

Reintegrating Cold War landscapes? The former Trieste Barracks in Casarsa della Delizia

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Abstract This paper engages with a specific feature of former military landscapes, the Cold War barracks, located in a specific territory, the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region in north-eastern Italy, at the former border between the Western and Eastern blocs. Based on several academic activities, such as an international workshop and didactical experiences, this work focuses on the Trieste Barracks in Casarsa della Delizia (in the province of Pordenone) as a laboratory for new landscape solutions to reintegrate a derelict military site into civil society. The main outputs of the research are: 1) updating the international scientific literature and the relative research gaps in the discourse of Cold War post-military landscapes; and 2) an innovative landscape-oriented approach to a former military landscape founded on locally based long-term solutions in terms of resilience and sustainable development. Our research aims to demonstrate that Cold War landscapes have primarily been neglected in the academic field, but academic work in collaboration with local actors can result in feasible solutions to export to other cases.

Keywords: *former military landscapes, urban voids, urban regeneration, place-based approach, heritage, tangible/intangible values*

INTRODUCTION

Three world conflicts have indelibly marked the evolution of the Friuli-VeneziaGiulia territory on the Italian north-eastern border (First and Second World War and Cold War). Throughout

these dramatic events, different warfare techniques have created a non-linear succession of distinct military landscapes. Friuli-Venezia Giulia was one of the theatres where the First and Second World Wars were fought,¹ but the most impact on the socio-economic character and landscape morphology occurred during the 1947–1991 Cold War. This war was a ‘cold’ one, carried out through ideology rather than fighting, but it left an impressive tangible and intangible heritage.²

After 1945, NATO considered Friuli-Venezia Giulia the ‘last’ defence against an ever-possible Communist invasion. This belief transformed its territory into a unique fabric of barracks, full of young soldiers ready for combat in case of invasion. The military population, in some cases, doubled the number of inhabitants present in the Friulian communities, and the military compounds created a distinctive pattern where social and spatial issues had to be balanced and solved locally. Forty years of the Cold War had been the reason to tolerate extreme military control of the territory, which had repercussions on the development of agriculture and industry. Friuli Venezia-Giulia represents the Italian territory with the highest percentage of military presence: a total of 119,205 km² (1.668 per cent of the regional surface), divided into 93,098 km² of state-owned land (1.303 per cent) and 26,107 km² of military servitude (0.365 per cent).³

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Friuli experienced the most significant quantity of abandoned military sites in Italy; however, the process of taking them back from the state to reintegrate them as part of the traditional territory is still long, with specific implications from the landscape point of view. The work edited by

Santarossa and Scirè Risichella⁴ found 285 former military sites of 9,811,245 m², with very few settlements reused. Despite comprehensive work on the change of military presence in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, knowledge and visions around the topics of former Cold War military landscapes in the region are still sporadic.

We aim to widen the research perspectives on the subject by investigating one of the most interesting cases at a regional level. The study case is the Trieste Barracks in Casarsa della Delizia, which hosted more than 4,000 soldiers during the Cold War in an area as wide as the village itself.⁵ The work comprises a desk research activity based on primary and secondary sources (ie local archives, government legislative documents, local administrations’ urban and territorial planning sources and press articles), the 2015 international project design workshop ‘Restarting from Bacchus and Dionysus, with the help of Oyamatsumi. Sustainable proposals for the renewal of former Trieste Barracks in Casarsa’ (with on-site visits and interviews with actors and stakeholders involved), subsequent detailed studies at Politecnico di Milano, and other public events, such as the 2019 conference ‘Beyond Barbed Wire: What Future for Military Brownfields?’ held in Casarsa della Delizia.

The restitution of these former military barracks in the community’s urban fabric raises many questions: How to maintain and enhance landscape memories expressed by these compounds? How to reuse such a high-consuming land during a time of economic stasis? What could be the sustainable scenarios for the future of the community? The answers we provided could signify a practical response to various situations inherited from the Cold War and its ideology that now seems to be reappearing.

