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Unfinished Public Works in Italy as 'Ruins of Modernity' and their Subsequent Critical Implications

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Abstract

Since the end of the 1950s, Italy has focused part of its modernization into the erection of public works. Due to several cases of malpractice, this form of development has occasionally failed, producing a large amount of constructions that have remained unfinished for decades. In 2007, the group of artists Alterazioni Video declared these 'ruins of modernity' a romanticized architectural style; in doing so, their aim is to newly imbue the sites with value and dignity. This article uses the artists' argument as a point of departure to theorize about unfinished public works within interdisciplinary literatures on modern ruins. On the other hand, since modern ruins hold a critical meaning by definition – which the artists have deliberately excluded from their narrative – the article also accounts for the obscure political and economic aspects that caused this phenomenon. After remarking upon its specificities and, overall, its similarities with unfinished neoliberal topographies caused by the 2008 financial crisis, it is concluded that unfinished public works in Italy are an interesting case which serves to enrich debates on incompletion.

Keywords: unfinished public works, Italy, modern ruins, unfinished neoliberal topography, 2008 financial crisis

[1] I would like to thank Alterazioni Video for granting permission to reproduce one of their images, and I specially owe a debt to Andrea Masu for our inspiring conversations. I am grateful to Dr. Max Guerra and Dr. Alfredo González-Ruibal, who continuously supervised my work, and my gratitude is extended to the anonymous reviewers in this journal for their constructive insights. Thanks to the Cultural Landscape Research Group at the Polytechnic University of Madrid, where I, as a visiting researcher, developed most part of this article. Finally, the present contribution would not have been possible without the Thüringer Graduiertenförderung scholarship granted by my university.

Introduction

The existence of unfinished public works in Italy is a phenomenon that, though dating back to the decades following World War II, has not been sufficiently interpreted until recent years. Today, national and international media as well as some academic texts and multidisciplinary art projects have started to address this issue, and it is not unreasonable to assert that such an increase in exposure is the consequence of the creative work done by the artist group Alterazioni Video in collaboration with their colleagues Enrico Sgarbi and Claudia d'Aita[2]. Alterazioni Video, originally based in Milan, first noticed the systematic presence of unfinished public works in 2006 after spending some time in Sicily. From then on, they constructed an informal survey on unfinished public works in Italy in the form of an on-line tool open to public contributions[3]. Alterazioni Video's preliminary results (2008) revealed that there are 395 unfinished public works in Italy from which 156, approximately 39.5%, are located in Sicily alone. This statistic demonstrated that the phenomenon of unfinished public works is most present in southern regions and proves less prominent towards the north of the country (Fig. 1). In view of such a reality, Alterazioni Video opted to coin the term 'Incompiuto Siciliano' – literally 'Sicilian Incompletion' – to refer to unfinished public works as a formal architectural style. This re-interpretation, which conveys the recovered dignity of these 'ruins of modernity', considers unfinished public works a type of heritage with the potential to represent the entirety of Italian society (2008). Yet, *an unfinished public work is 'Incompiuto Siciliano' despite being located in a different Italian region from Sicily*.

Fig. 1. National survey on unfinished public works

Source: Alterazioni Video, 2008. Reproduced by permission of Alterazioni Video

[2] See reference list for examples of media attention (Dipinto 2016; Lauria 2016; Donadio 2012; Meichtry 2012); increasing master thesis (Santangelo 2009; Accattini 2011; Scalia 2013; Bella 2015; Lago 2015) and artistic approaches (Felici 2011; Antolino 2013; Farmer and Cinelli 2015). On the other hand, along this article, and due to operational reasons, referring to 'Alterazioni Video' implicitly involves the participation of their two collaborators.

[3] The continuously updated version of this survey is accessible at <http://www.incompiutosiciliano.org/opere>

The first section of this article uses Alterazioni Video's work as a starting point from which to dig a little deeper into the physicality of unfinished public works (typological, urban and material qualities) to then, in the second section, make a theoretical analysis of their condition as spaces that have never been used nor inhabited. All this is done by contextualizing the case with interdisciplinary literature on 'modern ruins', which ultimately demonstrates the suitability of referring to unfinished public works as such – not only in the artistic realm but also at an academic level. This body of knowledge is supplemented by three different semi-structured interviews conducted with one of Alterazioni Video members – Andrea Masu – between October 2014 and May 2016. These interviews, together with Alterazioni Video's own production, show that 'Incompiuto Siciliano' is a project that is exclusively centred in the romantic revaluation of unfinished public works, and yet, explicit critical discourses on the negative origins of the sites are deliberately excluded from the artists' narrative. I have argued elsewhere (Arboleda 2016; 2017) that such a radical positivism, far from resulting in a naïve sanitization of dysfunctional management, corrupt politics or mafia networks, is rather an ironic and effective strategy of putting Italian incompletion on the agenda, which ultimately allows other people to explore the evident critical connotations within the phenomenon's origins[4]. This latter thought should not be surprising because, as noted by DeSilvey and Edensor (2012), modern ruins have a 'critical power' with the potential to open up access to alternative readings of modernity and notions of progress, and thus, ruins can be disruptive vehicles that offer new ways of looking at these. In this sense, the third section of the article breaks with Alterazioni Video's romantic argument to provide a condensed review of existing academic and journalistic works that have studied such a dilapidation of public funds, which leads one to consider that the political and economic causes that produced incompletion in Italy are systematic. Though this interpretation mainly relies on secondary sources, it serves as an appropriate contextualization to consequently, in the fourth section, grasp the specificities and, more importantly, the similarities of the Italian case when compared to the more recent and widely documented unfinished neoliberal topographies. The main argument is that, though belonging to different paradigms of modernization and coming from different epochs, society's behaviour in Italy, based on a broadly accepted condescension and simple indulgence, has not

