: The Agamben Effect), 107-120.

70 The connection with the French philosopher, at this stage of the paper, can appear untimely. Part of a ‘new French generation’ of contemporary thinkers, such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Bernard Stiegler, Catherine Malabou and Alain Badiou, Rancière has turned from language to materiality as his core concern. This is particularly useful in our attempt to approach egalitarian political practice in the urban reality since he addresses the mechanisms through which the domain of sensual experience is parcelled out: a division which serves to maintain a perceived separation of capacities regarding who can and who cannot legitimately speak. the triad relationship of (in)equality, politics, and sensible experience is why Rancière’s work is certainly very relevant. For further debate see Camillo Boano & Emily, “Towards an architecture of dissensus: Participatory urbanism in South-East Asia.” *Footprint* (13), 2013, 41 - 62.

71 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: politics and philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

72 Mustafa Dikeç, “Space as a Mode of Political Thinking,” *Geoforum* 43, no. 4, 2012, 674.

73 Dikeç, “Political Thinking.”

Agamben, “Profanation.”

Rancière, *Disagreement*.

74 Rancière, *Disagreement*.

75 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993..

76 Agamben, “Profanation”, 75.

77 Agamben, “Profanation”, 76

78 The Social Movements are Action Diritti in Movimento (Action Right on the Move) Blocchi Precari Metropolitan (Precarious Metropolitan Blocks) Coordinamento Cittadino Lotta per la Casa (Citizen Coordination for the Struggle for Housing). They are all somehow connected to the antagonist Left. The squat-occupation we worked with, Porto Fluviale, belongs to the third one, CCLC.



configuration and its objectives. Nowadays there are about fifty squat-occupations in the whole Rome whose size varies from a few households to a couple of hundreds. They all take place in previously abandoned buildings, private or public – whereby the capitalistic aesthetic urban regime and its governmental dispositif is obsolescing, where the pressures for mainstream development have got stuck leaving more room for profanation, reuse and social resistance.<sup>79</sup> This makes the Movements able to lever on the rhetoric and the imagination of return such abandoned portions of urban fabric to the use of the collectivity. A movement toward a neglected *common* use, typical of operations of profanation. The focus of the struggle has recently moved from housing to *dwelling*, expanding its breadth exactly from the simple provision of housing units to people in need to the one of services to the surroundings and to the whole *urbe*. Such a strategic move towards the city – grounding in the ethical stance of the Social Movements – aims also to make the occupations more visible and possibly accepted over the territory, trying to fill up the gap left by the disappearance of the welfare state. Through the creation of, for example, open desks for assistance and women advocacy and support, homeless and others in need, and at the same time opening up the squatted spaces toward the city with the invention and the organisation of leisure and cultural activities and services in general.

Squat-occupations are truly readable as heterotopic fences: they are separated from the rest of the city though at the same time being connected to many other spaces – definitely the other occupations in the network and their surroundings, but also for instance the places of origin of their inhabitants; they *mirror* the outside reality, replicating it in a perfect mechanism, ordered and controlled (as in the Jesuit colony) and comprehensive of many realities and geographies (as in the Persian garden); they are *heterocronies*<sup>80</sup> since they get more open from time to time, when hosting events, or more closed, when an external threat is approaching (typically, a risk of eviction according to the particular political climate). Squat-occupations are *types* as well, often taking place in abandoned public buildings, which were once constituting a language in the city's fabric and whose decay had erased them from the city's map: from a condition of semantic vacancy during the period of abandonment, the act of occupying re-signified these types and make them reappear as those monuments which Lefebvre<sup>81</sup> described as fundamental *anchors*, in a city's fabric by now become a *texture* rather than a meaningful text<sup>82</sup> –fabric that at the beginning of the paper we deemed as dominated by the *State of Exception* insofar as any possibility of language had got blurred and become impossible.