THE DISCOURSE OF COLD WAR (FORMER) MILITARY LANDSCAPES: DEFINITIONS AND APPROACHES

The end of the Cold War constituted a benchmark for the military presence in the territory. Many national defence sites have been closed in many countries following geopolitical changes, spending review policies and privatisation of public-owned assets in the logic of capital.⁶ The existing international literature shows that Cold War military sites abandoned after 1989 are included primarily in archaeological and heritage debates,⁷ which lie within broader discursive and institutional structures of national, regional and local policymaking and practice. Specific museumification and inheritance of Cold War military settlements have occurred in countries such as Sweden,⁸ the USA⁹ and the UK.¹⁰ Various initiatives, including conferences,¹¹ have dealt with the fast disappearance of the Cold War heritage.¹² These efforts, however, are not sufficient to prevent the mass demolition of the military remains of the Cold War, especially in Europe.¹³ Cacciaguerra and Gatti¹⁴ claimed that 20th-century military settlements' architecture and morphology are scarcely preserved compared to the conservative reuse approach to military sites built before 1900. Strange and Walley¹⁵ pinpointed that the global landscapes of the Cold War are a 'heritage at risk' as they have been subject to the financial objectives of the disposal policies from the early 1990s.

The studies mentioned above suggest that urgent measures to contrast the loss of this landscape may create a catalogue of what the military had released and recognise the international historical significance of the Cold War sites under threat of disappearance. Robertson¹⁶ and Woodward¹⁷ based critical theoretical contributions on Cold War landscapes. On the one hand, Robertson argued that the concept of 'militarised landscapes' mostly

refers to two typical locations: 1) hand battlefields and fortified locations that could become combat sites; and 2) staging grounds for combat, such as airfields, missile and logistics bases and testing grounds. On the other hand, Woodward included the redundant structures of the Cold War within the notion of 'post-military landscapes', ie those 'without a military function in the present, but where the imprint of a former military function remains too pervasive to enable the erasure of their military origins'.

Several studies addressed specific features of Cold War landscapes, such as air defence networks¹⁸ and bunkers,¹⁹ but they did not provide comprehensive analyses of Cold War military sites such as barracks. The Italian case lacks in-depth studies on Cold War landscapes, and a public inventory of Cold War sites in Italy has still not been released. Bravaglieri²⁰ inquired on preservation issues of Cold War sites, while Malatesta²¹ analysed the historical events related to the NATO presence in Italy. Nevertheless, few steps have been taken towards a comprehensive survey of Cold War military sites. Santarossa and Scirè Risichella²² dealt with the military abandonment in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and Gastaldi and Camerin²³ identified the changes in military presence in the Veneto region between 1989 and 2017. They found 94 military settlements built between the 1950s and 1960s.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE COLD WAR POST-MILITARY LANDSCAPES: THE TRIESTE BARRACKS IN CASARSA DELLA DELIZIA

The analysis of the Trieste Barracks in Casarsa della Delizia can be approached according to three features in the discourse of Cold War post-military landscapes: the types of sites, their tangible and intangible values, and their abandonment.

Types of sites

Military settlements comprise various sites according to their purposes.²⁴ The specific landscapes under study are the barracks as a part of military infrastructures from the Cold War. This type of settlement aims to accommodate military personnel separated from the local population in an enclosure. The morphology and structure follow standardised patterns to design barracks according to functional, structural, hygienic-sanitary and morphological criteria. In the post-Second World War period, the danger of an atomic attack radically redrew the scale, distribution and versatility of military installations in Italian territory. For instance, the logic behind the localisation of the Cold War military sites responded to the attempt to provide a minimum distance between two installations of 3–5km.²⁵ Following these patterns, the ‘standard barracks’ would be established between 2 and 6km from the urban centre to house 1,000 soldiers in an area of at least 20 hectares. According to Eccellente,²⁶ the cost of these barracks would be around 30bn lira.²⁷

The Trieste Barracks built post-Second World War lay over the peripheral area of the ancient airship’s hangar and station constructed in Casarsa during the First World War (see Figure 1). The plot size is 235,000m², with 109,733m² devoted to interior streets and squares. The net area comprises 4,702m² of dorm rooms, 1,418m² of sanitary facilities, 1,344m² of kitchens and canteens, 2,554m² of space for conferences, 1,079m² of recreational spaces such as the gym and the cinema, and 2,305m² of offices and various equipment. In other words, we are dealing with a city within a city.