[4] The above mentioned media attention, academic production and artistic works are a demonstration of such a thesis. The present paper may well be too.

been that dissimilar from those countries strongly affected by the bursting of the property bubble in 2008.

This contribution is both constructive and relevant because it allows us to expand discourses on incompletion – an increasingly important topic in urban studies – through the addition of an original case study. Said case is slightly different from the already existing ones in terms of *when and under what* political and economic circumstances it emerged, allowing us to build a wider argument about the different conditions under which ruins are produced. At this point, it is worth mentioning that the term 'ruin' has already been applied to describe the unfinished neoliberal topographies caused by the last global financial crisis. Kitchin et al. (2014) label unfinished estates in Ireland as 'new ruins' representing the property crash; Hernández (2012) calls those private unfinished constructions in Spain that reflect a 'ruined' development model and a 'ruined' way of living 'neo-ruins'; and Pálsson claims that 'these are not old ruins' (2012, 559) when referring to the half-finished and empty structures left by the collapse of the economic boom in Iceland. Hence, acknowledging that the term 'unfinished' is usually associated with the recent property boom, and taking into account that that there is an increasing number of critical contributions voiced towards neoliberal incompletion, this literature has been extrapolated and adjusted in order to detail a critical interpretation of the Italian case.

Physicality

It is important to note that Alterazioni Video's exclusive focus on unfinished 'public' works responds to the necessity for creating an artistic discourse where 'public' entails a cultural attitude, a common aspiration where everyone is reflected (Masu, Personal communication, 13 November 2015) – as opposed to private initiatives such as the phenomena of 'abusivism' (Zanfi 2014) and 'eco-monsters' (Romita 2007; Guido et al. 2009) that have also been largely associated with incompletion. Although the tangible repercussions of unfinished works are similar, be they privately or publicly developed, Masu (Personal communication, 13 November 2015) clearly distinguishes between both spheres in an attempt to classify unfinished public works as a representative factor of the Italian society as a whole.

When defining 'unfinished public works', Alterazioni Video (2008) refers to those public development projects whose construction process was interrupted for some reason, leaving them unfinished and their structures visible. This occurred in most of their documented cases, however, Masu (Personal communication, 11 October 2014) considers that 'unfinished public

works' *also* involve those public constructions that were fully realized though never used due to whichever kind of bureaucratic complexity that tended to arise. In this case, an unfinished public work initially looks like a finished product but, as time passes, it suffers a progressive ruination owing to a lack of use and maintenance. An example of this sort of unfinished public work is the 'lift to nowhere' in Sutera. Squires (2015) explains how, in order to attract tourism, a lift was proposed to link Sutera, a village of 1,400 inhabitants in central Sicily, to the monastery on the top of its neighbouring hill. Funded by the European Union with a budget of €2 million, it was finished in 2012 and, since then, has remained unused 'because the local council cannot afford the 100,000 euro annual operating, maintenance and insurance costs' (Squires 2015).

Regarding the typological classification of unfinished public works, and in view of Alterazioni Video's database, it can be summarized that two major divisions exist: infrastructure and social buildings. That is to say infrastructure would include facilities such as roads, railways, airports, harbours, tramways, bridges, tunnels or dams; furthermore, social buildings would involve every construction that was intended to serve a direct public service such as sport centers, hospitals, schools, theatres, etc. This latter typology constitutes the highest proportion of unfinished public works in Alterazioni Video's national survey, with such flagrant examples as the Athletics Stadium and Polo Field, or the Olympic Swimming-pool in the Sicilian town of Giarre amongst their number (Fig. 2 and 3), which have both remained unfinished since 1985.

