DISTRICT WORKSHOP

1979, Otranto, Italy

The "district workshop" was a project dedicated to the rehabilitation of historic urban centres sponsored by UNESCO in 1979, and was commissioned to the Piano & Rice studio by Wolf Tochtermann.

It was a demonstrative experiment carried out within the city of Otranto, located in the Italian region of Puglia, which sought to determine the feasibility of employing traditional construction techniques to restore the city's ancient historic centre. The district workshop intervention would not require the inhabitants to leave their homes nor to actively participate in the work operations themselves.
To this end, a number of new light and non-invasive technologies were introduced for most of the routine and special maintenance operations to be carried out within the historic centre.

This experiment saw the participation of Gianfranco Dioguardi, who arranged for the work management company, Mario Fazio and Magda Arduino, who helped set up the methodology for the participation process, director Giulio Macchi, who supervised the collection of oral history accounts, and photographer Gianni Berengo Gardin, who documented the various stages of the work activities.

The project involved the construction of a cube-shaped mobile unit that could be transported on a truck and was installed at the centre of the city's historic district.
The unit was organized into four sections, which occupied the four sides of the cube itself: analysis and diagnostics, information and education, open project, and construction work. Each section was assigned a specific operating time.

The analysis and diagnostics phase involved an inspection of the deteriorated building's conditions in terms of structure, architecture and hygiene. The instrumentation included a hot air balloon that had been adapted for photogrammetric survey. This unit provided detailed aerial imaging of the ancient district, thus combining the excessively costly technique of aerial survey with the less precise technique of manual relief. The purpose of this initial operation was to carry out an extensive structural, chemical and physical analysis of the old dwellings.

The second section of information and education, on the other hand, was dedicated to acquiring knowledge on issues relating to the recovery of the historic centres themselves. It contained a library and a video library, and also provided information on the local regulatory and urban planning situation, the legislative tools, possible sources and public funding methods. It essentially acted as a liaison between the workshop's specialists and the residents of the historic district.

The section dedicated to the open project was focused on raising public awareness of the practical and technical aspects of the project's activities, by providing expert advice on current legislation, cost issues, the purchase of materials from cooperatives, etc.

The work and construction section moved on from the diagnoses of the previous stages to the actual work activities. The work site employed the use of compact, silent and lightweight operational tools of low environmental impact (mobile scaffolding, low-speed electric transportation modules, cable cars, presses, welders, etc.).

Without requiring the residents to leave their homes, the work was initiated: after having consolidated the walls, the cracks were sutured, the roofing and plaster work was redone, any humidity was eliminated and sanitary structures were installed. Where necessary, innovative solutions were applied, such as the spraying of polyurethane foam (for thermal and acoustic insulation) or the injection of silicone resins (to protect against humidity).

The problem was that the mechanism had to be set back in motion after having been jammed for quite some time: this was to be achieved through the creation of a permanent and continuously operational work site.
In this sense, the workshop did not come to an end with completion of the experiment itself, but was rather extended into the future and took on the characteristics of a self-managed studio capable of scheduling its own cycle of investments.
It's an excellent example of how memory architecture can be implemented by acquiring a more in-depth knowledge of the people's needs, by evaluating the magnitude of the task, and by making use of the scientific tools available.