Lofts districts in Milan. Overlapping tensions between uses and regulations. Instruments for urban and architectural design

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Abstract: The topic of conversion of industrial buildings and compounds into lofts got very little attention in the Italian case, represented mainly by the city of Milan. The gray areas of national and local regulations allowed the unplanned emergence of entire multi-functional enclosed districts within the city, built from the ruins of former industrial plants. Due to the inherent flexibility of industrial buildings, with spaces that can be divided horizontally and vertically in modules which can be joined and split, lofts allow for the coexistence of diverse uses. Officially listed as workshops, these units host housing, commerce, small manufacturing, one next to the other or even in the same unit. Lofts developments may represent a case of overlapping tensions, of uses and practices and at the same time a possible way to use architectural and urban design to address several issues about the contemporary city, as the flexibility of uses and urban manufacturing. The contribution aims first to quantify the phenomenon in the city of Milan through a map of loft developments and then present one of the most critical cases, showing the tensions produced in these environments between the different uses, formal and informal, legal and illegal.

Keywords: loft, industrial heritage, reuse, flexibility

Introduction

In this paper, I will cover a somewhat ignored piece of knowledge in the chapter of the transformation of former industrial areas in Milan. The conversion of industrial buildings and compounds into lofts has been widely studied in foreign countries, starting with Zukin's seminal work "Loft Living" in 1982, until the more recent "City as Loft" of Baum and Christiansee (2013). In Italy though, even in Milan, where the loft phenomenon is quite huge, the topic has been usually moved to the background, just mentioned and rarely deepened.

In the first part, I will provide a brief international background to the topic of loft conversions. In the second, the phenomenon of loft conversions in Milan will be set in the general process of post-industrial transformation of the city. Then the loftscape of Milan will be described and analyzed. The current situation of loft developments in Milan will be depicted and quantified. A paragraph on methodology in this section will explain how data were found and processed. Finally, a significant loft compound in Milan will be studied. According to the purpose of the session the paper is presented in, the focus will be on the tensions between the many paradoxes of lofts (Zukin in Vv.Aa., 1990) and all the tensions that these paradoxes engender both at an architectural and urban scale.

The emergence of the loft phenomenon

What we can consider as the ancestors of the lofts are already found in Paris at the turn of the 19th Century, where young and not affluent artists started to rent the upper floors of buildings. Artists found appropriate for their purpose what was an uncomfortable location for most people. The interior space was normally distributed on two floors, the upper one, with skylights which let plenty of natural light getting inside, was used as a studio and the lower one usually as a bedroom.

However, it is in New York City where loft lifestyle as we intend it was born and spread in the second half of the 20th Century. First artists started to rent abandoned spaces in industrial buildings for cheap, in a period when industries already started to move outside of Lower Manhattan to more convenient locations for logistic and land prices. Those artists started a new way of living: in huge open spaces, displaying materials and features that until then were not associated with residential habits. The space of their lofts was able to combine home and work, public and private, a workshop and a gallery, remarking the difference in the notions of house and home (Nicolin in Vv.Aa., 1990).

The appropriation of these spaces for purposes other than industrial production meant the construction of new significances also for all the objects related to industry and production and the activities previously hosted in those buildings, a domestication of the industrial beauty (Polazzi, 2007). This appropriation of industrial spaces and change of values was possible because the original use was terminated, since "only people who do not know the steam and sweat of a real factory can find industrial space romantic or interesting" (Zukin in Vv.Aa., 1990, p. 21).

The conversions started a conflict between artists and the municipality of New York since all the occupations were illegal. The first measure was taken in 1964: the City Planning Commission rezoned some sections of SoHo allowing only artists to work and live there, officially recognizing the value of art production for the collectivity and the City (Celant in Vv.Aa., 1990 and Sussman, 2017).