Tangible and intangible values of the barracks

On the one hand, tangible values preserve the existing built environment

and its morphology within the military enclosures. None of the Trieste

Barracks buildings is listed, so there is no recognition of specific architectural and historical interest for the site. As a result, the area is not recovered for future generations as a tangible memory of the Cold War period. A question arises: How to preserve the site’s historical significance and public enjoyment against issues such as its annihilation following the neoliberal tendencies of urban governance?²⁸

On the other hand, intangible values deal with the village’s local culture, character and history (ie oral traditions and expressions, performing arts and social practices, rituals and festive events²⁹). Significant intangible values of Casarsa della Delizia are the figure of the Italian intellectual Pier Paolo Pasolini,³⁰ the Italian resistance movement during the Second World War,³¹ the annual Wine Festival,³² and the fringe narratives and meanings ascribed to the Cold War period coming from the personal histories of former officers and conscripts.³³ In this sense, personal memory plays a significant part in the intangible values of Casarsa della Delizia. The Trieste Barracks reached a peak of soldiers accommodated in the 1970s. It hosted more than 4,000 military personnel, a greater number than Casarsa’s inhabitants, including the soldiers’ family members. The military presence influenced the social, economic and urban aspects of the local community, whose economy, until 30 years ago, was strongly characterised by the presence of the barracks.

The abandonment

The barracks started to be underused in April 1991, when the Cavalleggeri Guide Regiment was transferred to Salerno (Campania region). Subsequently, the 41° Cordenons Artillery Regiment occupied the site. Despite important restoration



Figure 1: The Trieste Barracks area in Casarsa della Delizia. The historic urban centre of the town has the same surface as the former military compound

Source: Table from the MS in Architecture Thesis by Edoardo Del Conte and Erica Nonis, supervisor Luca Maria Francesco Fabris, Politecnico di Milano, AUIC School, 2018

works to the barracks in 1994, the end of military service in 2001 implied a progressive and inexorable abandonment of the military area. The 41° Cordenons Artillery Regiment transfer to Sora (Frosinone, Lazio region) eventually took place in 2007.³⁴ This led to the definitive abandonment of an area of more than 11 hectares, left uncared for inside the walls that isolate it from the civil society and even from the area still occupied (or rather, underused) by the military. A renaturalisation took place within the walls of the abandoned part of the barracks.

Many main buildings and facilities have been neglected and covered by wild vegetation, some in deplorable structural conditions.

After almost 15 years of complete abandonment (see Figures 2–5), the Trieste Barracks is paradoxically still owned by the Ministry of Defence. The local administration has, however, started a bureaucratic process through the Joint Commission State–Regional to transfer ownership to the Italian Public Property Agency (*Agenzia del Demanio*). After being a Cold War landscape in

which war has not been fought in situ, the barracks is the site of actual conflict between state and local public actors.

In a stagnant situation in which ideas for reuse have been discussed mainly in the local press, in 2019 the Ministry of Defence launched a proposal to redevelop 26 settlements under the so-called Green Barracks programme, among which are the Trieste Barracks.³⁵ The scope of this programme is to revitalise abandoned and degraded military sites over a 20-year period to create new resilient and sustainable sites.

Nevertheless, the Trieste Barracks are a priority as there are no interventions scheduled for the first 12 years of the Green Barracks programme,³⁶ nor has the local City Council been consulted

for their inclusion in the programme.