Fig. 2. Athletics Stadium and Polo Field, Giarre

Source: Author, 2015

Fig. 3. Olympic Swimming-pool, Giarre

Source: Author, 2015

Additionally, narrowing our discussion of unfinished public works' existence to the most populated cities in Italy would provide, in territorial terms, only a very limited and erroneous perspective of the phenomenon. Without a doubt, unfinished public works exist in major urban contexts, however, the proportion in these cities is anecdotal when compared to the evident spread across the country. Small and medium-sized villages represent the characteristic and omnipresent 'acupuncture' where projects did not crystallize. More importantly, whether they be located in big cities, or medium or small villages, unfinished public works are rarely present in city or town centres; on the contrary, they are mostly part of the peripheral and even remote areas with respect to any settlement. This is certainly relevant when interpreting these sites as modern ruins because discourses on contemporary ruination have largely put the focus on the relation between abandonment and the suburban contexts where they are located.

In their review of the typologies considered modern ruins, DeSilvey and Edensor include 'factories, foundries, mills; military installations and Cold War remnants; post-Socialist state-built architecture; abandoned rural settlements; urban wastelands and *edgelands*; derelict rail and transportation networks [or] maritime relics' (2012, 466, own emphasis). As mentioned, unfinished public works in Italy are either infrastructure or social buildings. However, the remarkable aspect here is that, when mentioning 'edgelands', DeSilvey and Edensor open the possibility up to not only specific sites but to any site, regarding their specific urban consideration. Defined by British environmentalist Marion Shoard as the transient space between the rural and the urban, whose dynamics are 'unplanned, certainly uncelebrated and largely incomprehensible' (2002, 118), 'edgelands' is a term that has recently been brought to the study of modern ruins, together with similar concepts referring to derelict sites' placement. For Martin, edgelands host 'architecturally anonymous sites that are neglected in cultural and political understandings of everyday urbanism' (2014, 1109); Light and Young (2010) opt for the term 'liminal space' to describe the context of ambiguous spaces which are not relevant to the elites and yet they are ignored in the representation of a dominant order – a notion of neglect shared by Sheridan (2007) in his 'indeterminate territories'. In this sense, unfinished public works in Italy also come to reach this placeness in which modern ruins are embedded because their characteristic state of incompletion responds to the incapacity to generate a coherent and continuous urban fabric. The fragility of the neglect context in which unfinished public works take place responds to the failure to create public activity, resulting in recognizable structures that are filled with emptiness. Additionally, the act of playing them down for so long can only

be understood as a consequence of both their marginal location and their generalized mundane form and materiality, matching further discourses on modern ruins.

Occasionally, unfinished public works in Italy were envisaged as sophisticated buildings made to impress, exemplified by sports complex designed by star-architect Santiago Calatrava in Rome (Berg 2016) or the theatre conceived by eminent artist Pietro Consagra in Nuova Gibellina (Fig. 4). However, by studying Alterazioni Video's database, it is evident that functional-oriented constructions – that paradoxically never functioned – are much more common. The aesthetic indifference relates to the fact that these spaces were expected to provide a practical service. Unfinished roads, unfinished multi-storey parking buildings, unfinished dams, unfinished hospitals or unfinished schools express an anonymous 'broken' functionality, without pretension or artifice – as if they were 'non-places of inexperience' (Wu Ming 2008). In any case, Alterazioni Video does not make hierarchical distinctions between originally ambitious works and those less refined (Masu, Personal communication, 26 May 2016). It could well be said that, in accordance with this view, incompletion balances the status of every work, producing equalized spaces, as they all failed in the common objective of being used.

Fig. 4. Theatre, Nuova Gibellina

Source: Author, 2015

Within this democratization of incompletion, a similar and gradual process of decay begins after the construction of every public work is interrupted. In Lucas' terms (2013), this means that the Italian case is a sort of 'slow' ruination – opposed to 'fast' ruins where natural disasters, war destruction or premeditated demolition accelerate the process. In Italy, ruination occurs progressively over decades and, apart from passing time, no external agents increase degradation. Consequently, unfinished public works exist in a softened state of permanent transition, where the mutable qualities of decay applied to modern ruins are part of their characteristic materiality (De Silvey 2006). Alterazioni Video has considered this aspect when publishing a 10-bullet-point manifesto that describes the main features of the works. Number

5 and number 6 specifically address unfinished public works' materiality, where the notion of change is unequivocally present:

> 5. Natural vegetation interacts synaesthetically with incompletion, re-appropriating sites and redefining the landscape. An exuberant community overrun by equally exuberant natural forces; these were the preconditions for the powerful bond between Incomplete public works and the countryside around them. Figs, meadow grass, cacti, concrete, and iron: seemingly unrelated elements became the ingredients of a recognisable style and characterised its precise geographical and historical positioning.
>
> 6. Reinforced concrete is incompletion's constituent material. Its colours and textures are determined by the ageing and weathering of materials. Concrete was pure matter, the bone structure of modernity, a symbol of work and productivity. It could assimilate the scars of time; take on new colours and shades. Using concrete was a powerful, meaningful step that made these places unique of their type (Alterazioni Video 2008, 193).