After the first colonization by artists, this new way of living began to be fashionable and started soon to attract also nonartists and got the attention of the real estate market which immediately made of the loft a commercial product, thus starting processes of progressive gentrification of the affected areas. The appeal to a broader public was possible thanks mainly to two changes occurred in the Sixties. The first is an opening of the public administration to a limited change in the zoning regulation and the possibility to make legal living in such spaces, with the aforementioned 1964 rezoning. The second one is the emergence of new habits of consumption of the middle class, open to new different and more articulated models of living (Polazzi, 2002). Affluent people, not related to the world of arts, started to be eager to buy or rent industrial spaces to turn into their homes, and contemporarily landlords began to raise rents, which became not affordable for the same artists who benefitted from low prices at first. In 1982 the Loft Law, for protection of loft tenants, was promulgated by the State of New York. In most cases gentrification meant the end of urban manufacture and mixed uses, even contradicting the basic features of the first lofts developments such as the promotion of mixed-use and the benefit of the transformation of abandoned areas. Indeed public funding directed to this last one gets substantially lost in the moment this transformation favours a more affluent part of the population.

Lofts started then to expand in Northern America and western Europe, finding their ideal setting in cities with two characteristics: a certain amount of old industrial abandoned buildings and a lively cultural environment (Zukin, 1982).

The transformation of industrial areas in Milan

In the 1970s of the 20th Century, the profound reorganization of the industry also hit Italy and its leading industrial city, Milan. Relocation of industries in the outskirts of the city or even farther happened simultaneously with the processes of tertiarization and suburbanization leading to a progressive expulsion of functions as housing and industry from more central areas.

Within this economic context, the 1980 City Plan tries to contain tertiarization and to retain industries in the city boundaries, not allowing modifications to the zoning regulation. The impossibility of governing economic and societal dynamics happening at a broader scale with an urban regulation freezing the land uses resulted in the 7 million square meters of abandoned industrial areas (Figure 1) the city of Milan had to deal with in the next years and, to some extent, still now (Mocarelli, 2011).

Figure 1. Abandoned industrial areas (marked in black) in the City of Milan at the beginning of 2000s. DiAP, Politecnico di Milano (Morandi 2001).

When it became clear that it was impossible to retain the industry in the city with the purple spots[1] (Secchi, 1984) the first attempts to direct the transformation of the areas were set up by the city in 1988, starting thus a season of large scale urban projects, known as Plans of Urban Recovery (PRU) and Integrated Intervention Plans (PII).

At the same time, at the end of the 1980s, the word loft started to enter in the common language and to become fashionable, with the first conversions of relatively small industrial buildings in central areas of the city or in the Navigli (the canals of Milan) district by people involved professionally in the world of the fashion industry and design, willing to import the American loft lifestyle.

1 In Italian urban planning purple has usually been the colour identifying industrial areas. In his famous piece of 1984, Italian architect and urban planner Bernardo Secchi reflects on a change in the situation, stating that is not possible anymore to think to retain industries just fixating those purple spots, *macchie viola* in the original Italian, on paper in the City Plans.

Loftscape of Milan

Every city has a different and peculiar loft landscape, an effective expression I will contract to loftscape, a product of the very characteristics of the land market and built environment of the same city (Podmore, 2002).

In the collective imaginary lofts are located in an industrial heritage context (Janetti in Ufficio Studio Gabetti, 2010). However, this is just the more familiar image of the loft we have. The real situation is much more complicated. The term loft can define two kinds of different products, and we can find these categories both in the real estate market and in everyday use:

1) Lofts by regulation. The first type is a loft defined on a regulatory point of view. Although there is not, at least in Italy, any law or even somewhat legal definition of a loft, this category represents the regulatory status of what is typically called loft. Indeed the word loft usually indicates any unit not officially registered as housing but used as such, or for mixed activities. There is then a difference between the official (regulatory) function of the unit, function certified at the cadastre and in the official urban planning documents, and its actual daily use. The most common case is the registration as a C/3, cadastre code for a workshop;

2) Lofts by morphology. The second meaning refers instead only to a morphological or typological issue. Often, indeed, a unit officially registered as a house may be defined as a loft due to its architectural characteristics, as its being a nonpartitioned open space, with a free internal layout, or for the presence of huge skylights or windows, and more generally its industrial-like look.

