

Arbeitskreis Theorie und Lehre der Denkmalpflege e.V.  
in Kooperation mit der LWL-Denkmalpflege, Landschafts- und Baukultur in Westfalen  
und der Fakultät Architektur und Bauingenieurwesen der TU Dortmund

# Strukturwandel – Denkmalwandel

## Umbau – Umnutzung – Umdeutung



Städtische und ländliche Räume  
unter Umnutzungsdruck

Verdichtung und Leerstand,  
Segregation und Gentrifizierung,  
Identität und Differenz

Jahrestagung 2015 in Dortmund

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## Research and Projects for the Recovery of the “Tifeo” Power Station in Augusta, Sicily

EMANUELE PALAZZOTTO, LAURA SCIORTINO, FLAVIA ZAFFORA

### SUMMARY

Even nowadays, the buildings of the Augusta “Tifeo” Power Station (Province of Syracuse) tell us, in a significant way, the history of the Sicilian industrial dream at the end of the 1950s. Now it reveals the remarkable contradictions of its founding, which exist in Augusta even today due to the harsh contrast with its polluted environment and the oppressive petrochemical plants that settled here in those times.

The Augusta Tifeo Power Station became operative on February 17<sup>th</sup>, 1959. The power plant covered around 150,000 square meters and provided, at operating speed, 210 MW of power, with three oil-fired groups. The recovery of the Tifeo Power Station cannot be accomplished without an open and multidisciplinary approach that locates it in the current and future reality of the wider territory in which it is situated. The authorial style of

the building is guaranteed by the cultural and professional importance of its designers – among them Giuseppe Samonà and Riccardo Morandi – but the quality of its architectural values should be enough to avoid careless demolition due to the loss of its primary productive function.

With these convictions and acknowledging the architectural qualities of this complex (which received the In/Arch Prize in 1961), the Department of Architecture and the PhD program in Architecture/Architectural Design at the University of Palermo, along with ENEL (Italy’s national electric company), have started a partnership aimed at completing a feasibility study on the recovery of the Tifeo Power Station.

The initial knowledge and design work aims at defining a place of exchange between different project ideas in order to find a real way to change. This



A view of the polluted industrial area surrounding the Augusta Power Station (far right).



transformation must guarantee the safeguarding and enhancement of the architectural object and, at the same time, must suggest new and useful changes in the wider context where it is situated.

### Contradictions of industrial dreams in Sicily

The issue of recovering decommissioned industrial complexes has for some decades been a strategic field of reflection for disciplinary research on architecture and on the recovery of buildings, especially where it aims at the redevelopment and environmental restoration of wasted territories as well as economic and social rescue policies for communities that have often become poor.

As a consequence of these overlapping concerns, those involved face the real difficulty of identifying the most correct way, among several

possibilities, to achieve a complete enhancement of the potential of places and artifacts and to start the most advantageous redevelopment processes allowed by the specific case.

The case discussed here is in Sicily and its core is the recovery of an exquisite architectural work, that is an important power station, now about to be demolished: the Augusta "Tifeo" Power Station, a few kilometers away from Syracuse.