Two different topics arise from Alterazioni Video's quote. On the one hand, they consider vegetation, for its capacity to shape the static image of unfinished public works, an integral part of the sites. Alterazioni Video specifically refers to 'natural vegetation', a tautology that must be understood as 'uncontrolled' or 'wild', which sprouts up due to a lack of maintenance. Jorgensen and Tylecote have discussed the importance of wild vegetation in urban interstices, to which they allocate derelict sites. For these authors, the complex and evolving character of vegetation allows us to 're-connect our natural-cultural selves in the context of our urban existence [while presenting] a rich contrast to the bland, sanitized landscapes that are now the mainstay of so much urban development' (2007, 458). Therefore, unfinished public works find in wilderness an additional value that highlights their transitional state, bringing it closer to formal discourses on modern ruins and their physical attributes.

The second topic that Alterazioni Video mentions in their manifesto is the remarkable presence of concrete as the main construction material. Initially intended to last for eternity, concrete as 'pure matter' is no longer so 'pure'. Concrete is not static; concrete in unfinished public works is as dynamic as a living entity. It is precisely this degradation affecting colours and textures produced by natural aging which Pétursdóttir (2012a) claims is an intrinsic value in Icelandic modern ruins made of concrete. For this author, similar to Alterazioni Video's statement, 'ruination, decay and the material being of [concrete] are not always regarded as negative but may be thought of as a generative process of becoming' (2012a, 49).

"...like hotels that have been prepared for aliens"

Discourses on modern ruins usually begin by contextualizing the changeable meaning of the term 'ruin' throughout history. Fein (2011) places its first usage in the late 1300s and he asserts that most of the initial uses referred to total destruction, establishing a biblical parallel between ruin and the apocalypse. For the following centuries, this negative meaning remained fixed but variable – depending on the historical period – until Romanticism reimagined the 'ruin' under artistic and aesthetic notions (DeSilvey and Edensor 2012). Nowadays, 'ruin' still retains this idealized value inherited from Romanticism when the term is applied to ancient works (Edensor 2005), however, a different standard is in place for ruins that have been produced in the modern era.

Modern ruins are the remnants of several characteristic changing processes of the 20th century, which have persisted and increased to current day. These processes are 'industrialization and abandonment, development and depopulation [or] conflict and reconciliation' (DeSilvey and Edensor 2012, 465), and they have the distinction of having been rapidly caused in a time of accelerated transformations (González-Ruibal 2008). Yet, while classical ruins transmit a sense of the glorious past as well as the idea of man-made monumentality lasting over time, modern ruins are the left-overs of current societies' perpetual motion and indifference. This means that, though there is an increasing number of academic contributions fighting for a renewed appreciation of ruins (e.g. Pusca 2010; Strangleman 2013; Péttursdóttir and Olsen 2014), authors concur that, in people's eyes, modern dereliction mainly represents the futility of the present, and thus, are uncomfortable entities with which to deal. Moreover, due to the fact that their materiality – broken windows, cracking paint, debris or crumbling structures – does not subscribe to traditional aesthetic standards, they are not objects of desire for the greater public but controversial and unpleasing sights. Therefore, in both the intangible and tangible sense, modern ruins generally echo back to the negative and threatening meaning that the term 'ruin' used to denote before Romanticism.

Unfinished public works in Italy are likely to be considered modern ruins since they contain certain specificities that can be attributed to the main themes in contemporary ruinology. It seems self-evident that a process of ruination is 'what happens to a building once standard maintenance stops taking place' (Fein 2011, 13), and thus, ruins are places where there was once some activity. However, regarding unfinished public works in Italy, French anthropologist March Augé, who collaborated with Alterazioni Video in the footage of a short-

film on Incompiuto Siciliano[5], has satirically described the atmosphere in these spaces by positing a break from the usual notion of ruins:

> [Unfinished public works in Italy] refer to a kind of monument completely different from Roman ruins: in Rome or in Pompeii one can feel the human presence, one can feel that there was a time where women and children actually used the space. [These sites] look like hotels that have been prepared for aliens. They seem to have been brought from a distant planet, from an unknown future (quoted in Magi 2012, own translation).

Aligned with the 'ubiquity of death' that modern ruins usually inspire (Schönle 2006), public works were never born; these architectural interruptions – most certainly dead – generated ruins before ever having been something else. In his most popular work, entitled *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* ([1967] 1996), American artist Robert Smithson refers to the elements he finds in the suburban landscape of his hometown as 'monuments': a bridge, a pumping derrick, an artificial crater where pipes gush water, a parking lot, and a sandbox. These elements serve their functions, they are finished and usable; they are monuments but they are not ruins. However, the artist also labels as 'monuments' a set of concrete abutments supporting the structure of a highway which was being built, which most certainly were in the condition of being, temporarily, unfinished. So although in Italy incompletion became the public works' final state, in Smithson's terms they can be considered thusly;

> *ruins in reverse*, that is all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the 'romantic ruin' because the buildings don't *fall* into ruin *after* they are built but rather *rise* into ruin before they are built, [defining,] without trying, the memory traces of an abandoned set of futures (Smithson [1967] 1996, 72).