There are then lofts defined as such only by the first or only by the second category and others, most of them, which are included in both. After specifying the possible meanings of the term loft, we can analyze the loftscape of the city of Milan, which is composed of two main categories of conversions of former buildings and units into lofts:

- micro transformation: conversions of single units of modest dimension, mainly former warehouses or workshops part of other buildings, primarily residential, scattered all around the city in the inner courtyards of the old fabric and the 19th-century city;

- large-medium transformations: conversions of entire former industrial buildings or compounds that stopped their monofunctional activity and production and turned into lofts villages.

Microtransformations are very difficult to map and to count, due to their very nature. The phenomenon is vast and widespread all around the city, but no official data are available neither it seems to be possible to map it effectively. Within this category, we find two main products defined as lofts:

1. Standard apartments renovated with loft-like features like being open space or duplex. They are lofts only by morphology, in the real estate market language;

2. Reuse with mixed or mainly residential use, with or without change of use, of shops at the street level, offices, workshops, and garages, mainly in the inner courtyards of the buildings, attic spaces and also basements. All of these conversions present peculiar architectural features which make them lofts by morphology. If a change of land use did not occur, then they are lofts also by regulation.

Medium-large transformations are the ones we will deal with now on in this writing and could be subdivided into three categories:

3. Reuse of buildings and areas on a gradual and progressive basis through actions of subtraction, addition, and modification of the existing (lofts by regulation and by morphology);

4. Demolition of the old industrial buildings and new construction of residential buildings recalling the industrial morphology of the previous ones or, if that was not significant, inventing a new industrial-like look (lofts by morphology);

5. Demolition of the old industrial buildings and new construction of buildings completely different by morphology that could be registered as commercial units without any change of land use (lofts by regulation) or as residential units after a change of land use but with architectural characteristics of lofts as mezzanines and big windows. (lofts by morphology).

As we can see, loft is a word that can define multiple situations, from a living, legal, morphological, or typological point of view. It is a word as flexible as the product it describes. What it becomes clear is also the normalization of the loft product (Multiplicity Lab, 2007), which became another among various real estate market proposals.

Lofts compounds in Milan are many and compose quite a heterogeneous loftscape. Medium-large transformations amount to 86 areas varying in the number of units between 5 and 500 and in surface area between 1.100 and 85.000 square meters for a total of approximately 700.000 square meters. Most of them, and this is a distinctive trait of Milanese loftscape compared for instance to the New York one, develops mainly horizontally rather than vertically. Ackermann (1991) subdivides industrial buildings into two types: multiple floors and big sheds. The first includes, as the same name says, buildings characterized by a vertical subdivision into multiple floors. They are very common in Manhattan, where industries did not have space to expand horizontally, and early technological developments allowed for vertical growth. These buildings are readily convertible into "common" city residential or commercial buildings, with one or more dwelling for each floor. The conversion is usually a matter of internal redistribution and the creation of spaces. The second ones instead, taking their name from the typical industrial roofs, develops horizontally, reaching a limited height, generally of just one floor (considering that the height of a floor for industrial use is significant, often exceeding ten meters). These kinds of industrial facilities, when converted to other uses resemble more a village than a building. A little town within the city, with row units, internal open-air streets, the outcome of a process of subtraction, cut and addition of volumes.