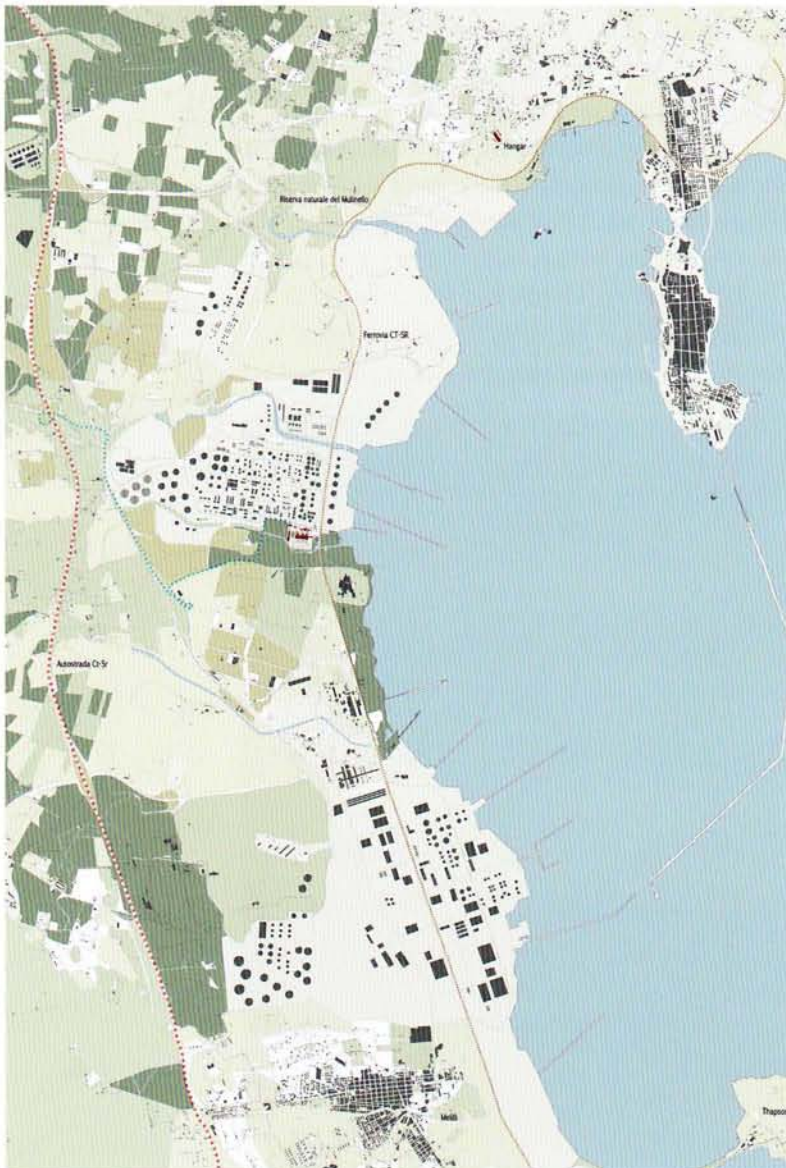
Today the buildings of the Tifeo<sup>1</sup> power plant tell the story of the Sicilian industrial dream of the late 1950s. It was a dream that, at that time, was the real chance for the revival of a territory deeply marked by the post-war crisis, a crisis related to its historically rural character, and, at the same time, to the great increase in migration towards richer and better-equipped areas of Italy.

The ongoing electrification process in Sicily and the huge increase in power supply in those years, intended to spur economic development, had, among their protagonists, the Società Generale Elettrica della Sicilia – the General Electric Society of Sicily (SGES)<sup>2</sup>. This society, before being absorbed by ENEL – Italy's national electric company<sup>3</sup> – was distinguished not only by its clear ambition and management ability in achieving its industrial goals, but also by its particular care for its own public image, which is evident throughout the architectural expressions of its production facilities.

This sensitivity was expressed in a very effective way, above all due to the tight relationship between the above-mentioned Society and the architect Giuseppe Samonà.<sup>4</sup>

With the passage of time, however, the Sicilian industrial dream revealed the underlying contradictions still present in Augusta today, together with the polluting and oppressive petrochemical plants built during those times.

These industrial plants are near the power station and have developed to almost totally fill Augusta's wonderful bay. They are almost exclusively detrimental in nature: they represent a hard core of resistance against an effective economic and environmental recovery of the whole area, keeping very little original significance as important production resources, which in the past promised a future of sustainable employment for a territory of great natural, historic and cultural richness.



Plan of the Augusta area. In red, the Augusta Power Station, located inside the industrial area. To the south, the archaeological site of Megara Hyblaea.