The essential point to note at this stage is that emptiness in unfinished public works does not correspond to the disappearance of life but with the fact that these ruins were never lived in. This is certainly the most defining attribute of incompletion and it is characterized, opposed to archaeological approaches to modern ruins (e.g. Olsen 2010; Pétursdóttir 2012b; González-Ruibal 2014), by the generalized absence of artifacts that may indicate any sign of previous formal habitation. Unfinished public works in Italy are mostly 'conserved' in their interrupted form due to the fact that, as Masu accounts, 'they have been surrounded by fences for decades and yet they are completely disconnected from any social or urban exchange. Nobody has a reason to go there!' (Personal communication, 26 May 2016). Masu's assertion is confirmed when looking at the presence of piles of bricks at Giarre's Multi-functional Hall, which is a

[5] The trailer of the short-film is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HyxpoQGFYg4>

building that has never been utilized in the last 30 years (Fig. 5). Also in Giarre, Chico Mendes Children's Park has remained unfinished since 1975, however here, glass bottles, the left-overs of a bonfire or graffiti and inscriptions on the walls can be found (Fig. 6). This latter degradation can be read as the result of informal and temporary uses of the space after it is abandoned (Edensor 2005), opening up an interesting new layer of discussion that would deserve a paper all of its own.

Fig. 5. Multi-functional Hall, Giarre

Source: Author, 2015

Fig. 6. Chico Mendes Park, Giarre

Source: Author, 2015

Until now, the study of Alterazioni Video's database and their decision to refer to unfinished public works as 'ruins of modernity' have allowed us to provide a deeper theorization of the phenomenon. From now on, the paper will focus on what the artists' narrative is omitting: a critical interpretation that is latent considering how negatively incompletion is viewed by both locals and the public culture (e.g. Marimpietri 2011; Innocenzi 2013; Siamo Noi 2013). Hence, as fascinating as the artists' work can be, in the context of Italy, it is interesting and important to open up a different paradigm of interpretation from that of Alterazioni Video. To start, this requires an account of the obscure origin of the problem because, paraphrasing Augé, unfinished public works are neither hotels that have been prepared for aliens nor have they been brought from a distant planet.

Genesis

Though incompletion in Italy is a national reality, it cannot be denied that, as expressed in the introduction, the country's southern regions present a higher proportion of unfinished public works than those regions in the north. This is the quantitative fact from which most studies draw – including this one – to illustrate the phenomenon. However, in view of Lago's analysis (2013) of the northern region of Veneto, it seems evident that the density of incompletion found in the south is *just* a quantitative fact, which does not imply that the circumstances that caused it are different from the circumstances in the north. This is important to note because, acknowledging developmental differences between both parts of the country (e.g. Gramsci 2005; Mayo 2007; Sassson 2013), alternative readings suggest that the south neither embodies a homogenous entity nor is it that dissimilar from the north (Franzini 2008).

In any case, studies reveal that incompletion is a phenomenon taking place in areas where, during the years that followed World War II, there were aspirations of economic modernization. Authorities envisioned construction activities as a core strategy within the economic sector, under the premise that public works would generate automatic prosperity due to the subsequent services that they would provide (Santangelo 2009). However, the excessive bureaucratization involving several administrative stages such as the national, regional, provincial and municipal, led to a lack of communication and coordinated actions, where projects prioritized localized interests over general welfare (Scalia 2013). Magi (2012) goes further in describing how authorities were guilty of competing amongst themselves in order to fund non-connected public investments and provide a framework where every city looked out exclusively for itself. According to her, this created a development model based on local pride and comparison against the neighbouring rival towns, where even small villages applied for major investments – which in many cases, turned out to be completely disproportionate and unnecessary. The fragmentation of the Italian institutional system did not only contribute to this model through its direct implication, but it served to consolidate the generalized illusion that money was for free (Faris 2012).

Moreover, even though the decision to implement public works was taken by local councils that were granted funding by higher administrative spheres, construction concessions were given to private companies – a fact that, ultimately, was what caused a variety of complications towards accomplishing the works. Accattini (2011) primarily blames the lack of rigorous planning which, in certain cases, made it difficult to begin the building processes and

consequently, extended their duration. The result of this inconsistent planning is the re-formulation of the projects, which led to the increasing cost of the constructions and ultimately, to the lack of available funding (Scalia 2013). Though institutional inefficiency is evident, the clearly documented presence of political corruption (Cappelletti 2012; De Leo 2013; Chiodelli and Moroni 2015) and mafia networks (Schneider and Schneider 2003; Giglioli and Swyngedouw 2008; Savona 2012) affecting urban-planning and construction industries in Italy, prompt us to consider that such incompetence is the result of private benefit schemes acquiring the funds put aside for public works through systemic backstairs dealing.