Furthermore, as we can see in Figure 2 another unique characteristic of the Milanese loftscape is that most of the most significant converted areas are not in very central locations but peripheral areas of the city. Milan is quite compact as a city and distances are not so huge. The adjective peripheral here

defines what is outside the very city center, recognizable as the Zone 1, delimited by the circle of the former Spanish Walls. Industrial areas developed outside the historical center and when conversions started these locations were not central and not regarded as fashionable. One for all, the Navigli area of via Tortona, which also due to the loft conversions is nowadays an active and vibrant part of the city, devoted to the industry of fashion and design. In any case, the centrality of location does not seem to count as a plus for the appeal of conversions in Milan, which instead involved half peripheral and even very peripheral locations, not so well linked by public transit with the center of the city. The loftscape of Milan is indeed characterized by significant peripheral developments. The limited size of the city should be, of course, taken into account when making these considerations.

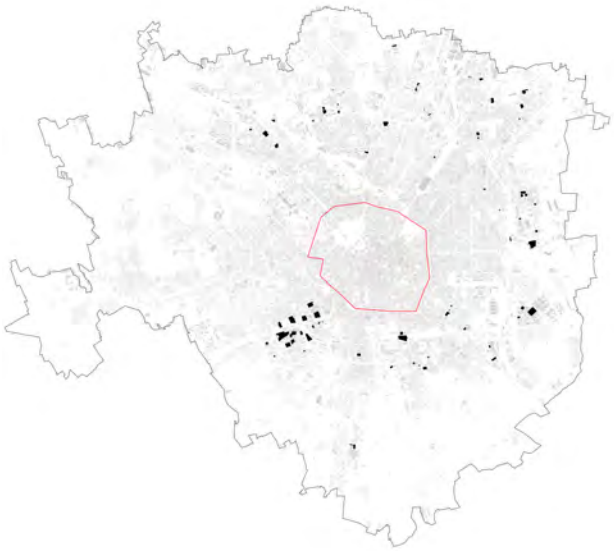

Figure 2. Lofts compounds (marked in black) in the City of Milan in 2018, with city center in red perimeter. Elaboration of the author.

The creative environment, instead, did play a major role in importing the loft-living style and spread the loft culture around the city. The very beginning of the phenomenon, as mentioned before, started in the Navigli area thanks to a few pioneers linked to the world of fashion. With the expansion in the last decades of the reputation of Milan as a world fashion and design capital, these two sectors kept gaining importance in the economy of the city. Some of the districts renowned for the heavy presence of creative industry-related activities are also the ones with a massive presence of lofts: such as the aforementioned Navigli, or Lambrate or Mecenate.

Tucidide 56

The loft complex Tucidide56 (via Tucidide 56 the address of the building complex) stands where once was the productive site of Richard-Ginori, famous pottery producer where the renowned architect Giò Ponti used to work as art director. It is located in the eastern outskirts of the city, beyond the railway belt, in an area where the urban fabric remained quite compact and still the separation between the city and the agricultural land is perceivable.

Tucidide56 is the second biggest loft development per surface with 57.000 square meters and the one with most units, over 500, a proper urban village, with streets (Figure 3), common spaces and services. The factory, built during the first decades of the 20th Century, was characterized by some art-deco architectural elements and ornaments.

Figure 3. A street inside Tucidide56 area, result of the operation of subtraction and cut of a former warehouse.

The compound is very peculiar due to its size but also for the composition of the property of the area. The development started in the early 2000s as a sale operation. The units were sold to privates by the new landlord of the whole area, who bought it from a prominent and controversial real estate company. The landlord was in charge of the facades and the common spaces while the interiors were delivered not finished so that buyers could personalize them. Year after year a certain number of units was put on the market until the economic crisis of the second half of the 2000s. With the crisis, the redevelopment operation changed from sales to rent, which became more profitable at that time. The landlord and developer became then also the manager of the complex, building, renting, and managing the newly constructed units.

Lofts for rent are very different from lofts for sale (Hemnett and Whitelegg, 2007). The lofts made for the specific purpose of being rented are oriented toward ultimately another market than the ones for sale. They can be smaller, and the quality of the finish can be rougher and cheaper, with no personalization from the developer, which aims to extract the maximum rent at the minimum cost. This issue also reflects on more mediocre environmental performances of the buildings.