In this situation, the actors should not forget that the Trieste Barracks have a testimonial value of the war conflict memory and are a resource in architectural and urban planning terms. In addition, the barracks are totally 'off-limits' for the local community, although they are legally state property — in other words, 'commons'. This intrinsic characteristic would mean that the barracks theoretically belong to all the citizens. Therefore, several questions arise: How much time would it take to transfer the military property to the local level? What kind of function can reuse the barracks and give them back to the community? Could the enclosure be reused without removing the unforgettable Cold War memory?



Figure 2: The vegetation has invaded the surroundings of a building

Source: Federico Camerin (2015)



Figure 3: Former kitchen furniture

Source: Federico Camerin (2015)



Figure 4: An empty hangar

Source: Federico Camerin (2015)



Figure 5: A fallen tree

Source: Federico Camerin (2015)

TURNING THE COLD WAR LANDSCAPE INTO 'FUTURE MEMORIES': COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT, DESIGN APPROACHES, CONCEPTS AND POST-WORKSHOP

Community involvement

The international workshop 'Restarting from Bacchus and Dionysus, with the help of Oyamatsumi' organised by Politecnico di Milano in September 2015³⁷ arose the local community's interest in a recovery action to be promoted on the Trieste Barracks. The interaction with the local citizens and the administration aimed to collect suggestions and desiderata from the local stakeholders and took place in public town-hall meetings and forums held during the workshop and afterwards.

On the one hand, the City Council approached the unused barracks not as potential new real-estate blocks or large industrial areas but as an actual wound inside the town. Administrators claimed to fill the gap in ideas and concepts by showing how to reintegrate this space into the city. On the other hand, the citizens emphasised that the renewal should maintain the place's memory and historical value while creating a new attraction to Casarsa tourists interested in wine tasting and buying and cultural events. Citizens desired to convert most of the former military area into a public park for tourists interested in oenology. To sum up, the proposed brief and the desiderata of the stakeholders were very similar and supported the results of the workshop.³⁸

Approaches and concepts

The workshop based on the EXPO 2015 themes ('Science and Technology for Agriculture and Biodiversity' and 'Food and Lifestyles') combined different disciplines such as architecture, oenology, landscape and urban planning, to raise the values of Casarsa's specificity. This event represented an incredible resource, attracting to Casarsa a wide range of possible international interest, carefully analysing the local history, culture and economy. The multidisciplinary workshop approach focuses solely on the local strengths of Casarsa della Delizia. First, Casarsa as a place dedicated to wine production and its connection with the Friulan territory, which over centuries has been transformed into a flat landscape covered with vineyards. Second, the cultural legacy of Pier Paolo Pasolini,

the internationally known poet and film director with Casarsese ancestors, who lived in Casarsa during his youth and wrote some of the best artistic descriptions of the Friulian landscape. Finally, the Cold War military heritage that during the 20th century transformed the rural landscape that is still present on Casarsa's territory with a constellation of former barracks, the most extensive being the Trieste one.

New functions

The workshop set the former Trieste Barracks as a centre of gravity for transforming the town and its community (see Figures 6–8). The proposals outlined several hypotheses of gradual reappropriation toward the complete reuse of the neglected area. They focused on agriculture, winemaking, culture and



Figure 6: Adaptive reuse of the open spaces present in the former Trieste Barracks according to citizens' requests

