



**GAPS:**

**MAPS, THRESHOLDS  
AND BREAKS IN  
THE ARCHITECTURAL  
DESIGNS OF  
ELISABETTA TERRAGNI**

Green House In Cernobbio  
Cernobbio ( Como ), Italy  
18 m<sup>2</sup>



A compact apartment in Milan  
Milan, Italy  
28 m<sup>2</sup>



Bianchi Annex  
Cernobbio ( Como ), Italy  
85 m<sup>2</sup>



Engadine house  
Samedan ( Engadina ), Swiss  
95 m<sup>2</sup>



A+F Apartment  
Como, Italy  
120 m<sup>2</sup>



Como Crea 1  
Como, Italy  
150 m<sup>2</sup>



Casa Pagani Museum  
Val Solda ( Como ), Italy  
160 m<sup>2</sup>



Exhibition "In Cima"  
Centro Palladio – Vicenza, Italy  
180 m<sup>2</sup>



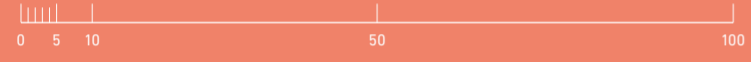
Loft In Montreal  
Montreal, Canada  
250 m<sup>2</sup>



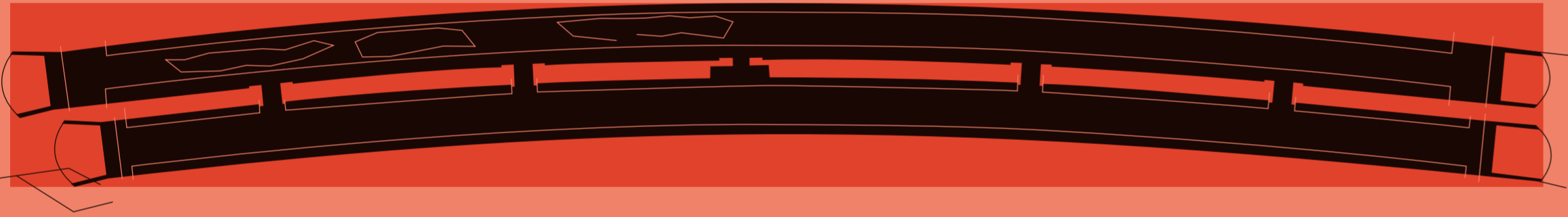
Installation on-board ship  
Como, Italy  
400 m<sup>2</sup>



School  
Altavilla Vicentina ( Vicenza ), Italy  
3.500 m<sup>2</sup>



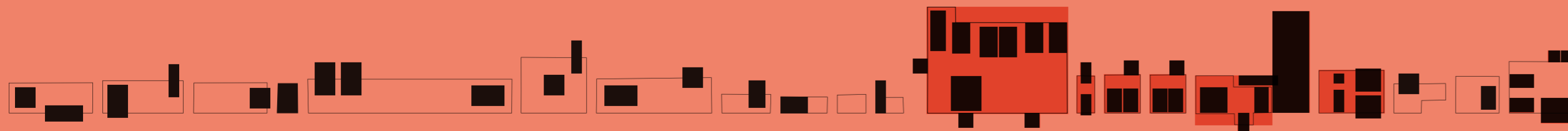
Le Gallerie  
Trento, Italy  
6.000 m<sup>2</sup>



Panorama of the Cold War  
Porto Palermo, Albania  
14.000 m<sup>2</sup>



No Concrete Project  
Porto Palermo, Albania  
Undefined m<sup>2</sup>



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Edited by

NodoLibri

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www.nodolibrieditore.it

**NODO**  
*libri*

Printed in Italy

*Gaps: maps, thresholds and breaks in the  
architectural designs of Elisabetta Terragni* by  
Elisabetta Terragni

ISBN 978-88-7185-243-0

Graphic Design:

xycomm (Milano)

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**Matthias Sauerbruch**  
(S+H Sauerbruch+Hutton, Berlin)

I do not find it easy to write for the monographs of colleagues, even if I admire their work, because I feel like an intruder. The projects do not need my comment as they speak for themselves, and in Elisabetta Terragni's case the author has also written extensively about her motivations, inspirations and thoughts. As a matter of fact, at times GAPS feels almost like a diary, direct and intimate, not for everybody's eyes... In addition, I am neither a historian, nor a theoretician or a critic – all of whom would be able to provide an adequate classification of Terragni's work within the architectural discourse of today. Hence all I can offer are some reactions of my own that were ignited by reading this book.

### Writing architecture

As we know, the representation of architecture is almost impossible, for neither drawings nor photographs are adequate substitutes for the experience of a space, a building, a location, or a landscape. Only when we have been somewhere and have actually perceived a space with all our senses does an image sometimes act as an aide memoire and catalyst that brings the encounter back to life. Of course such memory may also be triggered by sounds, smells, colours and other sensual phenomena that are inseparably linked to a place. The challenge of any attempt to represent architecture is to provide enough intellectual and sensual stimuli in order to offer a mental space, in which the architecture can be constructed in everyone's

imagination. In a book these stimuli are necessarily reduced to text, visual clues, technical and other information.