Nowadays in the area, there are over 550 units, of which around 200 properties of private citizens and the rest property of the developing company that rents them. Land use was changed in most of the privately owned lofts, mainly used as family homes. Some of them have been put on the temporary rent market. They usually are quite spacious and with outer spaces, gardens or terraces, with double heights and all the features that characterize lofts in the common imaginary.

The units for rent are over 350, and still growing in number as long there are other old hangars to be transformed. The average surface is of 76 square meters, far from what is the typical image of a huge loft space and a lot of them are even mini-lofts of 30 square meters. All of them are listed in the building registry as commercial units, but they host a permanent population of an average of 1,2 persons per unit.

The 55% of the lofts are used only as housing, 30% as house-studio and 15% for office or deposit. The population is evenly divided between males and females, 60% of the inhabitants are singles, and 20% are foreigners. The 82% of the holders of the rental contract own a VAT number, which makes them autonomous workers or entrepreneurs. The 28% of the occupants work in creative professions,

intending as such jobs in visual production, communication, design, show-business as photographers, designers, architects, musicians, dancers, artists of many kinds, and so on.

The peculiar and heterogeneous mix of inhabitants and activities gave life to a lively environment. Of course there are condo-living like issues and problems, but there is also a community spirit, with social events, a dedicated social media page, and it fosters continuous contacts among different people involved in the world of arts or small manufacture, giving the opportunity for easily starting collaborations.

Lofts as a place of conflict

As we saw, illegality played a major role in the history of lofts. The whole story began thanks to a few rule breakers willing to pay the price of relative discomfort for having other advantages, as cheaper rents for bigger spaces in central locations on the island of Manhattan. When they became too many to be ignored, public administration had to intervene, some way even endorsing them, recognizing their role and the importance of art production in the economy of the City (Sussman, 2017). The biggest change lofts brought along was about land use. They forced the city of New York to revise the zoning regulation; they brought back a way of living that was typical of cities in the past (living and working spaces together, mixed). Separation of functions and zoning, heavily promoted by the Modern Movement, had their right reasons in hygiene: due to the very unhealthy conditions of cities back then a strict separation of functions was a necessary and effective way to avoid or diminish sanitary risks.

Lofts are the place of multiple conflicts. The word conflict, recalling the Latin etymology and use, which acceptation is both collision and encounter, divergence and medley. Conflicts both at an architectural and at an urban scale, regarding little things of the daily life of inhabitants and concerning crucial issues related to the functioning of the city, urban planning, regulation, and taxation. There is a conflict between their legal situation which is different from the actual daily use; a gap between what is de jure and what is de facto. The conflict between living and working, and among various kinds of activities one next to the other. The conflict between public and private, mixed in the same space, inside each unit, and inside the whole compound, canceling any form of zoning.

Furthermore, local and national regulations on urban planning and taxation produce different types of conflict in each different city. Again, loftscape is different from one city to another, not only according to the local cultural environment and economy but also to local regulations.

In Milan, but what follows could be generalized in the case of Italy, for instance, building lofts has been a way to avoid and bypass a series of prohibitions and limitations, introducing residential functions where it was not allowed. This is possible thanks to the grey areas of the law, especially about the place of residence a person is allowed to declare. It is possible indeed to declare the place of residence in a non-residential unit, as long as this is suitable for a living. Suitability consists in having a furnished kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom, the basic requirements controlled by the inspector, who does not check the land use or cadastre registration code of the unit, but only the fact that the applicant is living there. This situation engenders two main issues.