Such spaces have *Spatial Agency*<sup>83</sup> in the sense that they represent multidimensional forms of negligence toward the mainstream production of space and knowledge in the city: they are *appropriations*, since the Movements literally appropriate someo-

ne else's property, at the same time giving new life to abandoned spaces; they achieve *dissemination* of knowledge, moving expertise and skills within the network and from its inside to outside and vice-versa, and promoting sensitisation toward their many intercultural and multi-ethnic realities; they *network* with organisations and representatives of the civil society, sometimes with institutions; they *empower* their inhabitants toward having a control over their environment;<sup>84</sup> and, finally, they *subvert* the current order, reshaping an urban fabric originally meant for other purposes and other users, in some cases influencing local policies too.<sup>85</sup>

Hence, squat-occupations and their practices definitely represent a form of negligence toward the urban *dispositif*, but do they represent actual Profanations? In order to answer such question, we should ask whether they truly achieve to create new uses and modes of politics, deeply contesting the original settings in which they were born. And whether they are truly profanation or simply *secularisations*,<sup>86</sup> in other words whether the apparatuses of power have simply been reshuffled or a recalibrating action between the several subjects has actually been achieved.

## Inside the (Squatted) Fence: Enacting a New Mode of Politics

We tried to answer this question entering the 'fenced' situation of Porto Fluviale, seeking for understanding the nature of its fencing mechanisms and of its latent profanations from the inside. In the summer of 2012, during a workshop<sup>87</sup> we undertook a series of action-design-oriented interventions, which saw the interaction of a group of ten participants with the members of Laboratorio Arti Civiche and the inhabitants of Porto themselves. Collecting – through ethnographic research methods (mainly using semi-structured individual and collective interviews, and digging into the photographic archives of a few families) – the stories and the myths of the inhabitants, we understood how the 'occupation' literally started, by now 10 years ago, and how many

84 Of course during the assemblies some voices are more powerful than others, but the final decisions are definitely shared.

85 Although this is rarely achieved, the network has managed several times to be heard by institutions at the municipal level, for instance with the attribution a few special places for the squatters in the rank of the people entitled to access social housing.

86 Agamben, "Profanation". Agamben sets profanation against secularisation, which "leaves intact the forces it deals with by simply moving them from one place to another. Thus the political secularisation of theological concepts (the transcendence of God as a paradigm of sovereign power) – as Carl Schmitt (see: Carl Schmitt, *The nomos of the earth in the international law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, NY: Telos Press, 2003) recognised in his claim that all the fundamental concepts of the modern theory of the state, both historically and structurally, are secularised theological concepts – does nothing but displace the heavenly monarchy onto an earthly monarchy, leaving its power intact" (Agamben, "Profanation", 77). Secularisation merely shifts the locus of power, ultimately "guarantee[ing] the exercise of power [itself] by carrying it back to a sacred model," (ibid.).

87 The workshop was co-organised by The Bartlett Development Planning Unit and Laboratorio Arti Civiche as part of the initiative DPUsummerLab <http://www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/dpu/programmes/summerlab>

79 Legg, "Assemblage/Apparatus."

80 Foucault, "Of Other Spaces."

81 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

82 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.

83 Nishat Awan, Tatiana Schneider and Jeremy Till, *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2011.

transformations have occurred since the day when 80 families from different nationalities – mainly Italians, Ecuadorians, Moroccans, Peruvians, supported by the movement’s activists – broke into the former barrack Porto Fluviale, whose name evocatively means *river harbor*.<sup>88</sup> It was interesting to see how collective and individual memories overlap over each other and get blurred – starting from, for instance, the day of the occupation itself: the actual main gate has by now become so prominent that many inhabitants had forgotten that they had broken into the building from the other side (the gate that at the moment is not used), or at least were confused about it. The process of re-writing a mythology of Porto Fluviale (to achieve a profanation as *iocus*, see below) had to navigate amongst many different truths, all valuable but definitely contrasting and somehow contradictory, often reflecting the individual’s vision over space.

