

The project as an escape route: reimagining the TMB Salario with Lacaton&Vassal

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The essay aims to return the outcomes of the two-week immersive workshop proposed by the master's degree course in architectural and urban design of the Department of Architecture of the University of Roma Tre, held in September 2023 and conducted together with French architects Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal, winners of the Pritzker Prize 2021. The workshop was meant to rethink a large waste treatment plant in the city of Rome, the TMB Salario, decommissioned a few years ago following a large fire and after long years of protest by residents. Starting from some methodological assumptions proposed by the two architects, as simple as radical, such as 'being able to recognize value in what is already there', students imagined a new space of possibilities for the city, connected, transparent and open. The main ambition of the projects presented below is to mend a relationship of trust between the inhabitants and a space they have long suffered, and which can and must instead become an attractive, vibrant, public place.

Keywords: *Reuse*, *Public city*, *Urban metamorphosis*

Il progetto come via d'uscita: reinventare il TMB Salario con Lacaton&Vassal

Il contributo intende restituire gli esiti del workshop immersivo di due settimane proposto dal corso di laurea magistrale in Architettura-Progettazione Urbana del Dipartimento di Architettura dell'Università degli studi Roma Tre, tenutosi nel settembre 2023 e condotto assieme agli architetti francesi Anne Lacaton e Jean-Philippe Vassal, vincitori del Premio Pritzker 2021. Il workshop si proponeva di ripensare un grande impianto di trattamento dei rifiuti della città di Roma, il TMB Salario, dimesso qualche anno fa a seguito di un vasto incendio e dopo lunghi anni di proteste da parte dei residenti. A partire da alcuni assunti metodologici proposti dai due architetti francesi, tanto semplici quanto radicali, come "saper riconoscere valore in ciò che già c'è", studentesse e studenti hanno immaginato un nuovo spazio di possibilità per la città, connesso, trasparente e aperto. La principale ambizione dei progetti di seguito presentati è quella di ricucire un rapporto di fiducia tra gli abitanti e uno spazio che a lungo hanno subito, e che può e deve invece diventare un luogo attraente, vitale, pubblico.

Parole chiave: *riuso*, *città pubblica*, *metamorfosi urbana*

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To ensure that architectural design creates open, hospitable, functional spaces, necessary, it is essential, above all, to recognize in each place those qualities that “we cannot afford to lose”; it is a matter of acting with humility but with rigor, which does not mean limiting creativity; acting with care and respect knowing that “cheapness” is not the opposite of “generosity”. The project, working with the existing (which is our great resource!), should not only aim to do “a little better”, but should always strive to do “the best possible”.

It is from this simple yet essential awareness that, in the early days of September 2023, the Department of Architecture of Roma Tre hosted an immersive two-week architectural and urban design workshop led by the French architects Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal, winners of the 2021 Pritzker Prize. This workshop, titled *Lacaton & Vassal @ TMB Salario: Reuse and the New Life Cycle for the area of the former TMB Salario*¹ aimed to rethink the large waste treatment plant decommissioned a few years ago. This site is both a lingering issue for the nearby community and a vast space of possibilities for the city.

For two weeks, a diverse temporary community comprising students, researchers, administrators, waste management experts, and artists collectively addressed the issue of waste, a perennial challenge in our city, often swept under the carpet – the epitome of our ‘urban removed’ mindset. Instead, we learned to view it as valuable source material. We got to know a space, the former TMB Salario, considered as waste, a discard, a history that everyone seems eager to forget as soon as possible. Instead, for this space, we tried to apply the same change of perspective by first observing it from different perspectives, then understanding its components and their value, possible uses, spatial layout, and strategic potential. Gradually, we envisioned its transformation from *ugly* and *unwelcoming* to “the best possible”.

The richness of this experience lies in the opportunity that both we and the students had to engage with Lacaton & Vassal’s design methods, which in many ways intersect with our approach to research and work in and out of the university.