The first one is about the relation with the city. Many people live and are allowed to live and use the public services of the surroundings, services for which they or the developer never paid and contributed to build or create if any change of land use was done. In this way, lofts' inhabitants use city public services in a parasitic way (Pareglio and Vitillo 2013). Furthermore in this way the developer achieved to accumulate most of the urban rent, more than it would have been able to if he paid a land use change, leaving the public administration to more costs to sustain and less income.

Then there is also a second issue related to taxation. People living and using commercial units as housing are subjected to commercial taxation and pay for commercial utilities, but they can put this costs into the VAT subject that officially use the unit, which in this way result as an asset useful for the business of the VAT subject, being thus deductible from taxes. In this way, although there is not real tax evasion, a sort of tax avoidance occurs, and an implicit pact is established between developers and users, both gaining and taking advantage of this blurry situation.

However, on the other side, lofts compounds brought quite an innovation in the city. They responded to a demand which was not met by traditional forms of living providing new typologies and managed to create art-professionals friendly environments. Indeed they got much appreciation in the real estate market. The most diverse activities live one next to the other. There is the web designer with the bedroom on the mezzanine and the studio/living room downstairs, on the ground floor. The neighbor is a young couple of professional, only sleeping there while working in the center of the city. Next to them an artisanal pastamakers laboratory. On the second floor instead, there is a group of four university students, a small independent recording firm and a musician. Structural flexibility of the modules allows for merging and splitting the units according to the needs (Figure 5).

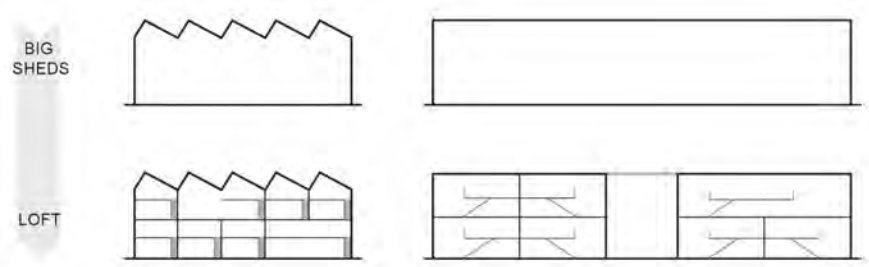

Figure 4. Scheme of a big shed industrial building transformation into lofts

They have been innovative also for construction management. The old buildings, especially of course in extended areas, have been transformed gradually, but in the meanwhile, they have been started to be inhabited. People were living there already during the construction, basically in a worksite. A flexible schedule of construction allows minimizig the risks connected to sale or rent market and prevent a failure of the operation.

Additionally, in many cases, they preserved the minor industrial heritage that would have been otherwise lost. In this case, preservation was not regulated by any law or institutional body since buildings were not officially protected and may have been torn down as well, but the general industrial look and their feature were an integral part of the product that was going to be sold, representing its main competitive advantage. Preservation then coexists with the needs of real estate development, with some interesting outcomes.

The paradox of lofts is more evident when looking at lofts compounds next to PRU or PII areas (Figure 6). The first ones, despite standing on, or beyond, the border between legal and illegal, created a vibrant and vital urban context, in the form of urban villages, recovering abandoned buildings and allowing for some innovation in the way of living and working of people, responding to existing needs otherwise unheard.

Figure 5. Aerial view of Distillerie lofts compound and PRU Pompeo Leoni. Elaboration of the author on Google Maps image.

On the other hand, PRU and PII are often made of speculative buildings, and although they officially comply with regulations they did not provide any innovation and in many cases, they also did not provide either for enough public services, or for quality space or even mixed functions (Doni, 2008). Opposed to loft compounds, the failure risk was higher in this kind of developments, and traces of this issue are still unsolved in the city, for instance in the Porta Vittoria development.

City as loft?

The loft, or better, the concept it embodies, may be seen as a symbol of flexibility, until the point of imagining it as a primary architectural and urban planning tool for the entire city (Baum and Christiansee 2013). Lofts indeed anticipated many issues we are facing in the last years, and they managed to be a successful market product thanks to their overall flexibility of uses and layouts, matching with the need of a changing and more flexible society.