Working, interacting, discussing with its community, we understood how, for most of its first ten years of life, Porto Fluviale had to keep its gates closed, because of constant risks of eviction and social stigma. Behind those gates in the meantime an intercultural resistance to the housing policies and to the mainstream urban development has been taking place, offering first housing to people in need, and recently also services to a wider collectivity. We sat in this space and we become part of this shared agency. We saw how Porto’s three floors got transformed into houses facing both internal and external sides of the C-shaped building, and how the dark distribution corridors were still marked by the rails once used to move the materials around the floors and to the service-lifts. The housing units search for the light vertically, thanks to the widespread use of self-made mezzanines built to reach the level of the old barrack’s arch-shaped windows – whose base is at 2.50 meters – having this way a view toward the outside or the courtyard, too. In the meantime, the courtyard and the ground floor as a whole evolved from being simply a space for parking cars surrounded by residential units, to be the centre of the community life and the spatial element that has helped the most in fostering throughout the years a sense of collectiveness and everyday life sharing. In spite of the constant risk of eviction the community recently voted to keep the main gate open during the day so to let the people from the surroundings feel free to enter. The process started a couple of years ago opening a tearoom on the ground floor (our main working space during the workshop), and went on with the transformation of many spaces, that were once residential and now have become an assembly room, a bicycle workshop, not-for-profit guest rooms (where some of us were kindly hosted for a week) and new rooms for skill-sharing activities.

88 Porto Fluviale is named after the road (via del Porto Fluviale) on which its main gate opens, while the road’s name derives from the nearby harbor on the river Tiber where once were the customs. Through the years this toponym ended up recalling the squat-occupation’s character of open port where many identities were able to moor at.



Figure 1: Porto Fluviale, the outside. Source: DPU summerLab, 2012.



Figure 2: Porto Fluviale, the courtyard. DPU summerLab, 2012.





Figure 3: Porto Fluviale, the open gate on the final day of workshop. Source: DPU summerLab, 2012.



Figure 4: Porto Fluviale, the tea room. Source: DPU summerLab, 2012.



Figure 5: Porto Fluviale, the assembly. Source: DPU summerLab, 2012.

In an assembly we could take part to, we properly understood the shared (neo-marxist, at least in the words of a few people close to the squat-occupation's leadership) vision of the inhabitants, that see the new square as set aside any capitalistic logic and being the place where to experiment new activities and ways of exchanging and paying back the services that the community will offer: the new piazza is meant to be the place where new alternative lessons can be taught and more lessons have yet to be learnt, where pro-active citizens can meet and exchange their experiences, where the use-value of space takes again over the exchange one, contesting the realm of consumption (the *unprofanable* one, according to Agamben).<sup>89</sup> Apart from the desire of the community, the idea of a truly open piazza is yet-to-be-realised: the idea of a post-capitalistic square, whether or not we agree with that, acts as another mechanism of filter, since not everybody would necessarily feel welcome to get in – people with different political stances for instance, or simply pedestrians that would refrain from entering because of the depth of the entrance passage, a true spatial threshold. Moreover, Porto's inhabitants needs of both privacy and security make inevitably emerge some contradictions, and the vision they share certainly does not come out from a consensual process. Some dissent remains, a few families holds to more conservative positions though being respectful of the assembly's final decision. Someone's main concern is simply the safety of their children, reduced with a closed gate. Others propose, maybe contradictorily, to leave the main gate open while building three new ones on the main staircases – transformation that would replicate the 'privatised' image of many piazzas that Porto Fluviale aims to contest. Some do not want to open at all, since "the outside has never been that friendly for us".<sup>90</sup>

The workshop we held aimed to spell out such contradictions and portraying possible ways of keeping the space truly open. All the ideas, scenarios and options were eventually presented in a final event that enacted the rite of opening the space and inviting all the inhabitants and the people of the surroundings to listen to the proposals and to share a meal in the meantime. Other smaller rites of participation were enacted by students, inhabitants and a few visitors, simulating how the space could have looked like, using plans to share ideas for the transformation of the piazza, devising menus of what a potential 'visitor' could have expected to find entering the space. The ingredients of our action, after all, were the same of the neoliberal *dispositif*, though completely subverted, *détour*-ed: simulations, images, menus, whose aim is put to a different use, easier to discover and address whereby the *dispositif* itself is obsolescing, as in the squat-occupied spaces. For a few hours until the end of the collective meal the square was open in a rite of sharing ideas, foods, cultures, languages: in such a short timeframe, new worlds were made visible, and a new mode of politics really occurred. This profanation happened through a collective work of art: the enactment of the metaphor, which accompanied the entire workshop, of a piazza as a harbour inhabited by many 'boats', the place where many identities have moored and are still floating while encountering each other.