Firstly, always start from what already exists, recognizing the potential and beauty inherent in it: no matter what it is – plant, usage, view, space, soil or construction – what already exists will always be the initial structure of all projects.

1 The workshop was conducted with the contribution of the professors of the master’s degree in urban design and the in collaboration with Rome Capital – Department of Agriculture, Environment, and Waste Management, Department of Urban Planning, AMA (the waste collection and disposal company), Municipality III, the No TMB Salario Observatory, BPG Research and Development, the Archibloom and Ati-Suffix collectives, and informal ecological operators within the Roma culture.

The workshop has since continued in the 2023/24 edition of the architectural and urban design laboratory, led by Professors Francesco Careri and Fabrizio Finucci. This course, in ongoing dialogue with Ama and the numerous stakeholders involved in the workshop, has expanded its focus to encompass the entire city, proposing the hybridization of collection, reuse, and repurposing spaces with cultural, work-related, recreational, and hospitality activities and services.

Secondly, remember that analysis is integral to the project. One must observe, understand, and measure before deciding how and whether to act.

Lastly, understand how to accommodate what cannot be anticipated within the project, embracing the multitude of uses that urban life entails: free space acts as a mediator. Free from standards, it loosens norms, and creates.

From these premises, the group delved into the complexity of reimagining the former TMB Salario, where desired projects and stakeholder conflicts intersect at multiple levels. An old waste treatment plant, mismanaged for so long that it has created a rift in the relationship between the municipality and the resident community. A captivating, painful, intricate, real-life case study.

Given this complexity, we began by working in fragments: images, situations, atmospheres. Constructing these fragments based on existing scenarios, using various tools such as surveys, debates and collages. Addressing the entire site, as well as specific areas. Working by overlaying different scales: the scale of the territory, mobility, and the individual user. Piecing together the fragments to create a sequence of spaces, narratives and atmospheres. Accumulating, combining, superimposing, and transforming them to form a project. Integrating them into a broader vision and proposal for the area.

Specifically, after numerous lectures, students were tasked with addressing various topics: the functioning of the waste system in the city of Rome, its critical aspects, potentialities, emergencies, future development; the existing reuse and recycling networks of private stakeholders (such as street markets), religious institutions (Caritas, Emmaus, Waldensian Church, Community of Sant'Egidio), and the work of scavenging, recovering, sorting, repairing, and reselling in informal street markets that sustain many impoverished individuals; the potential of the landscape, infrastructure, and strategic position of this bend of the Tiber River; the specific morphological features of the site and buildings of the TMB plant, attempting to discern which areas and values are essential to maintain and which qualities and facilities should be added if necessary; experiments and innovative practices for reuse, recycling, and the circular economy, and the spaces in which these can occur.

Some general conditions emerged from this analytical work that are worth summarizing: the urgency to immediately activate the site through cleaning, securing, and temporary use of its spaces to test various transformation programs; the need to connect the area to pedestrian, cycling, road, and rail infrastructure systems to improve accessibility; the desire to create a place where secondary raw materials can be brought in to be tested, adjusted, sold, and dismantled, expanding the perspective toward which the new decree of the Ministry of the Environment (Law 119, July 2023) on waste reuse is moving; the necessity to include the new TMB within the Tiber system, through the Tiber River Contract, to ensure the necessary continuity of the public spaces of the Tiber bend under consideration, together with all stakeholders.

Four different projects, the outcomes of two weeks of work, gave shape and meaning to these intentions²:

Line Up: The “Line Up” project has the ambitious goal of transforming the area into a new manufacturing hub dedicated to recycling and reuse, open and integrated with the surrounding community and the city. The proposed solution primarily focuses on reconnecting existing logistics facilities around the area. Indeed, the foundational element of the project is an elevated infrastructure that serves as a unifying element between buildings, people, ideas, and stories. This infrastructure will directly lead to the main building, promoting transparency of activities and the opportunity to observe the ongoing transformation processes, highlighting the simultaneity of the territorial and local dimensions. The former TMB Salario thus becomes a place open to the community and capable of restoring the area’s healthiness and its territorial importance within the city.