### The site of the power station

The area where the power station is sited is a place with a long and troubled history, as witnessed by Thucydides, Herodotus and Diodoro Siculo and revealed, even today, in the ruins of the archaic settlements of Thapsos<sup>5</sup> or the civilization of Mègara Hyblaea,<sup>6</sup> which succeeded in building a town here that at that time was competitive with the growing city of Syracuse.

At the crossing point of principal Mediterranean and Asian routes, on a natural peninsula extending to the south towards the Thapsos promontory and, a few kilometers farther, towards Syracuse, the city of Augusta faces on two natural gulfs. The inner one extends into a wide closed bay and is characterized by a deep sea floor that has always made this a very important place strategically, both from a military<sup>7</sup> and from a commercial point of view.

A wonderful environment surrounds Augusta. Its mountains, water flows and sea define a possible system of parks that is already planned and has its natural conclusion in the "wet areas": huge salt marshes that existed here before the industrial settlements and that, as early as 1200 AD, gave Augusta the name of "maremortum".

Any proposals for the post-industrial future of these places should encompass a Mediterranean and European<sup>8</sup> perspective and should involve a vi-

sion that combines development and employment, as well as guarantees the recovery of identity and the urgently necessary measures for environmental redevelopment.

In this complex situation, where huge problems are mixed with great potentialities, the recovery of the Augusta Tifeo Power Station can be one of the first significant elements in a program of redevelopment for the whole area, becoming the possible starting point for much larger processes.

### The power station's complex, its quality and duality

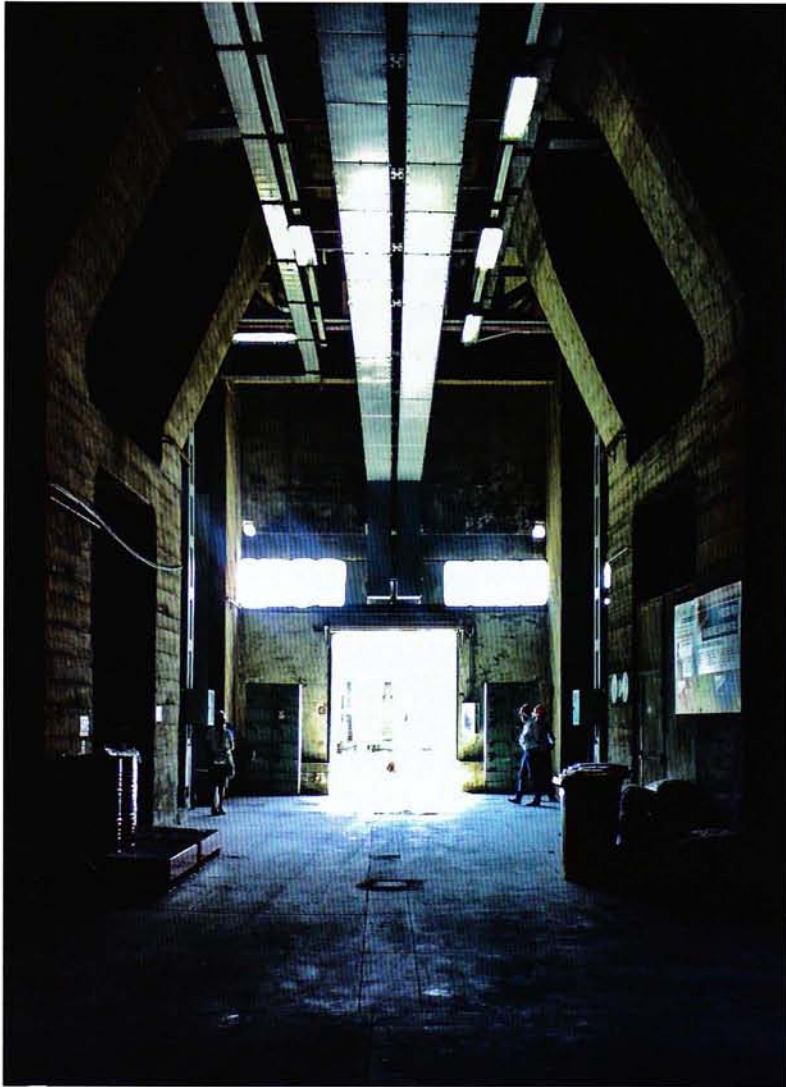
The Augusta Tifeo Power Station covers an area of around 150,000 square meters and provided, at full operating speed, 210 MW of power with three oil-fired groups. The oil came from the neighboring refinery Rasiom (now ESSO) through an oil pipeline. In 1961, it produced almost 60% of the entire power demand of the region. Located in a vast natural valley between the Cantera and Marcellino rivers, the Tifeo Power Station is still distinguished by its particular architectural shape, which represents a significant redeeming quality, even given the powerful contrast with its natural context.