89 Agamben, Dispositif.

90 DPU summerLab, Rome Occupation City. Available at: <http://www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/dpu/programmes/summerlab/2012-series/rome>. Accessed 4 February 2013.

## The Mythology of the Squatted Fence: Archaeology as Profanation

If the 'instantaneous' event is definitely important to spark off a shift toward *opening up* the fence, the challenge for a designer or practitioner though is to understand how to extend indefinitely such temporary condition, working on the possibility for such space to be theoretically open and inclusive at any time: the idea of *profanation* as *iocus* can help understanding a way forward. In the case of Porto Fluviale, a periphery<sup>91</sup> is treated as an archive, acting archaeologically to dig into its layers, to (re)write its stories and unpack the shifts in power relations influencing its spatial transformation and its re-significations. This *iocus* does not aim simply to understand the past to forecast possible futures, but at the same time, as said, is a *statement of centrality*<sup>92</sup> for such periphery and its daily realities,<sup>93</sup> its possible germs of what Agamben<sup>94</sup> defines as *coming community*.

Such archaeological approach again shows an intersection between Agamben<sup>95</sup> and Foucault.<sup>96</sup> Foucault exalts archaeology against history, insofar as it can 'centralise' and 'monumentalise' what has been left over as marginal, because of not obeying to widespread norms of conduct, and in so doing it can profane those norms themselves. History, creating and entailing a set of official discourses, de facto partakes in the exercise of the homogenising action over the urban realm deployed by the *dispositif*: it feeds the appearance of spectacular environments, defining their myth, sacralising their images, celebrating their events, hardening their fences. Archaeology, on the contrary, is what allows us to profane History and the *dispositif*. Agamben<sup>97</sup>, interestingly for us, shifts Foucault's Archaeology of Knowledge toward an Archaeology of the Sign. Describing reality as a collection of signatures, operators rather than simple signifiers, the author states that the signature "is what [...] displaces and moves [...] into another domain".<sup>98</sup> As we elaborated above, design – urban and architectural – and designers can reconfigure as one of these operators, able to intercept 'sacred' signatures and to move them back toward the realm of the profane.

91 Henri Lefebvre, *La Pensée Marxiste et la Ville*. Paris: Casterman, 1972.

Colin McFarlane, "The city as assemblage: dwelling and urban space," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 29(4), 2011.

Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, vol. IV: *Centrist Liberalism Triumphant, 1789–1914*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

92 Lefebvre, *La Pensée Marxiste*.

Simon Kipfer et al., "Henri Lefebvre: Debates and controversies. *Progress in Human Geography*," first published online May 29, 2012

93 Perhaps the main inspiration for such methodology comes from Robert Smithson's *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic*, where the artist describes a portion of apparently wasted suburban land as monumental. See: Robert Smithson, "A tour of the monument of Passaic." In: Flam, J. (ed.) *Robert Smithson: The collected writings*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997.

94 Agamben, *Coming Community*.

95 Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*. New York: Zone Books, 2009, 40,

96 Foucault, *Archaeology*.

97 Giorgio Agamben, *Signature*.

98 Giorgio Agamben, *Signature*, 40.



Figure 6: Porto Fluviale, a moment of our workshop, discussing possibilities with the inhabitants.

Source: DPU summerLab, 2012.