City ReHUB: This proposal includes a series of interventions concentrated in the AMA³ area, involving the total rethinking of outdoor spaces and the functional reconversion of existing buildings to accommodate new uses while preserving AMA’s internal headquarters and its services. The TMB buildings will be transformed into a new multi-purpose complex, housing new production activities and services. Certain architectural elements of the TMB facilities will be enhanced to define and characterize the spaces. Within the main building, specific functions related to end-of-life materials treatment will be incorporated, including laboratories, reception areas, and commercial spaces. Additionally, there will be amenities such as a library, an event hall, and a refreshment area. Urban greenhouses will be located in the former filter spaces.

Refundo Salario: Starting from the former TMB plant, preserved in its industrial character, the Refundo Salario project aims to create a new urban destination that is transparent, clean, and open to the public, capable of rebuilding the relationship with the river and its residents. It envisions a space where the natural environment coexists with a variety of functions, reflecting the complexity of waste management. The existing buildings serve as a foundation for connecting with the site’s history and the surrounding community. While maintaining their industrial character, these refurbished warehouses take on a new significance: they become vessels for innovative practices, ideas, and dreams. Different worlds, typically separate, converge here at varying speeds, influencing and enriching one another. This industrial tapestry is transformed with the introduction of greenery, blending productive activities with recreational pursuits.

2 The short project description texts are excerpts and adaptations of the texts produced during the workshop by the student authors of the projects.

3 AMA is the name of the municipal company that handles waste management in Rome.

RiuSalario: Although recycling may involve complex processes and facilities, reintroducing objects into new life cycles can also be achieved through a series of small and simple operations. For example, an old lamp forgotten in the garage, cleaned up, bulb replaced, and plugged in can amaze because it works perfectly. Building on this understanding, the RiuSalario project aims to maximize the utilization of existing resources by considering both the value of the existing building stock and the life cycle of end-of-life assets. Therefore, the decision was made to enhance existing spatial qualities, such as the presence of building structures with long spans or the availability of industrial machinery still in good condition. By implementing interventions to clean and secure the spaces, it is possible to reactivate the area quickly to support a functional program open to the public and capable of adapting over time. This functional program will involve collecting items deemed to be at the end of their life, classifying them according to their type and general condition, undergoing a subsequent cleaning process, and testing to verify their functionality. Suitable items may be repaired, sold, or disassembled and returned to the production chain.

In their diversity, these projects underscore certain beliefs that have emerged from our work, serving as a kind of manifesto that represents the main output of this workshop.

The former TMB site must evolve into a public space that is transparent, well-connected, and easily navigable, encouraging active participation. It should transform into an appealing place capable of dispelling the negative imagery that currently surrounds it, becoming a symbol of our commitment against material and spatial waste. It must serve as a hub for advanced experimentation in waste management, a place no longer understood as a great detritus of urban life, but as a resource. Furthermore, it should provide visibility and support to the various formal and informal initiatives already engaged in recovery and reuse practices, creating a network of innovation. It will be an innovative space, blending public and productive functions, showcasing the city as a resource mine where ecological principles can be applied and understood in contemporary urban society. These currently empty spaces have the potential to host diverse and seemingly conflicting functions, yet the site will reconcile and harmonize them, fostering coexistence and diversity. It represents a metamorphosis of objects, spaces, and meanings, embodying an advanced vision of ecology and sustainability.

As Lacaton & Vassal argue:

For each project, we keep in mind the idea of an escape route. Creating escape routes also means fabricating possibilities, projects within the project. It's about putting the inhabitant in a creative situation. The opposite of a framed situation. It's about constructing a non-frame. How to withdraw from the real, to always be able to exit? By constantly clinging to the idea that we can be free, to the idea of elsewhere, to the idea of a dream. How to trigger an imaginative process? We always seek to construct a space that doesn't subjugate anything, that is nothing but pure freedom. This freedom is something that some will grasp, others will not. But it's there⁴.