The system of buildings composing the power station<sup>9</sup> was conceived by the architect Samonà as a "little city" of energy, structured along an axis and following recognizable rules that describe sequen-



General view of the complex.





The massive pillars supporting the turbine hall.

ces of hierarchical and functional relations within an “open” composition.

This “little city” can be described, starting from one of its most evident characteristics, as a succession of recomposed dualities operating on various levels of relationship. These result from the great synthesizing abilities shown by the designers of this architecture, but also from research into more appropriate spatial expressions for the technical functions needed. With this in mind, the first duality can be seen in the contrast between the principal volume’s horizontality and the verticality of the boiler-towers and chimneys.<sup>10</sup> This relationship is typical of this kind of building (being technically determined) but, in this case, it is underlined by the covering of the principal volume, a light horizontal plate that protrudes slightly and is articulated by the different shadow effects of the fork-like structures supporting it, which recall, moreover, primordial archetypal forms.

Another obvious dialectic is that between the structural and material solutions and the different functions of the parts of the complex, solutions that distinguish the turbine building from the three boiler-towers. The “ethical” aim of achieving structural honesty is shown here by the choice of steel for the towers and concrete for the turbine building. Through the sensitive use of structural materials, the designers distinguished the architectural space of turbine hall from the purely technical space of the boiler-towers.

Another dialectical declination of structural expressions occurs between the inside and the outside of the principal building, in the independence of content from container. The articulated structural shell (characterized by thin, fork-like columns) supports only the roof-covering and the long beams for the overhead travelling crane, but not the middle floor. All of the massive inner technical equipment is sustained by a totally autonomous structural system, which discharges vibrations and transmits the weight of the engines onto a massive central core comprised of “titanic pillars”.

In the primary building, yet another dialectic experience is to be found in something that can be described as “passing from shadow into light”. The designer clearly used light as a medium of spatial and architectural articulation, creating a progression of highlights in the wide turbine hall; there one can experience an almost total dematerialization of the walls into light behind the ceiling beams.

As an interpretation of the project intentions, the will to “enlighten” also characterizes the shoulder of the building, here ingeniously realized through architectural means.

### Possible scenarios and project visions

The owner’s decision to shut down the primary production function of Tifeo by 2015 has made it impossible to delay the finding of some other solution in order to prevent the unfortunate (but likely) demolition of the power station.

What solutions are desirable for this fine system of buildings, and what role could it have in meeting the urgent need for enhancement felt in the wider territory in which it is located?

In order to answer these questions, the Department of Architecture and the PhD program in Architecture/Architectural Design at the University of Palermo, altogether with ENEL (Italy’s national electric company), have started a collaboration aimed



at supporting a feasibility study on the recovery of the Tifeo Power Station. The goal is to define some possible project scenarios for an intervention, perhaps involving more specific architectural projects.

In this, the PhD program in Architecture can take advantage of more than 10 years' experience with the general issue of the restoration of "Modern" architecture; an experience proved by around fifty theses (dealing with buildings located in Europe, in Italy and above all in Sicily) and witnessed by the publication of three "notebooks" dedicated to the topic.<sup>11</sup>

Starting from an initial phase establishing a metrical, material and critical knowledge of the buildings, our work has gone deeply into the various themes concerning the management and complex recovery of this artifact and its area.