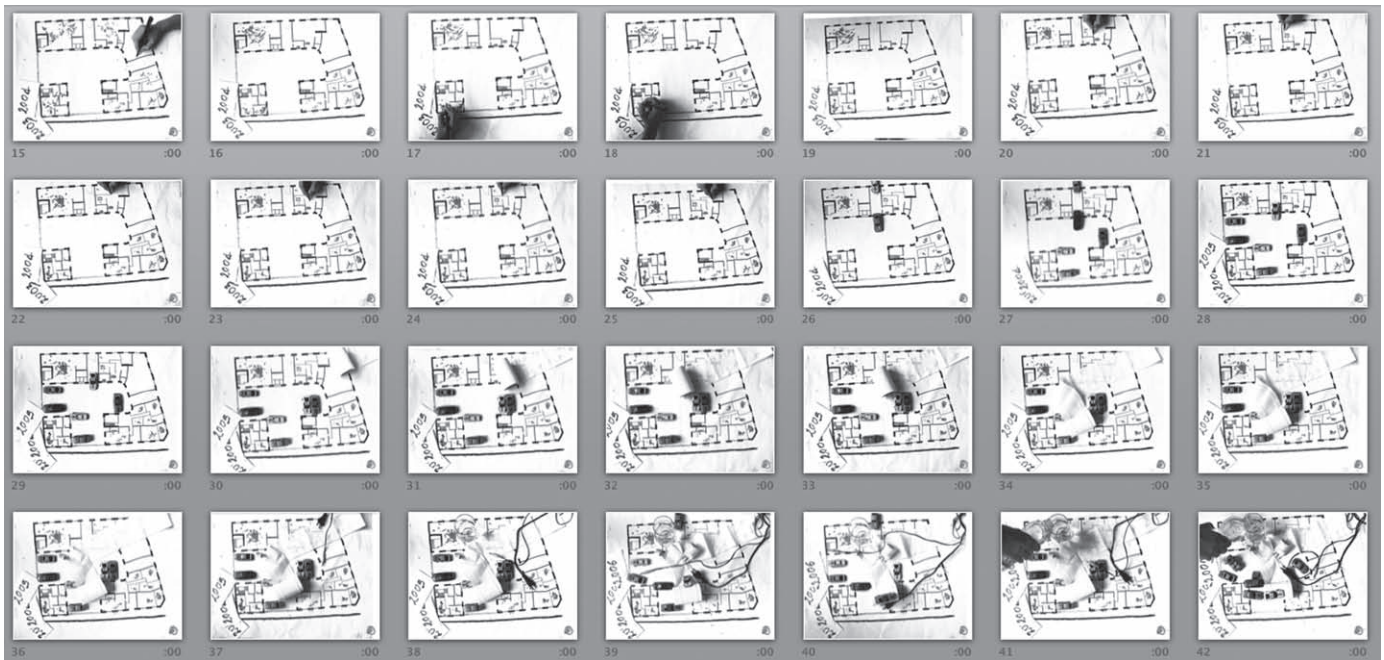
In Porto Fluviale the design process aimed to re-write a mythology of the place, listening to the life and housing stories of the inhabitants – first collectively and then individually – understanding how the spatial and social relations have changed during the almost ten years of occupation. The participants created a set of life-stories 'cards', which should have served as a representation of identity designed towards both potential visitors and inhabitants. Such gesture portrayed heroically their collective and individual emancipations from a situation of housing emergency, and their dreams about a future piazza as catalyser for their dreams and aspirations. Porto Fluviale as a 'coming community' emerges from such mythology: Y. and H. for instance tell us of the impossibility of surviving in Rome with children without a family backing you up, "this is why we live in the family of Porto Fluviale, although this condition carries along with it many discriminations: we often have to conceal this";<sup>99</sup> or P. who explains us how she moved away from Ecuador because of an economic crisis, and how she established her new roots there, to the extent she is saving money to make her parents able to join her;<sup>100</sup> or R., who acknowledges the big challenges the project of the piazza will carry with it, but sees it as a necessary step to overcome the prejudices against them, and as an opportunity to build a public space that would be quite unique in the Roman context. And finally I., who is now happy in her small flat with her two dogs and simply dreams of a Piazza with more space for sport activities, and in general, more 'green'. From overlapping all these stories, an intriguing stop-motion movie was realised, showing on the ground-floor plan all the mutation this had undergone in the last 10 years: how the place was conquered, shared, transformed, enclosed and then, the day of the projection, opened up through an event.