4 Lacaton A., Vassal J.P. (2021). "Il piacere di abitare". In *Domus web* [online]. Available at: www.domusweb.it/it/architettura/gallery/2021/03/19/il-piacere-di-abitare.html.

If in these two intense weeks of workshop we have managed to imagine even one possible escape route for such a complex place; if the students have managed, in such a short time, to design a non-frame for TMB Salario, to give space for the freedom that this place, and those who live around it, deserve; then we can say we are more than satisfied, because designing the best from what is already there is a miracle, as Anne and Jean Philippe say, that must happen in every project. And it's not something that happens every day at universities to experience miracles.



Fig. 1 - TMB Salario was one of the public Mechanical Biological Treatment plants in the city of Rome, required to separate and process undifferentiated waste. The plant received about one-third of Rome's undifferentiated waste: one thousand tons per day (Ama). An estimated four thousand tons of garbage were stationed in the plant daily, the size of a five-meter-high soccer field, only a hundred meters from first homes, 150 meters from a kindergarten (source Internazionale.it, 2018). In use since 2011, the plant, or rather its obvious mismanagement, has catalyzed criticism and protests, generating bitter conflict between residents and institutions, at multiple levels. On December 11, 2018, a fire disabled the plant, to this day still awaiting a convincing and shared redesign