Source: Elaboration from the 2015 workshop, © Politecnico di Milano

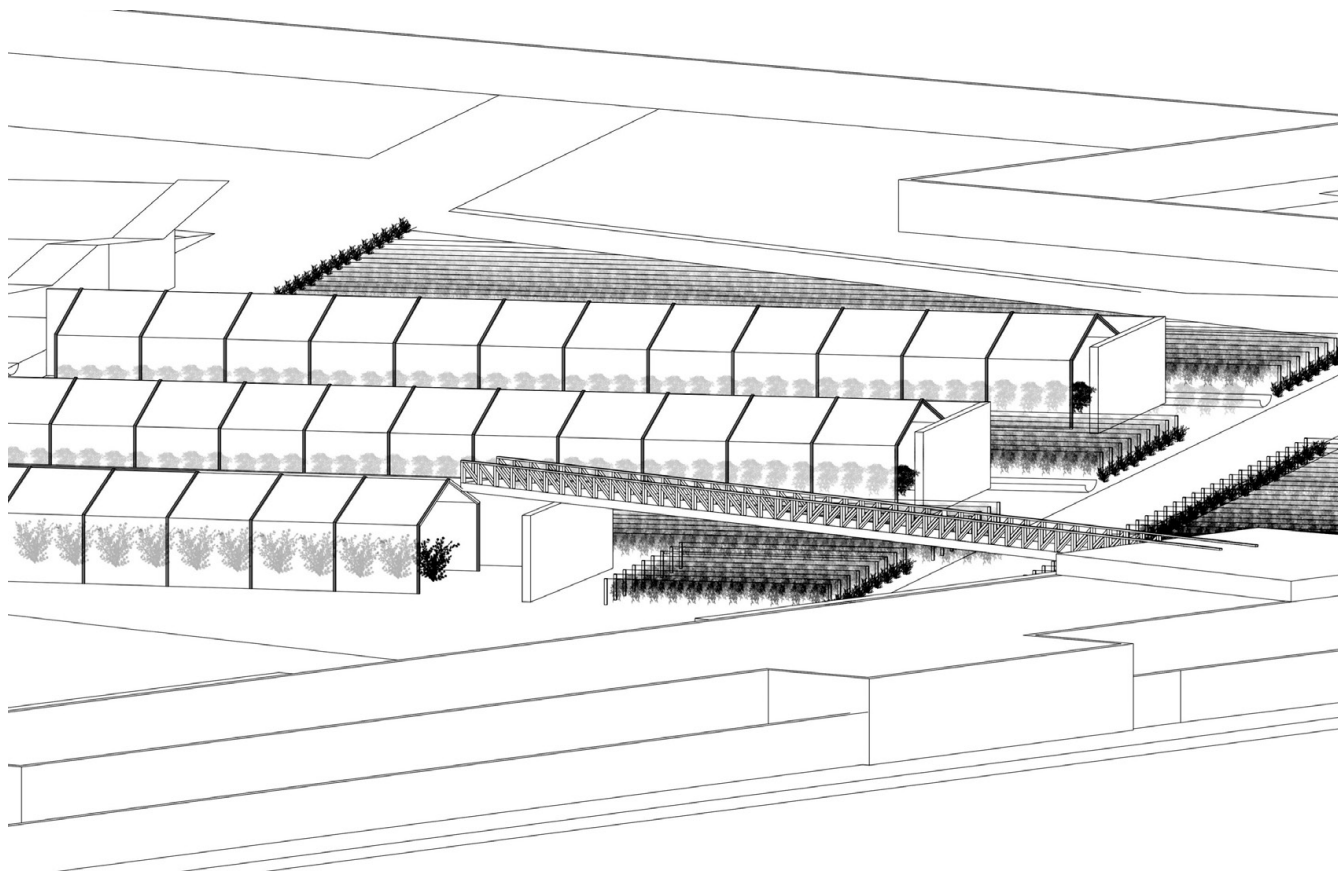


Figure 7: Vineyard landscape connects Casarsa's urban area and the abandoned former military area

Source: Elaboration from the 2015 workshop, © Politecnico di Milano

history to merge into new locally centred tourism.

The reuse hypotheses are based on one of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development pillars, ie 'make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable'.³⁹ The new functions would be a wine museum and a pilot vineyard together with the Friulian typical countryside landscape recreation to promote organic farming and the local cooperative social winery (a winery reality on a European scale), as well as a museum dedicated to the Cold War. These ideas came from discovering, during the preliminary research in preparing the workshop, that there are no similar facilities in the whole of the Friuli Venezia Giulia region.