The hypothesis, based on a typical method used in PhD research, starts from the matching of restoration and development intention and considers the architectural project not as an aim but as a knowledge "tool", because of its ability to establish a critical movement back and forth, referring both to historical and critical studies and to the comprehension of the specific architecture to be recovered. For this, the project is like a necessary device for the critical interpretation of the work and for showing the various features of the artifacts and the places to be reused. Dealing with the issue of the "restoration of the Modern" (although the argument could apply to the general issue of the restoration) the "crux of the problem" becomes evident: only by starting from an acknowledgment of its nature (and, therefore, from the specific case) it is possible to make conscious and informed decisions toward a solution.

In case of the Tifeo Power Station it is amply clear that, whatever one might envision for its recovery, it must be tied to an open and multidisciplinary approach that situates the power station in

the present and the future of its wider territory. The past, present and, of course, future of the Augusta area are deeply connected with the sea and the particular geographical condition of these places; even today they could play a strategic role in the new global trade system connected to them, as well as a potential change in energy supply production, to be rethought in a sustainable way.

Conscious of the complexity of the issue, it is evident that only through a comparison of different ideas can the best pathways to be followed be determined<sup>12</sup> in order to recover the artifact in a way that supports the requalification of the entire territorial context; this could contribute to its safeguarding. The knowledge-gathering and project-development process, already started within the framework of the PhD, has been oriented towards a "call for ideas", a place for a dialogue between different cultural bases in architectural and restoration design.

To this end, ten European and Italian groups have been invited to participate, and each has been asked to develop its own project.

The differing design hypotheses eventually compose an alternative mosaic of possibilities, an open system providing clear, immediate solutions and different concrete scenarios for the short, medium and long term.

The next step is not to choose the "best" proposal among the submissions; the projects are not executive and they do not aim to solve definitively a very difficult problem that is changing more and more and will involve plenty of different actors. Starting from a critical synthesis of the requalification principles and the logic of these ideas, it should be possible to find, in cooperation with the client and local stake-holders, a concrete and shared way to change and recover these places; a way to safeguard and value the architectural property and, at the same time, to realize, in different steps, concrete and significant consequences for the whole context.

## Illustrations

- 1 Laura Sciortino
- 2 Laura Sciortino
- 3 Flavia Zaffora
- 4 Emanuele Palazzotto