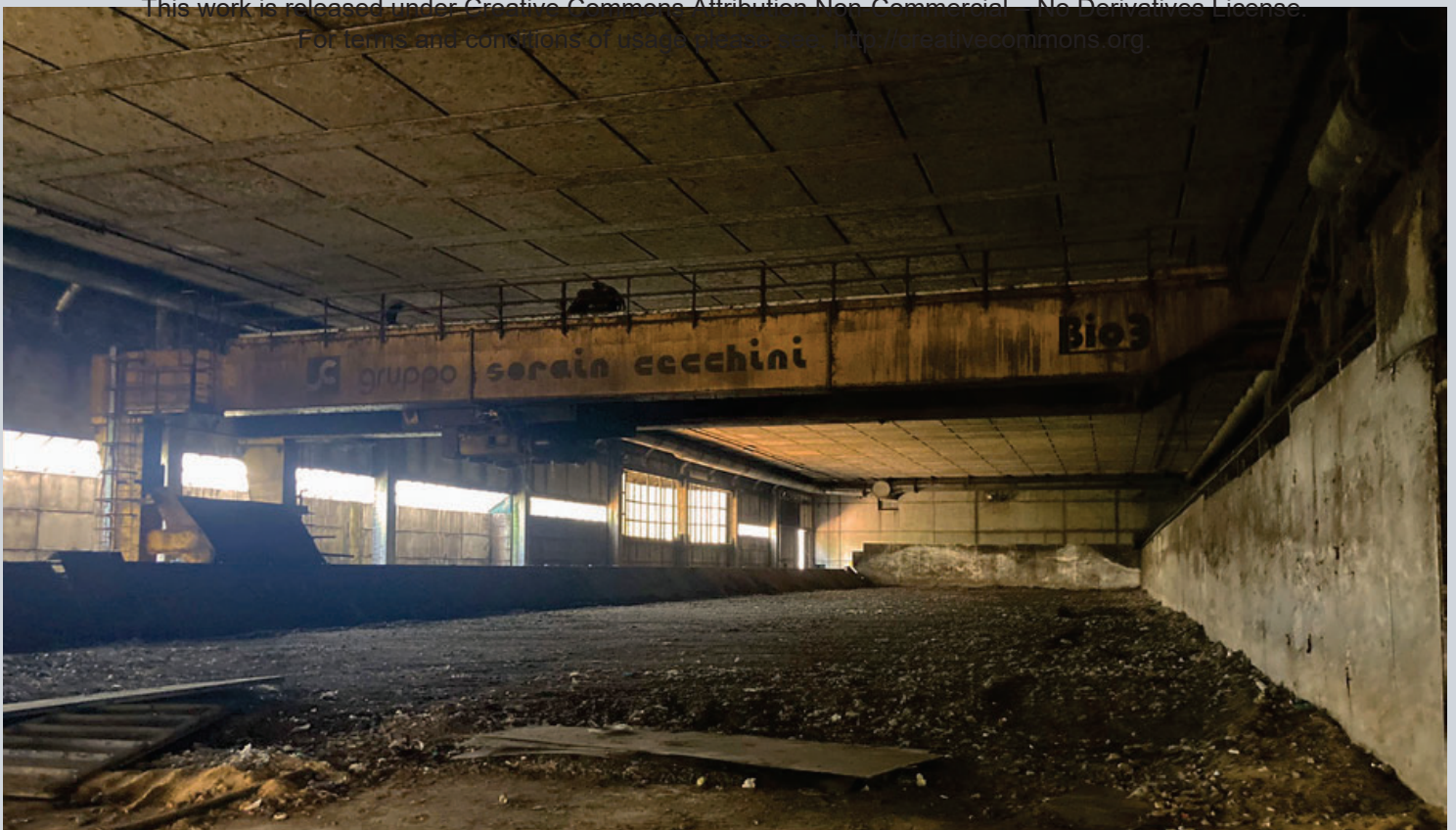


Fig. 2 - TMB Salario, the site under abandonment, September 2023



Fig. 3 - TMB Salario, the site under abandonment, September 2023



Fig. 4 - Images from the visit to TMB Salario with Lacaton and Vassal, September 2023



Fig. 5 - Images from the visit to TMB Salario with Lacaton and Vassal, September 2023



Fig. 6 - Images from the visit to TMB Salario with Lacaton and Vassal, September 2023



Fig. 7 - Images from the visit to TMB Salario with Lacaton and Vassal, September 2023



