

Identification and preservation of the Cold War sites in Italy

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Abstract

Since the Fall of the Berlin Wall, more than 8000 military installations worldwide have been made available for civilian use. To many, the idea of attempting to conserve military sites from the Cold War sounds discordant due to the awkward or “uncomfortable” nature of the subject matter and the generally unappealing aesthetics associated. Even if the Cold War influenced many aspects of the popular culture, science and technology, architecture, landscape and people’s perception of the world, the legacy of this war is less tangible than others, and for this reason it is important to make an attempt to preserve its relics. Military sites might be the only representative Cold War remains of a country and reflect issues beyond their military functions. The aim of this contribution is to present few cases of reuse of Cold War military structures in Italy and to introduce the lack of their identification and preservation.

Keywords: Cold War heritage, military architecture, preservation, twentieth century.

1. Introduction

This contribution is part of a broader research, which explores the decommissioned military sites and artefacts built during the Cold War in Italy, such as nuclear weapon stores, communication and radar systems, military airfields, aviation and naval sites, missile defence structures. The aims are the identification and knowledge of the military complexes built from 1947 to 1989 displaced by the military sites, through mapping them and describing the materiality of some site. The research will investigate the possibility to define the Cold War military legacy as deemed to be preserved by law, and with which criteria.

Since in the specific field of architecture and preservation, the studies on Italian Cold War military sites are fragmentary, I would like to present an overview of the whole territory. The research focuses on the decommissioned military sites which were built during the Cold War (1947-1989). The analysed buildings and sites are part of systems very distinctive for the Cold

War which have later become obsolete and then decommissioned, in some cases, before the end of the war.

This text will present some cases of reuse of Cold War military complexes, in order to open the discussion on the need to identify and preserve the Cold War legacy in Italy, avoiding excessive and unsystematic collecting or loss of elements.

2. Identification of the Cold War military sites in the international context

There are few cases of identification and studies on the Cold War decommissioned military sites which have been done in a systematic way, such as the assessment published by English Heritage in 2001¹. Other illustrative examples are the Berlin Wall (Feversham, Schmidt, 1999; Kalusmeier, Schmidt, 2004) and the Iron Curtain from 1999, the “Department of Defence Legacy Resource Management Program” in the United

States from 1991 (Center for Air Force History, 1994; Lonnquest, Winkler, 1996), the Baltic Initiative from 2004 (Langelands Museum and the Baltic Initiative, 2009; Rasmussen, 2010) (which gathered Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Russia and Sweden). In particular, Sweden² was one of the first case in which the possibility to preserve these sites was studied already in the 1990s because of the massive demilitarisation and the need to decide what to do about several regimental museums voluntarily created by the military. Recently, a group of also Swedish researchers (Burstrom, Gustafsson, Karlsson, 2009, 2011; Axelsson, *et al.*, 2018) began working on the study of Cold War military sites, with an archaeological approach following the example of J. Schofield and W. Cocroft which have been working on comparisons between Eastern and Western bloc and transnational heritage trails. The used methods to record and interpret the Cold War era sites are architectural survey and photography, characterisation of the place to guide future management, recording to capture the “feel” of the place (Schofield, Klausmeiser, Purbrick, 2006).



Fig. 1. The entrance gallery of Aerozeum, Gothenburg, one of the museums supported by the Swedish Military Heritage network (Sveriges militärhistoriska arv). It was a secret underground mountain base in the area next to Gothenburg. With an area of 22000 m², today is a combination of museum, hands-on centre and conference facility. The development of the site started with the interest of the former general, which now is still part of the organisation, to keep objects from the military function and display the history of the air defence in Sweden. (Author, August 2019).

There are several cases of musealisation and heritagisation of Cold War military sites in the in-

ternational context.³ Most of them are buildings which represent the history of that period also through their materiality; they are open to the public and involve local stakeholders and administrations to different extend. They can also be considered part of broader networks; for instance, the NATO sites connected to the Italian ones in different ways –as the Greenham Common case, one of the 6 sites built in the 1980s to deploy the Cruise missiles in Europe– (in Italy there is the Comiso Airport).



Fig. 2. The view from the control tower of Greenham Common, Berkshire, a former Royal Air Force station used both by the RAF and the US Air Force during the Cold War, also as a base for the Ground Launched Cruise Missile during the 1980s. Many of the building were reused and are now productive buildings. The control tower is managed by a start-up which opened it up as a museum. On the site, attempts have been done to investigate the materiality of the Peace Common which developed in the 1980s and stayed active for almost 20 years in protest to the presence of the cruise missiles. (Author, March 2019).