Inhabitants and participants had different reactions to this design approach, the former feeling happy about being involved in the process and seeing themselves legitimated as the actual agent of change over their space; the latter initially contesting it because of its being essentially retrospective, but then ap-

99 (DPU summerLab, 2012:22)

100 (ibid.)





**Figure 7:** Porto Fluviale, frames from the stop motion movie on the history of the courtyard.  
**Source:** DPU summerLab, 2012.

precipitating its potential to look differently at the past to envision possible shared future situations: from setting up a ‘monumental’ community garden to activate the leftover portions of the courtyard, and make this new greenery visible from the train passing by; to using the corridors between the gates and the courtyard in a flexible way, as space for projection, for sports, for relax, for ‘looking at the outside’ or for getting in contact with the outside itself, installing small activities on it; to declaring the inter-cultural richness of the inside on the façade toward the road.<sup>101</sup> Whatever idea (whatever form of profanation) produced in six days came out of, ultimately, our presence *in* the space, which is the first form of *profanation* against a sacralised and alienated practice of urban design, and toward a reinvented one.

## Towards the politics of Profanation: a way forwards

In engaging directly with the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben, and in proximity of the reality of Porto Fluviale, we understood profanation as an act deactivating the apparatuses of power which the urban governmental dispositif has put in place, unlocking its *fenced* situations, its *medieval* condition<sup>102</sup>, working on a ‘change of use’ – a change that is different from the one capital had ‘assigned’ to that particular piece of urban fabric. The deep causes of such ‘gated’ urban landscape derive not only by

the ‘neoliberal’ side of the dispositif (those actors pursuing investment and profit by developing areas), but rather by the continuous and overwhelming exercise of powers that *all* the actors of the urban transformation perform to guarantee themselves access and control over certain spaces of the city. Spelling out the desire for such an overwhelming dominance, we find, amongst its root causes, far more than the quest for profit, but rather gender, racial and ethnic discrimination, contrasting political and religious ideologies, drug trafficking, the obsession for security.<sup>103</sup> The attitude of the urban to ‘gate’ therefore depends on much more than neoliberalism: in the specific case of the Struggle for Housing in Rome, social movements – in contesting the order of things enacting an equality that is not yet in place, do not limit themselves within the contestation of building and land speculation typical of the urban regime but invite rather an urban collectivity to ‘meet’ that otherness (political as well as ethical, racial) which the occupations embody and would otherwise be lost. Rome’s Social Movements well interpret the twofold action of ‘appropriating’ a space and ‘participating’ in its transformation that Purcell recalls, referring to Henri Lefebvre, as mandatory action to contrast the commodification of the urban (to profane it) and then of urban design.<sup>104</sup>

We saw though that Profanation, as *gesture*, neither *produces* nor *enacts* space, but rather breaks that false alternative between means and ends<sup>105</sup> that brings, after all, to conceive Ur-

<sup>101</sup> This idea was actually realised a few months later, getting in touch with the famous artist Blu, who drew a mural on the façade, see: Blu Walls. [Online Resource] Available at: <http://www.blublue.org/sito/walls/001.html> [last access: 19 November 2013]

<sup>102</sup> Alsayyad & Roy, *Medieval Modernity*.

<sup>103</sup> Dikeç, “Justice and the Spatial Imagination.”

Soja, “Unjust Geographies.”

<sup>104</sup> Mark Purcell, “Citizenship and the Right to the Global City: Reimagining the Capitalist World

Order,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27 (3), 2003: 564-90.