Accattini labels concrete 'grey gold' to create a buzzword explaining the illegal actions revealed by judicial investigations as 'the use of non-adequate construction materials – mostly low-quality concrete – as well as bribery and extortion of the involved actors within the contract approvals' (2011, 31, own translation). While authorities claimed that starting large-scale public works may counteract the recruiting power of the mafia and its illegal and lucrative activities (Bonnett 2014), the construction sector indeed provided a legal framework in which organized crime could spread its influence and business investments (Saviano 2008). In this sense, inaccurate cost estimates, disregard for building regulations or design errors, causing the bankruptcy of companies and the prosecution of both constructors and politicians, led public works to remain in a limbo due to their temporary cancellation and eventual recommencement. This collection of premeditated management failures guaranteed construction sites remaining for long periods which, rather than plunging the population into a collective frustration, contributed to raising citizens' working expectations for the imminent jobs that the construction sector is able to generate within a short period of time (Magi 2012). In the meantime, the political outcome was evident since politicians *also* expected something back: to be elected in the following elections due to workers' vote so this sort of 'vicious circle' could keep running. Creating jobs in construction was then a vote-winning strategy (Bonnett 2014) and as result, 'politicians became dispensers of benevolence, handing out jobs and favors, with little incentive to worry about waste' (Faris 2012).

Hence, the paradox relies on how, according to macroeconomic data, this peculiar political and economic system proves a temporary success since the involved regions' GDP actually increases (Accattini 2011). Though such a patron-clientism model is not intrinsically negative when it is well conducted (Piattoni 1998), incompletion demonstrates that certain growth is not aligned with a true improvement of social welfare as long as immediate revenues loom over the idea of public works as the long-term common benefit. Accattini (2011) finally indicates

that there is not a coordinated strategy to revert this order, and moreover, there is a lack of institutional initiatives to re-activate unfinished public works. According to her, the complexity that originated this situation, where every unfinished public work was produced by a set of specific causes, is the same complexity that leads us to assume that eventual solutions would involve a set of specific measures for each case.

Thus, over the decades, political authorities have been responsible for directly investing in a model that basically secures funding and creates jobs without taking into account its eventual negative consequences. In this regard, it can be said that the building process of a particular infrastructure was – *in itself* – the main economic benefit of it. All that time, there was no long-term foresight and the use and management of public works was simply not contemplated further than the construction phase. Modernization meant construction but not necessarily the future usage as a public work was already able to generate wealth so long as it was being constructed – and that seemed more than enough. This is a model that, when profitable, it is profitable for some time and for many people; however, perhaps surprisingly, when it fails this is not life or death since it has already served its purpose. Yet not finishing the buildings means that a large amount of public funds is in the pockets of a privileged minority. It is a system that paradoxically works for some *only* when it fails for the rest, demonstrating that unfinished public works are not an accident but a successful white-collar crime.

Different but the same: An interpretative comparison with unfinished neoliberal topographies

In terms of unfinished works, DeSilvey and Edensor (2012) assign capitalism and communism the same level of responsibility, though they establish a distinction between the failed 'abundance' promised by the former and the 'banal mismanagement' of collective aspiration found in the latter. The particularity of the Italian case is that it is neither a pure capitalist sample nor a communist one. It is rather a combination of these two orders' features, in line with the 'reformist-progressive' paradigm that was dominant in Italy between the end of World War II and the beginning of liberal orthodoxy in the late 20th century (Cassano 2009). On one hand, the excessive construction of unfinished public works aimed to energize the private sector in a context of Western consolidating democracy while, on the other, their subsidized condition provides an image in which the state, legitimately representing people, remains at the core of such failed development. In any case, the perception towards incompletion which

is mainly studied nowadays focuses on the failure of capitalist or neoliberal topographies right after the bursting of the property bubble in 2008. Kitchin et al. (2012) define 'neoliberal topography' as the landscape which resulted from prioritizing private economic revenues over the actual necessities of a society. The globalized aspect of neoliberal failure is demonstrated through uncompleted and empty housing and, though countries such as Ireland (Conefrey and Gerald 2010; Kelly 2012; Donovan and Murphy 2013) or Spain (García 2010; Concheiro 2012; Puntí 2012) are the major victims, neoliberal 'wasted property' is encountered in every corner of the world (Moreno and Blanco 2014). As a result of this, the increasing bibliography on incompletion is clearly addressed to critically review neoliberal manifestations and, consequently, these sources are a solid background from which the particularities and similarities of the Italian case can be interpreted.