3. The reuse of Cold War military sites in Italy

There are few cases in Italy in which Cold War decommissioned sites have been reused; between them there are some cases of musealisation. Base Tuono, for instance, is a former Nike-Hercules⁴ site in Folgaria (Trento) which has now opened a museum about the Italian north-eastern defense system in collaboration with Aeronautica Militare. Since 2019, the museum has become part of the network of the Historical Museum of the War of Trento (Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra) in Rovereto, so it will be considered part of its collections. In there, is possible to find the control tower of another Ni-

ke site in Zelo, in order to prevent its loss during the site transformation in a photovoltaic plant.

Another example is Bunker Soratte, a civil defence bunker open to the public as a museum in Sant'Oreste, next to Rome. The structure would have hosted the Italian government and the President of the Republic in case of an atomic attack. The museum since 2017 contains the operations room of the COSMA (Centro Operativo Stato Maggiore dell'Aeronautica - Operation Centre of the Air Force Staff) originally situated in the site of Monte Cavo, in Rocca di Papa, Rome.

The common feature of these openings is that they are private initiatives or from the local authorities and they do not involve any kind of safeguard from the Italian legislation. One of the consequences of the framework in which these initiatives develop is the possibility for museums such as Base Tuono and Bunker Soratte to expose entire parts originally belonging to other sites; for instance the control tower of the site in Zelo, which while it was operational was not even part of the layout of Base Tuono, and the operation room of the COMSA in Monte Cavo. This kind of actions –which are signs of excessive and unsystematic collecting, difficult to connect to any scientific methodology– should not be decided only within the local museums; the discussion about the heritagisation of these sites could also help these situations and in preventing loss of sites or loss of particular elements as it happened in Site Rigel.



Fig. 3. Part of the damaged fence of Site Rigel, Naz-Sciavez. (Author, August 2019).

“Rigel” NATO base in Naz Sciaves is a former “special” storage for nuclear warheads in control

of both Italian and American troops during the Cold War. Now it is used every year since 2009 for a three-days music event which gathers thousands of people around it. This implied the adaptation of the site into the new function by losing some important elements, such as the roofs of the two main buildings and part of the former fence. There have been few (unsuccessful) initiatives from the municipality to protect the site and transform it in a community open space.



Fig. 4. Abandoned site of Dosso dei Galli, Brescia. (Author, July 2019).



Fig. 5. One of the control room in “West Star”, Affi. (Author, July 2019).

The discussion on the preservation of the Cold War sites would also help in finding a solution to their abandonment, experienced by many complexes. This is the case of Dosso dei Galli site, part of the ACE HIGH Tropo Scatter NATO system, next to Brescia, and “West Star” NATO base, Headquarters of the Allied Land Forces Southern Europe, in Affi, which have been focus of studies and proposal of openings in the last years. These sites are with no doubt important traces of the history of the Cold War and are part



Fig. 6. Base Tuono, Folgaria; the tower on the left is from Zelo Nike site. (Author, July 2019).

of systems which need to be identified in order to make sustainable and systematic choices.

3. Identification and potential protection of the Cold War decommissioned military sites in Italy

In Italy, the control of the sites differed between Italian Army (Esercito Italiano), Italian Air Force (Aeronautica Militare), Italian Navy (Marina Militare), US Army, US Air Force, US Navy, NATO. Often more than one military force was present at the same site. The NATO sites, for instance, were complexes selected between the Italian Forces, where an international component was added. In some other cases, the US forces were the only one in control of the site. The categories considered starting from the identification of English Heritage (Bravaglieri, 2019a; Cocroft, 2001) are:

- Air and Territorial Defence (NATO, Italian Air Force, Army and Navy) such as radar and communication structures (ACE HIGH Tropo Scatter system - Allied Command Europe Highband, a NATO radiocommunication and early warning system used since 1956 to connect Norway to Turkey); short range air defence (Hawk missile system, anti-aircraft system controlled by the Italian Army which con-

stitutes the air defence of the north-east area, together with the Nike system); surface-to-air defence (Nike missile system, controlled by NATO and the Italian Air Force); airfields.

- Nuclear Deterrent (NATO, Italian Air Force, Army and Navy) such as nuclear weapons stores; surface to surface defence (Jupiter missile system, positioned in Puglia and Basilicata regions, including nuclear weapons delivered to the Italian Air Force).
- United States Forces (US Army, US Air Force, US Navy) such as airfields; naval bases; army complexes; nuclear deterrence; intelligence facilities; communication structures.
- Defence Research Establishments (NATO, Italian Air Force, Army and Navy) such as aviation; naval; rockets; guided weapons; nuclear.
- Communication, command and control (NATO, Italian Air Force, Army and Navy) such as static War Headquarters (as part of the NATO's Southern Region, Italy host two important NATO commands: CINCSOUTH, Commander-in chief Allied Forces Southern Europe in Naples; FTASE, Headquarters of

the Allied Land Forces Southern Europe in Afifi, Verona); naval facilities.

