

Forts ecologies: an interspecific approach to fortified heritage

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Abstract

'Landscapes-forts' is an independent research and curatorial project started in 2019 and aimed at building a new territorial imaginary for the abandoned WWI Austro-Hungarian forts of Trentino-Alto Adige alpine region, linked to a renewed ecological vision. Drawing insights from landscape archeology, built heritage, emotional geography, contemporary philosophy (posthuman, multispecies and interspecific approaches), natural sciences (geology, botany, biochemistry), phenomenology and feminism, the project focuses on the post-war life span of these structures. Our reading promotes interspecific approach to forts heritage that interlink multispecies and landscape as a comprehensive framework, able to rediscover and narrate all those micro-facts and more-than-human beings involved in shaping their environments, contributing to turning them into unconscious ecosystems. From history, the focus shifts to the stories, from heroes to the actors, from leaders to the guests: a ruin is not a process of destruction, but the process of a construction shared between humans and the other species. Establishing a parallel from queer and gender theory, the research challenges the very notion of 'natural' and 'artificial', proposing a queer approach to landscape where both dimensions fuse into a single hybrid presence. During their last one hundred years in fact, these abandoned structures became landscape and contributed to shape whole new mountains parts: concrete turns into stone, stalactites and stalagmites spring from underground parts, fungi and moss constitute new layers and everything fuses into a new coexistence. Therefore, these century-old mountain forts could offer the key to imagine spatial and material futures based on radical integration of species, genders, and categories, turning conflict archaeologies into traces of welcoming rituals. An untold story which opens up a space for possibilities and alternative assemblages to exist.

Keywords: landscapes-forts, ecologies, multispecies, hybrid.

1. Introduction

One hundred years ago, the Great War altered the alpine landscape through a series of marks and structures that profoundly changed the mountains, which have been partially reabsorbed by nature over time. Over the years in fact, and especially in the case of Austro-Hungarian abandoned fortifications of Trentino, structures created to dominate the surrounding environment have become examples of practices of coexistence between species (Fig. 1).

If the perspective on these mountain forts has always been informed by a mono-dimensional point of view based on a purely chronological,

material and artificial vision, this alternative approach focuses on the hybridisation of multiple dimensions and themes: natural and artificial, spatial and temporal, human and non-human, material and immaterial. Forts-ecologies claims to recognize the decisive role played in these locations by non-human agents and their processes: presences that have continued to make history and create stories, transforming these remains into something more than locations linked to the memory of past war events. The relationship between space and society, history and geography, structure and perception



Fig. 1- Gian Piero Sciocchetti, 1987, 'Forte Carriola in Valle di Ledro (TN)' (Fondo Sciocchetti - Biblioteca Universitaria Centrale Trento)

are embodied in the four ecologies of Los Angeles (Banham, 2009), capable of revealing the spirit of the city in a profound, unconventional and radical way. With this perspective, the contribution aims to propose a novel methodological approach to understand contemporary forts landscape heritage in relation to a larger condition. Four are the landscapes-forts ecologies proposed as the key narrative to interpret and read the whole territory going beyond the distinction between landscape and architecture: Hybrid (a queer approach to landscape), Ruins (geo-spatial and socio-graphical stratification), Habitat (multi-species interdependence), Worksite (forts as construction sites).

2. Hybrid: a queer approach to landscape

An ecosystemic approach implies a posthuman perspective (Miller & Gibson-Graham, 2019), able to recognize more-than-human beings as co-producers of transformative contributions within a specific habitat: this is the case of the forts that have suffered from a gradual process of abandonment, which have been strongly shaped by 'external' presences and in which artificial and natural categories do not apply anymore (Lowenhaupt Tsing, 2015; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Haraway, 2016) as they fuse into each other. Feminist geography has already reflected over the concept of interdependence as a key element to define how the materials and energy needed to take care of a land impact on that specific habitat as well as with other contexts. But such a focus on interdependence, and the parallel emergence of a plurality of voices within the landscape, triggers a vision in which the human - the so called 'artificial' - and the non-human - the

so called 'natural' - interact and exchange on the very same level. As queer theory have questioned the definition and presence of codified genders and categories (Preciado, 2018), we could thus imagine a *queer landscape theory*, where is not the distinction between sexual categories but between natural/artificial ones (Descola, 2014) that gets problematised.