Zoning is being progressively abandoned, and land use change is becoming easier. Are we going toward a city where every function may be put everywhere, and all of them can coexist in a very limited or nearby space, as already happening in lofts? Is this the end of land use regulation? Is this a way to foster a possible return of manufacture to the city centers? From these points of view reflecting on lofts make us think about the future of the city more in general.

Yet there are some issues to be considered. One is about how landlords and developers will get away with capturing all the urban rent in case of a total liberalization of land use change. The other is about taxation, to be solved at State level, on the different levels of taxation according to the use. Another issue is about the quality of the land remediation that nowadays can be made different according to the planned land use.

Lofts may be considered as the first outposts of a contemporary way of living and making our cities, but they are still an issue to deal with. Near past and current policies have gradually reduced zoning

and liberalized land use changes, going toward an acceptance of the loft model. In other cases, such in New York City, a specific body, the Loft Board, has been created to deal with the topic but also in this case it seems like laws and regulations just come ex-post to regulate what already exists and has already been done.

Methodology

The content of this paper is based on an extensive literature review of the loft phenomenon on international sources cited in the references. The Italian part of the literature is mainly about the conversion of the industrial areas in Milan, where a few paragraphs about lofts can be found. A GIS database of the loftscape of Milan has been developed with data coming from several different sources. First of all from personal knowledge of loft compounds, afterward through a real estate websites survey for rent and sale of lofts, allowing to discover other converted areas. Further additions of areas came through the comparison of maps identifying former industrial areas with actual Google Earth tools, to see what kind of transformation occurred in these areas. Eventually, all the recognized areas have been checked through the Agenzia delle Entrate website (State Revenue Agency) in order to find out the number of single units declared to exist in the area and their category of registration at the cadastre, whether productive or residential or others. This operation allowed to find out if areas are composed of lofts by law or lofts by morphology. A final check through on-site surveys when possible or at least a google street-view analysis has been made for all the areas.

The work here presented achieves to map in detail the loftscape of Milan for the first time, although of course there is the possibility of some developments missing and it should be constantly updated in the future. The database set up provides a sound base of knowledge for any further consideration and thought on the topic.

In regard of the compound Tucidide56 the analysis is partly qualitative, coming from direct observation of the place over a long period and hugely quantitative with data coming from a census I conducted in the area on behalf of the landlord.

Conclusions

In this paper, the topic of conversion of former industrial areas into lofts in the city of Milan has been presented and developed. The topic has been contextualized into the more general phenomenon of conversions, giving a historical background going back to the very beginning of the phenomenon in New York City in the 1960s and then to the industrial transformation of Milan.

Within the frame of the transformation of the industrial areas of Milan, a process already much studied, lofts conversions always found a very little space in the debate, although this paper shows that it is not at all a marginal phenomenon and it deserves at least the same attention that has been given to in other cities.

After a better definition and description of the loftscape of Milan in all its variations, I proceeded with mapping and quantifying the phenomenon of lofts compounds in the city, showing how widespread and diverse it is.

The general description of the phenomenon in Milan is followed by a presentation of a case study of one of the largest converted areas, Tucidide56. The case of Tucidide56 allowed for a better

understanding and explaining of peculiar dynamics occurring in this kind of developments and the problems and opportunities arising from them, which are discussed in the following chapter about conflicts and tensions. In this chapter, lofts and especially lofts compounds are presented as a place of conflict, intending this word both as divergence and encounter. The problems and issues arising in lofts compounds are discussed. Also, the benefits, mainly about the innovations in living and working that this model engendered, are considered. Lofts are a possible useful urban and architectural design tool for the city that changes, thanks to their overall flexibility. In any case, they are a good cause for reflection about the contemporary meaning of land use and the organization of space on the architectural and urban scale.

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