After the demilitarisation: the military has gone and does not exercise its power anymore on the landscape. The presence of the military in the perception of the place could last more than its tangible “liberation”. The space then is left with lack of protection, use, knowledge or interest. Now is the time in which many initiatives of reuse in Italy has started to raise. In most cases, former military sites become museums or memorial of what they were before. When this does not happen, the materiality of the site (or part of it) is in danger to be lost.

The only possibility to protect the Cold War de-commissioned military sites resides in the framework of the activity of recognition and documentation of the contemporary heritage, also for the purpose of issuing the *Dichiarazione di importante carattere artistico* (Declaration of important artistic character), the only tool to protect by law the buildings younger than 70 years (or 50 in particular cases) in Italy. This declaration is released by the *Direzione Generale Creatività contemporanea e Rigenerazione urbana* (Contemporary Creativity and Urban Regeneration General Direction) according to the law 633/41 introduced to protect the author of an art piece. Despite being used indirectly, this law can protect the contemporary architecture. For instance it was used in the *Censimento nazionale delle architetture italiane del secondo Novecento* (the Italian architecture of the twentieth century second half national census) started in 2000 by the ministerial office of *Direzione Generale per l'Architettura e l'Arte Contemporanea* (Contemporary Architecture and Art General Direction - now *Direzione Generale Creatività contemporanea e Rigenerazione urbana*, Contemporary Creativity and Urban Regeneration General Direction).

It is clear that the criteria “by author” cannot be used for the Cold War military sites. On the other hand, those “by publication” could be used in a broader sense, such as pointing the sites which have been cited from the specialistic literature abroad (Cocroft, Thomas, 2003). It will be use-

ful to consider criteria like the typological, structural or technological innovation –maybe with a demonstration that they were an input for innovation also in the civilian architecture– (e.g. telecommunications, radar); connection with significant historical event (e.g. peace protests), change in the NATO strategy) or the Trentino Alto Adige region (particular interest in the materials and building technologies used). It is difficult to consider the influence of one building on its urban context, since the military sites have often an independent and disconnected role in the city or landscape they reside. The urban, architectural and constructive vicissitudes have been segmented into periods, each characterized by a particular denomination that intends to summarize its main historical and cultural characteristics.

4. Conclusions

My research raises the question of whether these complexes can be considered heritage and should therefore be protected. Since the documents are still partly inaccessible, it is important to gather the available information and documentation, both tangible and intangible, through the recording of the most important sites. However, there is the risk to lose all the knowledge of the sites before preserving them, which resides mainly in the memory of the people who have worked and served in these places. This is the reason why a reflection on the protection of the sites would have more success now, while the generation who lived the Cold War is not disappeared yet. It is important to record these intangible features, which help to create the memory of one site, together with its material traces, and open a discussion about the criteria to select what could be considered for protection in the framework of the Italian law.

Notes

¹ In the United Kingdom the process of identification of the Cold War sites started as an English Heritage initiative, and it is the more inclusive approach I found until now. The Cold War project was developed in the occasion of the Monuments' Protection Programme (Cocroft,

2001), of which results were published as monograph (Cocroft, Thomas, 2003). The interest started as an initiative of Subterranea Britannica and thanks to few experts in archaeology of recent conflict (John Schofield and Wayne Cocroft) an assessment was developed inside the framework of the protection institution, which suggested the level of protection for every site analysed. The government protected 60 of them, so now some of them are scheduled and others are listed. The development and management of every site now are left to the owner of each site, and this brings to a very differentiated and various image of the Cold War.

² Already in the 1990s, Sweden has fastened the process of the identification of Cold War sites, as a wish coming directly from the institution. The demilitarization started at the end of the 1980s, led to the first investigations on the military sites. The result of the first campaign of

identification commissioned to the Swedish Fortifications Agency (FORTV), was a report (Från, 1994) which stressed that modern fortifications are a forgotten and hidden cultural treasure that must be saved from perishing. Also, the Swedish Military Heritage network was founded in 2008, after another investigation (A.A, 2005) to suggest which are the more representative museums in Cold War military sites to be supported as heritage. Only 15 sites are protected by law. The process of heritagisation is divided between the sites protected by law and those in development through the help of the government, but without protection on the building.

³ See for instance the analysis of few cases in the United Kingdom in (Bravaglieri, 2019b).

⁴ The main surface-to-air missile system deployed in Italy, for more information see (Carnevale, Ferracin, Struffi, 2016).

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