Fig. 8 - The design brainstorming through collages

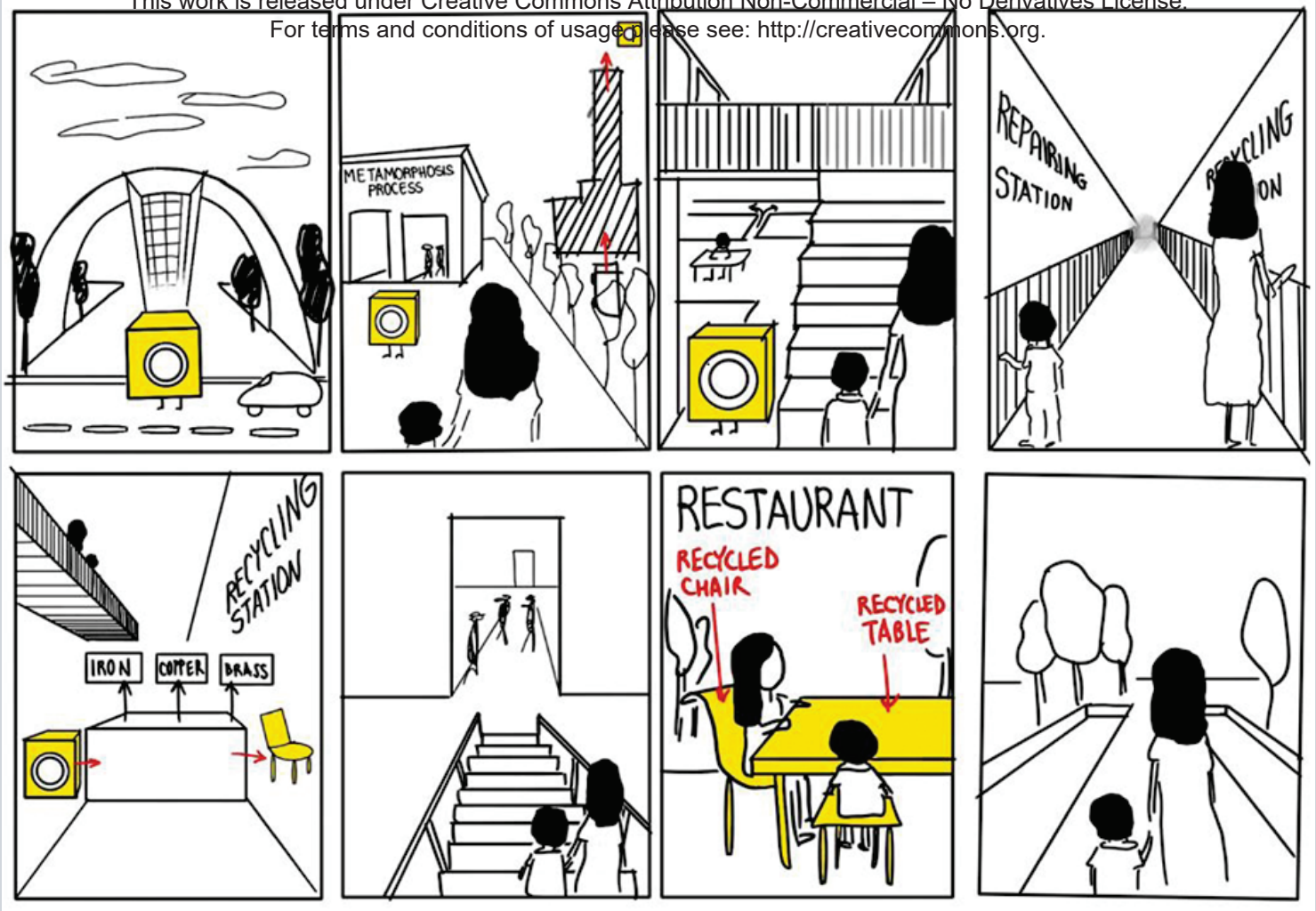


Fig. 9a - Line Up Project

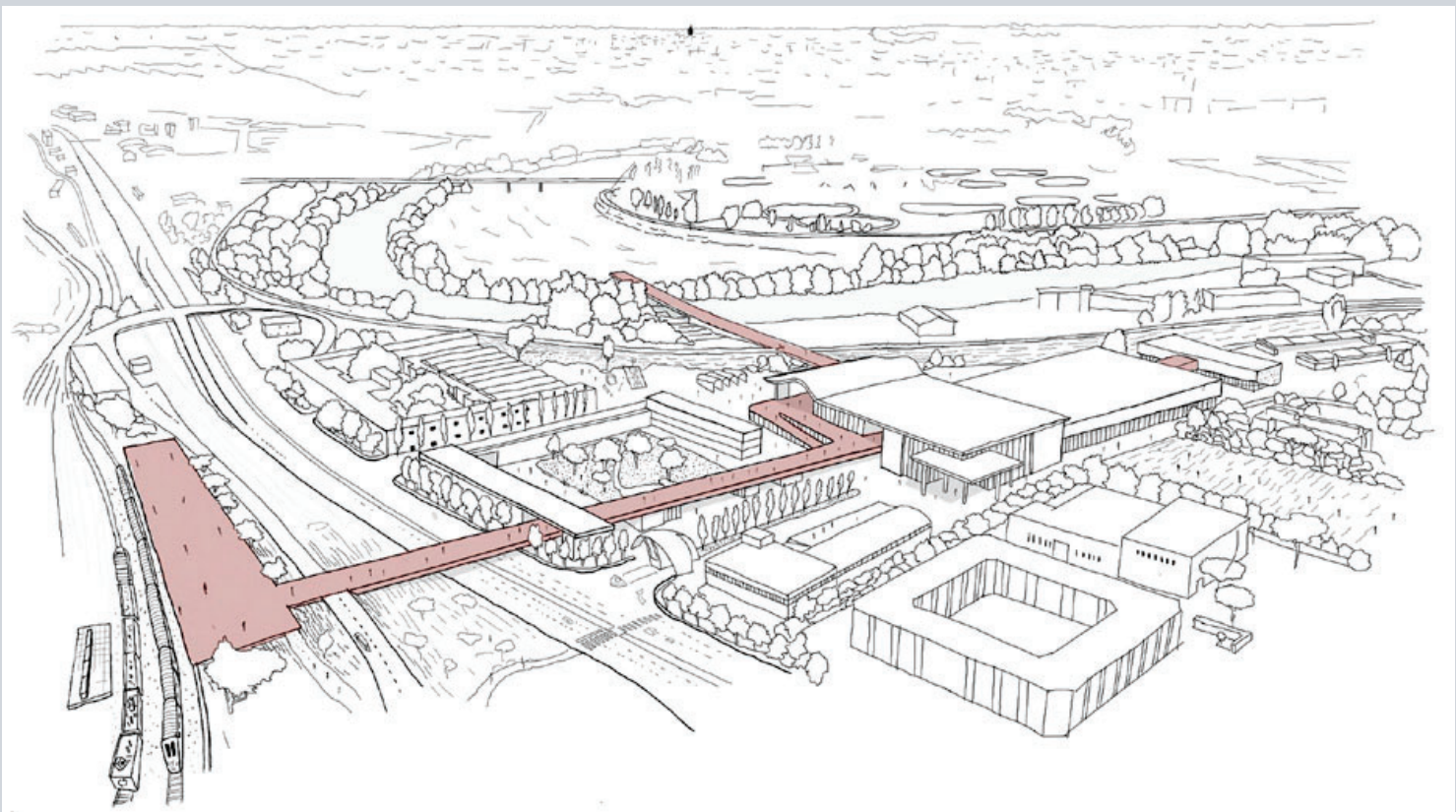


Fig. 9b - Line Up Project



Fig. 10a - City Rehub Salaria Project