Ruins testify to the frustration of utopian capitalist aspirations (Matos 2012), becoming 'the site of a critique of the ideology of progress' (Schönle 2006, 653). Moreover, considering ruins as part of the built environment, they represent the suspended ambitions of those empowered actors within any society because space is 'expressive of the ideals of a dominant political regime' (Light and Young 2010, 6). Within the myth of unstoppable growth (Salas 2012), where construction activity is 'the major metaphor of capitalism [and] growing means destroying' (Beltrán 2014, 3, own translation), both the Italian case and pure neoliberal incompletion reveal the failure of starting unlimited constructions funded by limited resources. They are all the ruins of a society which permitted and financed their appearing, naively expecting that everyone would benefit from their use. But nothing could be further from the truth and, in the end, the real goal is brought to light. While in neoliberal assumptions the role of the state is ignored as long as it does not interfere in the interdependency between developers and clients (Kitchin et al. 2014), modernization in Italy has been actively subsidized by the state so industries and workers within the construction sector were assured activity. Here, the alliances between the public and the private were forged through a deliberate dysfunctionality, establishing corruption and bribery among the unfortunate realities that deepen the country's stigma. Thus, unfinished public works are neither an accident nor an anecdote but the result of a corrupt system – just like corruption is considered to be an inherent aspect also in unfinished neoliberal topographies (Jiménez 2009; Burriel 2011). Aligned with this, and according to Accattini (2011), the annual amount of concrete utilized in Italy has increased from 50 kilograms per capita in 1950 to 400 kilograms per capita in 2007. The comparison between neoliberalism and a concrete-producing machine (Hernández 2012) comes play in this when

we consider that those corrupt few who are in power are the same corrupt few who manage 'grey gold', and vice versa:

> …Concrete. Water, gravel and cement: the ingredients to produce it though, sadly, they are not alone. A simple mix where mafia spreads its territorial control and its capacity of intimidation while indulged administrators mediate in rigged contracts. [Then,] concrete is not only water, gravel and cement. It is the ink with which politicians and mafia have written their own history of blood and power. An infinite history (Accattini 2011, 33–34, own translation).

Thus the construction sector manifests its dominant condition by consuming land and cement, and these practices are only abruptly interrupted when authorities run out of funds – nonetheless, they are given grants by public investment in the Italian context or by private loans in the neoliberal era (Brawn 2009). Both cases lack any method of self-critique. Works, public or private, are uncompleted not because societies suddenly experienced a moment of critical thought on how they were behaving; works are uncompleted simply because there is no more money to do so – a limitation which does not quench the thirst for construction. In this sense, Manchón (2010) considers that neoliberalism can exclusively be defined with a single word, 'excess', which can be extrapolated to the Italian case due to its failed overabundance of development. And so one can conclude that an *excessive* trust in *excessive* construction is what proves inappropriate, and ultimately, makes clear that 'excess' is unsustainable by definition. The Italian reformist-progressive paradigm has largely considered that 'too much' is always better than 'enough', or in other words, that enough is never enough. Similarly, in the neoliberal sphere, the fact of ignoring the notion of 'necessity' results in the transfiguration of what should be obvious:

> In Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Modern, the first function of architecture was to provide the needs of a world of life, to produce a framework for inhabiting both in a town and countryside, built for the needs of industrial and socio-cultural development. But now in full globalized postmodernity, the primary function of architecture seems to crumble (Matos 2012, 25).

Regarding power, as well as the localized character of the unfinished public works phenomenon, Faris (2012) expresses how '[i]n most cases elsewhere, self-determination encourages responsibility' while it Italy it seems to be just the opposite. Once more, establishing a relation with unfinished neoliberal topographies is inevitable. If Kitchin et al. present the Irish reality as a demonstration of the country's incapacity 'to manage capitalism properly' (2014, 1078), it can be said that unfinished public works represent Italian incapacity to distribute sudden abundances of capital in an adequate and appropriate manner. And though blaming politicians, constructors, the mafia or even workers/voters certainly provides a broad

spectrum of the implicated actors, it is important to note the complicity of the rest of society in not reacting to a problem that, otherwise, could not have persisted for so many decades. By silently witnessing the phenomenon, society becomes an additional passive actor whose sense of alienated local pride and megalomania is the only way to understand how unfinished public works continued to appear, year after year, in view of everyone. In a critical essay, Spanish scholar Rafael Argullol directly points to the entire Spanish society for having allowed the property bubble to happen. His criticism is perfectly applicable to the Italian case for the decades of blind and mute acceptance:

> The rest of the society did not offer any resistance either. Mass media reacted late and citizens were, in the end, horrified as consumers rather than as citizens […] The great material looting of these years, generator of both enormous wealth and irreparable damage, would not have been possible without incurring in the great looting of our consciousness – something that we now call 'lack of values' (2009, own translation).