## Annotations

- 1 According to myth, Tifeo (Typhon) was the son of Tartarus (the personification of Hell) and Gaia (Mother Earth). He was a horrible giant who was condemned by the will of Zeus to lie pinned underneath the island of Sicily in a sort of crucifixion, with his mouth becoming the volcanic cone of Mount Etna.
- 2 The energy supply plan created by SGES encompassed an electric connection to the Continent via a 220 MV line, the construction of two big power plants (the Augusta plant to supply the eastern part of Sicily, and another near Termini Imerese PA to supply the western part), the construction of a big hydroelectric plant in Guadalami, and some minor works, among them the Trapani Power Plant. See Scimemi, Cesare: *La centrale termoelettrica Orso Mario Corbino nel complesso produttivo elettrico della Sicilia*, in: *Sicilia Elettrica*. Magazine of the general electric society of Sicily, no. 14, September – October 1959, pp. 3–5.
- 3 The nationalization of the electric field happened with Law no. 1643 in 1962, after which the Ente nazionale per l'energia elettrica (ENEL), the national electric company, was created.
- 4 It was a relationship that started with the SGES Director eng. Cesare Scimemi. Giuseppe Samonà, at that time Dean of the IUAV (Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia), was given responsibility for the architectural design of all of the principal buildings of SGES: the power station in Augusta (SR) (1955–60); the power station in Termini Imerese (PA) (1960–64); the SGES offices in Syracuse (1960–64); the SGES building in Palermo (1960–64); the power station in Trapani (1963); and the SGES offices in Milazzo and Patti (ME) (both 1963). To these buildings should be added the private house of eng. Scimemi in the seaside town of Mondello (PA), which pre-dates all of the other projects (1950–54). See Ajroldi, Cesare: *La Sicilia, i sogni, le città*. Giuseppe Samonà e la ricerca di architettura, Il Poligrafo, Padova 2014, pp. 235–242.
- 5 Thapsos is the site of an ancient Neolithic village where several tholos graves from the Middle Bronze Age are preserved today.
- 6 Mègara Hyblaea (8th century BC to 3rd century AD) was founded by colonists from Megara (coming from Attica). It was destroyed during the Second Punic War and never rebuilt.
- 7 Augusta is a very important strategic and military site; this is demonstrated by the presence of the ancient Federician castle, the fortresses of Garcia, Vittoria and Avalos (16th century), and also the huge hangar for zeppelins (1918) and the area nearby. Since 1934, Augusta has grown to become an important base for the Italian navy as a stronghold in the Mediterranean Sea; indeed it is the second most important harbor in Italy after Taranto. Since 2002 Augusta harbor has been a primary site for the Comando Militare Autonomo della Sicilia, making Augusta an important base for organizations of the Atlantic Alliance.
- 8 One of the most relevant hypotheses for the future of Augusta's bay sees the transformation of its harbor into a great Mediterranean hub for transshipment.
- 9 The complex was awarded the In/Arch prize in 1961 for its outstanding architectural qualities.
- 10 The rhythm of succession among the chimneys is not consistent across the three sections: rather, the first two sections are mirrored (and more space is left between the first two towers) and the pattern is simply repeated in the third.
- 11 Palazzotto, Emanuele (ed.): *Il progetto del restauro del Moderno*, l'Epos, Palermo 2007; Palazzotto, Emanuele (ed.): *Il restauro del Moderno in Italia e in Europa*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2011; Palazzotto, Emanuele (ed.): *Esperienze nel restauro del Moderno*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2013.
- 12 Culotta, Pasquale: *La sonda del progetto per un Centro di coordinamento e documentazione degli archivi dell'architettura del XX secolo in Sicilia*, in Culotta, Pasquale/ Sciascia, Andrea: *Archivi dell'architettura del XX secolo in Sicilia. Il Centro di coordinamento e documentazione*, l'Epos, Palermo 2006, pp. 11–15.





Strukturwandel ist die *conditio sine qua non* der modernen Denkmalpflege. Ohne Wandel – ob politisch oder ökonomisch motiviert – gäbe es die Kraft des Beharrens nicht, die dem Konservieren zugrunde liegt, nicht den Wunsch, Bedeutungsvolles dem Strom der Zeit zu entreißen und gewissermaßen auf Dauer zu stellen. Brüche bzw. Transformationsprozesse sind es insofern, die Denkmalpflege als gesellschaftlichen Belang nicht nur initiiert, die sie nachfolgend auch verändert und veranlasst haben, immer wieder neu über ihre Gegenstandsbereiche nachzudenken. Der sogenannte Fortschritt bringt neue Denkmale, neue Wertbegründungen und auch neue Erhaltungsmethoden hervor. Auch die Denkmalwelt ist somit in einem steten Wandel begriffen – ein Prozess, der ihre Gegenstände und geistigen Fundamente gleichermaßen umfasst und mit dem gängigen Terminus der „Erweiterung des Denkmalbegriffs“ nur unzureichend beschrieben ist.

Auch die gegenwärtigen gesellschaftlichen Veränderungen verlangen nach konservatorischen Antworten, das Fach ist somit aufgerufen, sich im Nachdenken über die Denkmalpflege und ihr Selbstverständnis einzureihen in die große Tradition, die Karl Friedrich Schinkel mit seinem wegweisenden Memorandum vor 200 Jahren begründet hat.

*Ingrid Scheurmann*