Post-workshops: Going into details

The authors picked up the thread in 2017 as the Casarsa City Council asked

to deepen the 2015 workshop results by elaborating some more complex concepts, starting from these preliminary ideas. The workshop scenarios were the basis for a semester-long studio project that involved students from the MSc in architecture of the School AUIC of the Politecnico di Milano. This new phase was based on the landscape architecture task to reuse most of the former barracks in a public park devoted to wine culture. The Casarsa City Council called for a better definition of the architectural issues of the projects, maintaining just some of the former military buildings and adding new structures according to the workshop brief, ie the Wine Museum and the Cold War Museum. In addition, at the request of the town administrators, students had to design a sustainable hotel for tourists and a low-impact building hosting a hub for start-ups to support local young entrepreneurship.

Esploso assometrico

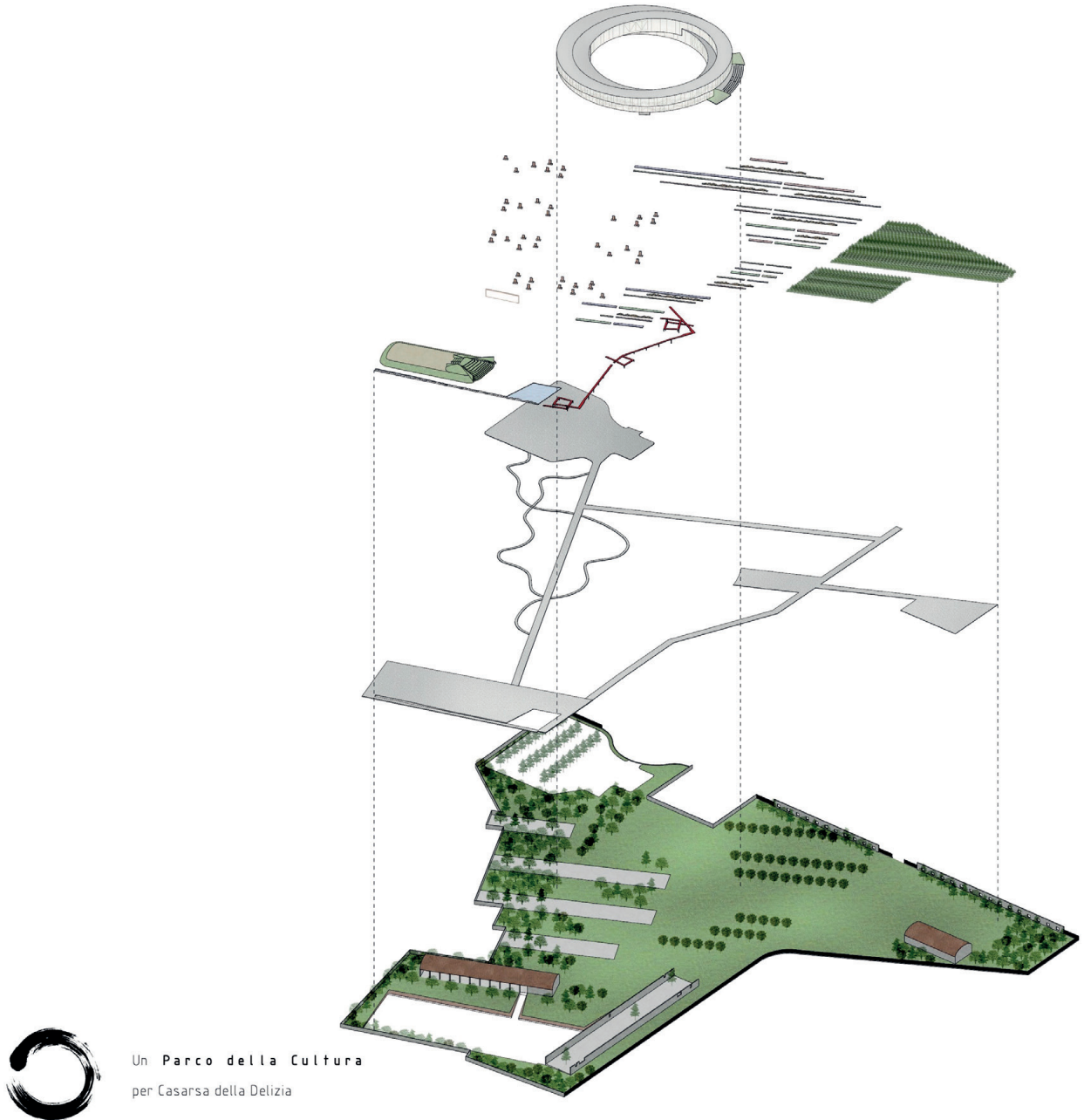


Figure 8: Exploded axonometric masterplan view

Source: Table from the MS in Architecture thesis by Edoardo Del Conte and Erica Nonis, supervisor Luca Maria Francesco Fabris, Politecnico di Milano, AUIC School, 2018

At the end of the design studio, the results were given to the Casarsa administration to enforce, with several new scenarios examples, the request to the state counterparts to return the former Trieste Barracks area to the community. The idea

was to define in greater detail, through practical and inclusive projects, the possible sustainable scenarios for the future of this disused military area, considering the lack of public resources and the current crisis in the real estate sector.

CONCLUSION

Although the Cold War itself is a comparatively recent historical event, it cannot be too early to deal with a landscape that is already fast disappearing. Aside from a growing debate arising on the gradual abandonment of former military settlements in Italy,⁴⁰ the remains of the Cold War in Italy seem to be understudied. No public inventory has been released either by public entities or by academics, and Cold War sites can be targets of mass demolition due to the financial approach of entrepreneurial urbanism. In this context, the Trieste Barracks are a collective memory of heritage and landscape and convey a sense of belonging to the community and former comrades. The awareness of damaging, or even dissolving, the Cold War landscape is a potential risk while proposing new uses, so the transformation process of the large-scale Cold War military heritage brings particular challenges.