Lack of responsibility, lack of capacity and lack of values. Unfinished public works in Italy, though emerging from *a different modernization paradigm that was dominant several decades ago,* are – just like unfinished neoliberal topographies – the generalized expression of 'lack', consequently contested with 'excess' in a failed attempt to create a parallel universe in which the country is fully modernized. However, this failed attempt shows the raw reality in Italian power manifestations. If the illusion of being rich societies has been the driving factor of neoliberal development in Spain or in Ireland (Azara 2012, Schultz-Dornburg 2012; Linehan and Crowley 2013; Kitchin et al. 2014), incompletion reaches now the status of authenticity. In this sense, while the erection of public works aimed to provide the image of a modern country, by remaining unfinished, they come to truly represent 'Italy and the age in which they were produced' (Alterazioni Video 2008, 205).

Conclusion

In the words of Alice Mah, 'to view something as a ruin is already to have a perspective' (2012, 8). What I propose is to go further by asserting that to view something as a ruin involves, at least, the two perspectives expressed in this article. One is closer to cultural assumptions, placing the term 'ruin' on a higher level when compared to mere 'waste'; and the other is mainly critical, stripped of any romanticism. Alterazioni Video, as an artistic group, has creatively played with this ambivalence in order to put the phenomenon of unfinished public works in Italy on the map. They have invented a positivist architectural style formed by 'ruins

of modernity' through the deliberate omission of the works' critical narrative, however, such narrative remains obviously lurking. This article has firstly embraced the artists' argument to embed unfinished public works' physicality and unused condition within literatures on modern ruins, and second, it has moved further to interpret the negative origin of incompletion in comparison to more recent unfinished neoliberal topographies.

Alterazioni Video's database has served me well when tracing a typological, urban and material analysis of unfinished public works in Italy. In doing so, it can be stated that there are enough reasons to consider these sites as 'ruins of modernity' as long as their physicality fits with broader discourses on contemporary ruinology. The fact that public works have never been finished – and consequently they have never been formally used – adds a certain peculiarity to this case. Providing an academic voice to Alterazioni Video's thesis means to go beyond the artistic realm, and thus, my contribution was born from the willingness to theorize and validate the cultural connotations of Incompiuto Siciliano. After all, to see something as a ruin is never trivial. And though incompletion is not an entirely new topic within modern ruins, it would need to be explored more in depth in order to reach the similar body of knowledge that we find, for example, in industrial or war ruins. Yet considering the increasing interest in incompletion, it would not be unreasonable to perceive it as a new branch in the study of modern ruins – to which this article aims to contribute.

It is true that there are already a number of contributions – though not many – from both academia and journalistic sources that have glimpsed the causes that provoked Italian incompletion. My intention has not been to recount new stories but rather to make an interpretation of the existing ones. For this, I have condensed the political and economic reasons behind incompletion in order to provide a comprehensible explanation of a phenomenon that, since it is repeated again and again regardless of time and location, leads to it being perceived as a solid system: a system that somehow works for some by virtue of its failing the rest. On the other hand, in countries that have been strongly affected by the 2008 housing market crash, we have witnessed hundreds of demonstrations in which those who protest held banners saying 'It's not a crisis, it's a scam'. Considering that the most tangible outcome of this crisis/scam has been the erection of unfinished neoliberal topographies – this time, largely documented and interpreted – it is only a matter of comparing this with the Italian case in order to note that unfinished public works are the product of another scam, which is different but ultimately equivalent.

Italy did not have to experience the property bubble conditions in order to have its own collection of unfinished works. It has been, and still is, systematic abuses of public funds and concurrent financial decline, taking place over decades, that resulted in sites that have remained uncompleted for so long. The temporal and economic circumstances may vary from those in neoliberalism, however, the society's generalized mentality underpinning it is not that distinct. When it comes to incompletion, we all behave the same; or rather, since we all behaved the same, we are all facing incompletion. Therefore, this article should not be understood as a stigmatization of Italian policies regarding public development and expenditure. Indeed, the 'reformist-progressive' approach is definitely able to generate growth when it is well conducted, and though I would not like to initiate a debate on whether this is better or worse than neoliberalism, it seems clear that both schools of thought produce ruins as a result of confusing economic benefit with social welfare.

To conclude, unfinished public works in Italy and unfinished neoliberal topographies are, in fact, symbiotic cases. The latter helps to interpret the former and the former anticipates the future of the latter. Kitchin et al. notes how, until know, we have waited to tackle the problem of unfinished neoliberal topographies by putting them on the back-burner, to be corrected at a later date. What's more, the authors claim that after the housing crisis, they no longer recognize the damaged Irish landscape: 'The past, it seems, is literally another country' (2014, 1078). Contradictorily, while simultaneously ignoring incongruous problems, we often like to imagine how the future could be, but unfinished public works in Italy are a warning of how inaction and the passing of time only produce older ruins. And so perhaps, some decades from now, we will most probably end up witnessing neoliberal topographies where the future is *literally* another country: Italy.

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