The WWI mountain forts of Trentino-Alto Adige alpine region in particular, with their radical and experimental spatial and material presence, were designed, built and developed on a complete integration and fusion between local landscape and new structure (Fig. 2).

The mountain setting, with its extreme features, required the adoption of a series of compromises and a high degree of co-design between existing ecosystemic components and new interventions. Thus, beside the concept of a queer landscape, we can talk specifically about the emergence of, paraphrasing Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (Haraway, 1991), a *cyborg mountain*: a new paradigm to interpret contemporary landscape, an alternative and thought-provoking concept that suggests possible different spatial and material futures based on radical integration of species, categories and materialities. Through the lenses of contemporary feminist and queer theory, we can then see how the forts start to emerge as metamorphic objects that abolish every distinction between artificial and natural.

3. Ruins: geo-spatial and socio-graphical stratification

When we think about WWI Austro-Hungarian forts in the Alps the first link we make is to history, but we tend to forget that these are mountain forts, related to history ('WWI Austro-Hungarian') as much as they are related to geography ('in the Alps'): they were built on the mountains with a deep understanding of alpine territory, its physical morphology, logics and dynamics. We often tend to associate these structures to the role they played during historical facts and phases of the conflict, while many of these structures did not play any role at all: they were abandoned because their position or constructing technique was not relevant anymore (Fontana, 2016). But then what is their common element beyond conflict? Surprisingly, we could find it in another aspect, a word we do not often associate with conflict: relationship, relationship



Fig. 2- Forte Dosso delle Somme in Altipiano di Serrada (TN) from the photographic series ‘Remnants’ realized for the exhibition ‘Paesaggi Forti’ (photo by Mark Wilson, 2021)

with site, local territory, landscape, topography, geology. An element designed for conflict and to dominate territories was based on a subtle and sensitive connection with the natural landscape. So if it is true that on the one hand we cannot forget the aim of dominance and superimposition over territories and foreign cultures that lay behind the forts, on the other hand the presence and positioning of these structures demonstrate an intimate form of connection which resulted into a deep coexistence with the local environment. The term ‘ruins’ always seems to refer to the loss of an original state, to a process of physical destruction, while we should better interpret this process as a creative force, in terms of construction (Leoni, 2015). During their last one hundred years in fact, these abandoned structures became landscape and contributed to shape whole new mountains parts: concrete, disintegrating, formed a new geological layer built on top of the natural ones, fusing together *natural* and *artificial* in a sort of hybrid stratigraphy (Morton, 2013). From being an extraneous and artificial material, concrete increasingly came to be seen as a legitimate presence in the alpine context (Fig. 3),

a rapid-setting liquid material on walls of ancient rock (Ferrari, 2019). These locations are not ruins but building sites, in-progress moments of co-design, places of spatial construction: building sites where spatial and temporal dimensions continuously exchange, where distant geological layers lie beside new materials. They are places intended as a palimpsest (Corboz, 1983), where the complexity of a multilayered landscape is foreseen by embracing a multiple perspective able to profoundly comprehend the logic of past transformation, current trends, ongoing dynamics, and future possible desires (Favargiotti et al. 2022).

4. Habitat: forts as construction sites

Habitat is generally intended as a living space for humans and other living beings (European Union, 1992). The forts were designed to be inhabited by humans but most of their life span, corresponding to the period after the war, were inhabited by non-human presences, which had no significant voice until now. Unconsciously, these structures became ecosystems able to accommodate other



Fig. 3- Collage of ‘before/after’ of Forte Verle in Pianina di Vezzena (TN) realized for the exhibition ‘Paesaggi Forti’ by Carla Colzani, Benedetta Aliprandi and Livia Sassudelli (2022)