<sup>105</sup> Agamben, *Means*.

ban Design simply as a tool to create governable and exclusive space and, on the other side, that enactment of equality only as a means toward an unreachable end. Through profanation, as a design act able to open up space and make visible new modes of politics, not only is the political subject enabled to retain her/his political condition, *conditio sine qua non* to claim her/his possibility to have an agency in urban transformation, but is moved toward a centre, closer to that Equality that otherwise could only be supposed. Not only does she/he retain the capacity of speech, but she/he is put in the condition to exercise such capacity, not to fall into *bare life*<sup>106</sup>. In repositioning and questioning design, urban and architectural, as a gesture of profanation not only do we wish to offer a critical reading of Agamben's powerful possible adoption into the realm of design, but also to refuse an *aesthetics of praxis* (as production) which would merely negotiate a field of force where one is already embedded into its productive relations, in its sacrality. And, rather to insist on an *aesthetics of poiesis* (as action, art as production of origin)<sup>107</sup> where space and relations are produced and rediscovered through profanations, and thus brought back to the use of man and his ability to construct politics.

This practice allows urban design to investigate new territories with a broad understanding of "the role played by the aesthetics and politics of space – i.e. 'the urban sensorium' [...] in producing and reproducing the durable disjunction between the consciousness of our urban 'everyday life [...] and the now global structure of social relations that is itself ultimately responsible for producing the spaces of our lived-experience'".<sup>108</sup> It is this combination of the aesthetic and the political that reveals the depth of influence of urban design, which acts not as a benign product of development, but as a contested channel through which corporations, governments and urban inhabitants are involved in the shaping of urban spaces.

Focusing on profanation and its potentials, the paper has sought to contribute to the recent debate emerged around the 'architecture of transgression'<sup>109</sup> and the 'mongrel discipline of urban design'<sup>110</sup> as gestures, discourses and practices that go beyond established limits – and to question the boundaries of what architecture and design are, and what they could (or even should) be. Specifically also, we wish to further enrich the existing body of work developed around the relevance of

Agamben's philosophy on space,<sup>111</sup> this time insisting on the profanation of urban design as an act of re-appropriating the communitarian and humanistic nature of the urban. Agamben's perspective can be made fruitful in critical research on urban policies and design. It involves a connection between politics, law and the production of space—a triangle in which the construction of the human subject is situated. The urban aesthetic regime with its sacrality had become the paradigm of an exceptional production of space by decree—a member of a largely wasted, invisible, poor marginalized subpopulation whose rights are potentially suspended. Despite the logical limits of this paper, we felt that urbanism and design could not ignore the intricacies of the principles of exclusion that have been molded into urban practices and where spatial topologies have brought an active dispositif of forces with the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, and discourses of living beings. In this light, this paper calls for more empirical and theoretical efforts, not only on the dehumanizing aspect of architectural and urban dispositifs, but also on the multiplicity of strategies that can contest and deactivate them. The research approach, applied to practice, can be seen as mobile and tactical as it does allow to analyse and then synthesise – or deconstruct and recalibrate – urban design as a contextual, responsive, and ultimately empowering practice that is not about the destruction of the dispositifs of exception, but in rendering them inoperative by liberating that which has been separated by them: profaning them.

106 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

107 Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999.

108 Kanishka Goonewardena, *Critical urbanism: space, design, revolution* in Banerjee T & Loukaitou-Sideris A (eds.) *Companion to Urban Design*, London Routledge, 2011.

109 Jonathan Mosley and Rachel Sara (2013) *The Architecture of Transgression: Towards a Destabilising Architecture*. J.

Mosley & R. Sara eds. *Architectural Design*. 83 (6), 14–19. Kim Dovey, *Informalising Architecture: The Challenge of Informal Settlements*. J. Mosley & R. Sara eds. *Architectural Design*. 83 (6), 2013, 82–89.

110 Matthew Carmona, *The Place-shaping Continuum: A Theory of Urban Design Process*. *Journal of Urban Design*. 19 (1), 2014, 2–36.

111 Boano & Floris, *Città Nude*.

Pløger, "Focault's Dispositif".

Boano, "Violent Spaces".

Boano & Martén. "Agamben's urbanism of exception".