As much as a book is a medium that represents a complex physical reality outside of it, a house or a space can equally be read as a representation of matters beyond its physical presence. Particularly exhibition design not only needs to provide appropriate conditions of display but is required—by its sheer space and material—to somehow call up the memories that are embedded in the content of a show. Thus a well-designed exposition space functions like an essay or a poem where the gaps between the words are filled by the rich linings of our imaginations.

### The practice of culture

Such narrative quality may be typical for an exhibition or a stage set, you may say, or perhaps a monument or a church, but not for the spaces of the everyday. But what if we encountered this gap of the imagination in the mundane context of a simple apartment? Would it not be a gift to feel that the walls that delimit our range of activity are not a prison but a mere threshold leading to a hitherto unknown freedom?

I am not arguing for fantasy design that ignores daily needs. As a matter of fact, particularly in small environments where every inch counts, the craft of design is fundamental. The table has to be the right size for two, in the kitchen there has to be a surface to cut the vegetables, the light has to come from the left if the desk is to be used by a right-hander and the doors must not slam into each other. So where is there space for the imagination? The gap is in the detail: the dimension, the material, the colour, the joining, the sequence and hierarchy of elements as well as in the ease of solving problems as if they had never existed. This is when

the mind can wander within the most basic confines, and this is also when architecture becomes the natural embodiment of culture and civilization.

## Sustainability

Whatever we do as architects we are following in the footsteps of our predecessors. No site is untouched, and wherever we go we find the leftovers of previous generations - some of them delightful and most of them in need of care. When acquainting ourselves with the circumstances of a project, it is so easy to see the shortcomings in the work of our forefathers and to condemn them. It takes a generous mind to see poetry in what one finds, to see its potential, to apply one's imagination and to be willing to continue the story that one reads.

It is equally easy to idolize the past and to forgo all critical capacity. To do neither, to have a no-nonsense approach, repairing a found situation and seeing the long-term benefits when you make do with small things is a direct and very humane approach to sustainability, one that celebrates the spirit of continuity even if it sometimes involves radical breaks.

## Navigation

Practising architecture in today's context is in many ways continuing a journey. One has to be willing to set off for India even though one might discover America instead - or indeed nothing at all. Joining the trip makes you part of its direction, its purpose, and makes one responsible for its success. As a critical spirit one has to take stock every now and then, map one's progress and sketch out the directions. Each of these attempts forces one to redefine one's territory and one's system of navigation. In this pursuit one might find help in past examples, one might rely on technologies, on analysis and scientific surveys. However, ultimately, when one has done one's

homework and studied everything there is to study, one will come to a point where one's intuition will be the only guide. One is lucky if one recognizes this and is aware of its power.

That, if I may say so, is for me the strongest aspect of Terragni's work: here is someone who applies herself very seriously to the requirements of a brief and researches exhaustively the cultural and physical conditions of each site and each programme, and who manages to resolve the (almost always inextricable) problems of a project with total ease. The direct beauty of her projects belies the complexity of her tasks; their seeming straightforwardness the depth of her thinking. In one word: Terragni's work is very elegant. Her book maps the journey taken, and makes you curious for further discoveries.

11. June 2014



## Introduction

Teaching and researching on two continents awakens a sense of scale, both of events and of the gaps among them, as well as of different time scales and magnitudes of meaning. I derive my insights and the motifs of my design proposals from the discontinuous conditions that so trenchantly mark our time. Instead of discussing one's work in the usual fashion, I wish to see it in the context of far wider preoccupations that, for the reasons just mentioned, lead to the rediscovery of those things in architecture that most deeply affect us. These are the qualities by which we ultimately gauge things that fit poorly, or not at all, into the categories of technology and economy. If the justifications we advance for our designs are bowing to technical and financial imperatives, we will have correspondingly reduced them to a mere affirmation of anonymous forces. By submitting to conformity—and thereby to the proliferation of clichés—we not only deprive our surroundings of every last spark, we also add to the crushing weight of pretension, pretension to soundness, operational efficacy, and social typecasting. There are many more ways of handling the issues that architecture raises than to replicate solutions we've come to accept as standard.

From a wide range of modest interventions, I've learned to make use of what is usually treated as a mere surplus or by-product, what is frequently disregarded or excised. It is likely that my work in exhibition design and temporary museum installations has alerted me to improvisation

and impromptu solutions. When limits are imposed and time is at a premium, one will need to think quickly, act with a certain delicacy, and nimbly handle what is affordable. But far from feeling cramped by such circumstances, I believe they have engendered pleasure in my thinking and stimulated a desire for work in response to conditions of impermanence.

Teaching keeps everything in flux between what is considered professional territory and the life experience of new generations. The gap between them does not open in only one direction, prompting students to master what they need to know and adopt ways of designing that lead to practice, fresh—even untutored—attitudes bring other wavelengths into the mix of voices and, ever so lightly, filter into the future of a profession. Learning extends well beyond the mere accumulation of knowledge, learning continues to change the subject that is being acquired. Gradually, matters that had no purchase on any curriculum and only a hold on a few minds are now becoming educational priorities. It goes without saying that once a subject is an integral part of a curriculum, it assumes its own cast and may soon enough be as rigid as what it displaced. This process, too, is an unavoidable part of the metabolism of knowledge. Rather than wishing to be rid of it, I consider it to be a lifeline and a source of stimulation for myself. My experience in the studios I have organized and taught leads me to the quick of architecture and to the infinite ways in which we conceive of life as a wellspring of architecture.