Fig. 4- ‘Herbarium’ realized for the exhibition ‘Paesaggi Forti’ by Marco Ferrari (photo by Riccardo De Vecchi, 2022)

living beings inside a space designed, built and conceived by humans. A landscape-based strategic approach can instead foster both tangible and intangible values and propose an alternative narrative, nurturing strategies and toolkits from these experiences that could illuminate reflections towards a more open and inclusive habitat (Ferretti & Favargiotti, 2021). Based on this, we focus on the post-war life span of forts and on all those micro-facts and more-than-human beings involved in shaping their environments, contributing in turning them into unconscious ecosystems. From History, the focus shifts to the stories, from heroes to the actors, from leaders to the guests. If we focus on the last 100 years we see no significant historical fact, but this does not mean that we should overlook all the other micro-facts that happened, mainly not involving humans or at least involving humans and non-humans at the same time. Spiders and bats are now found in great numbers, stalactites and stalagmites spring from underground parts, fungi and moss constitute new layers and everything fuses into

a new coexistence. So beside the inorganic level of hybridisation we introduced in the previous paragraph, there is an organic - botanical and animal - one. These defense structures were finally conquered by plants: a gentle but pervasive form of invasion (Fig. 4). A botanical re-appropriation which resulted from the process of colonization by fungi, moss, and other vegetal presences. Beside this vegetal form of invasion, we should notice an animal one, for which these structures turned into alternative ecosystems, platforms of mutual adaptation between certain animal species and these new hybrid environments.

5. Worksite: between material and immaterial

The idea laying beyond this whole text is that WWI landscape-forts of Trentino-Alto Adige are material remains of the past which could constitute a laboratory for the emergence of alternative stories and stimulating concepts. As we have seen, today their spatiality is actually more linked to the natural surroundings than to the memory of the war, and this consideration calls for the construction of an alternative narrative: there is a detachment from a perception still abundantly informed by the idea of conflict and tragedy (Bondi & Davidson, 2005) and the actual aspect of these sites, which talk about integration, relationship, acceptance and horizontality too. In the same way, their interpretation should be open and inclusive, without forgetting their past but without overlooking the lively connections and challenging questions that these structures offer today. The ghosts of conflict co-inhabit these spaces together with animal, botanical and mineral presences: material and immaterial dimensions live next to each other. Instead of ruins these forts are thus worksites of contradictory imaginaries, testing grounds for innovative concepts and for the emergence of new stories beside the official and main one (Fig. 5). The most effective way to give these structures a new life does not come with modifications and material alterations but through the formation of a new territorial imaginary: to change the view on them means to reconfigure them, opening up a space for untold possibilities to emerge. It is an act of building based not on concrete or stone but on association of meanings and words, in order to be able to return and fully understand the whole complexity and variety of themes brought by the stratifications of the mountain forts (Tilley, 1997).



Fig. 5- Maquet in felt inspired to Forte Valmorbia (TN) from the maquette series ‘Soft Landscapes’ realized for the exhibition ‘Paesaggi Forti’ by Cristina Gallizioli (photo by Riccardo De Vecchi, 2022)

6. Conclusions

These century-old mountain forts could offer the key to imagine spatial and material futures based on radical integration of species, genders and categories, turning conflict archaeologies into traces of welcoming rituals. Today the forts and their stratifications talk not only about conflict but surprisingly also about dialogue and cohabitation, relationship and interdependence. They have become cyborg-objects that are fading artificial into natural, extremely contemporary examples of hybridization, symbiosis and multispecific dynamics (Fig. 6). The ruin has become the prototype of a future ecosystem: wrecks and waste are transformed into nurturing elements, multiple landscape archaeologies arise and intertwine with geographies in which human events contaminate and then cohabit with non-human ones. Landscape and architecture lose all distinction and allow to read the whole territory as a set of interconnected and constantly evolving relationships, re-interpreting past structures as trajectories for future narratives. This research on

a specific territorial context could offer a method and an interpretative thread that goes beyond its physical borders, and that can be exported, reassembled and applied on different lands and expanded to other disciplinary fields.

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Except for fig.1 all the images have been originally produced for the PaesaggiForti exhibition, curated by the authors of this contribution.



Fig. 6- Utopian view of Batteria Palon (TN) from the collage series realized for the exhibition 'Paesaggi Forti' by Beniamino Servino (2022)

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