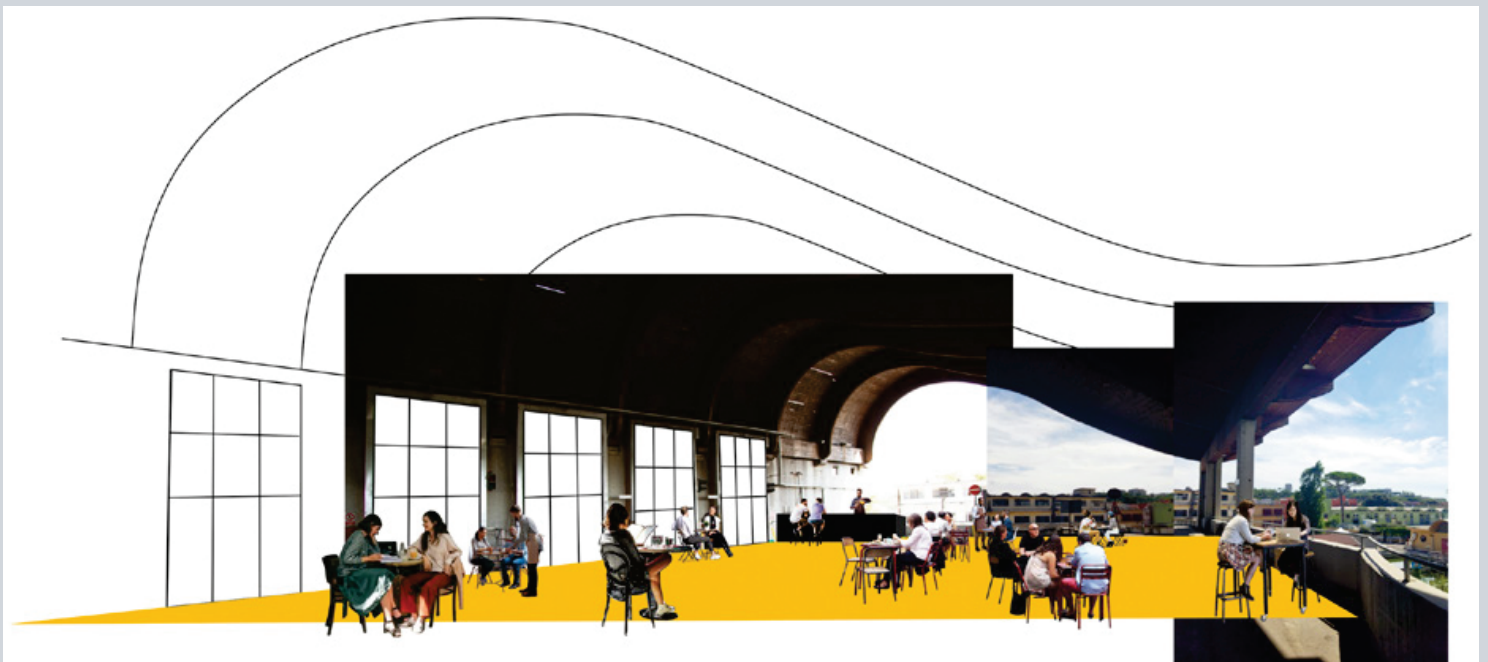
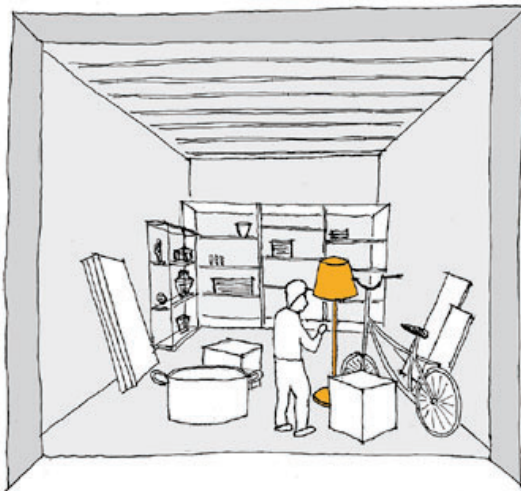


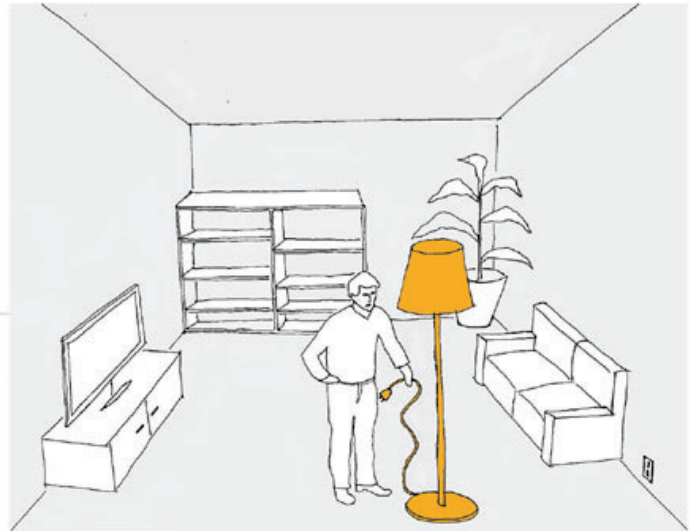
Fig. 10b - City Rehub Salaria Project



Fig. 11 - Refundo Salario Project, Concept



"GULP! GUARDA LA MIA VECCHIA LAMPADA!!"
"Gulp! Look at my old lamp!!"



"CHISSÀ SE FUNZIONA ANCORA!?"
"I wonder if it still works!?"



"WOW!! FUNZIONA!"
"Wow! It works!"



"FACENDO IL MINIMO HO OTTENUTO IL MASSIMO!!"
"By doing the minimum I achieved the maximum!!"

Fig. 12 - Riusalario Project, Strategy