Despite the hiatus caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the workshop's approach is still useful, showing valid reasons to rethink and redesign diversified open and cultivable spaces to reimagine the public use of the city. The multidisciplinary approach developed since the workshop provided feasible solutions to integrate resilience and sustainability in the Cold War post-military landscape. Moreover, the workshop gave the power of participation to the community and new local-based opportunities to reinvent Casarsa based on the former military land.

In a context in which research on post-Cold War landscapes in other countries linked to heritage and regeneration appears to be limited, this case study may be relevant for two main reasons. First, it addresses a large-scale military site located in a relatively small municipality according to the local specialities and economic activities, ie agriculture and winemaking,

to foster place-based tourism. Second, it proposes resilient and sustainable solutions that can be applied in similar cases, both in Friuli's myriad former military sites and abroad. Eventually, future research directions may focus on proposing and creating a public inventory of all Cold War military land on which to apply the Casarsa-based analysis of other kinds of military settlements, such as gunpowder depots, shooting ranges and warehouses.

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35. Esercito Italiano (2019), 'Caserme Verdi per l'Esercito', p. 4, Ministero della Difesa, Rome, available at http://www.esercito.difesa.it/comunicazione/editoria/Rivista-Militare/Documents/2019/3/FASCICOLO_Caserme_Verdi_web.pdf (accessed 5th September, 2023).
36. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
37. The workshop results were presented at the 'Wine – A taste of Italy', Pavilion at the Milan EXPO 2015.
38. Fabris and Camerin, ref. 5 above.
39. See United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 'Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable', available at <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal11> (accessed 5th September, 2023).
40. Gastaldi, F. and Camerin, F. (2017), 'Processi di dismissione degli immobili militari. Temi e problemi aperti per la rigenerazione urbana in Italia', *Scienze Regionali, Italian Journal of Regional Science*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 103–120.