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DECOMMISSIONED COLD WAR
MILITARY TECHNOLOGY.
THE ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE
OF COMMUNICATION ARCHAEOLOGY:
HOW CAN IT BE ENHANCED?

WYCOFANA TECHNOLOGIA WOJSKOWA
Z CZASÓW ZIMNEJ WOJNY.
DZIEDZICTWO ARCHITEKTONICZNE
ARCHEOLOGII KOMUNIKACJI:
JAK MOŻNA JE WZMOCNIĆ?

Abstract

The paper aims to reveal an unknown architectural heritage that appears to be devoid of value. Through the classification of the network of major decommissioned troposcatter military sites in Italy and the analysis of their architectural characteristics, a design method is proposed for their reuse and enhancement. This can be considered communication archaeology, where technology has determined the form and dimensions of the buildings supporting military electronic infrastructures.

Keywords: Cold War, military infrastructures, architectural heritage, communication archaeology, electronic technology

Streszczenie

Artykuł ma na celu ujawnienie nieznanego dziedzictwa architektonicznego, które wydaje się pozbawione wartości. Poprzez klasyfikację sieci głównych wycofanych z użycia wojskowych stacji troposferycznych we Włoszech oraz analizę ich cech architektonicznych zaproponowano metodę projektową na rzecz ich ponownego wykorzystania i wzmocnienia. Można to określić jako archeologię komunikacyjną, w której technologia określa formę i wymiary budynków wspierających wojskowe infrastruktury elektroniczne.

Słowa kluczowe: zimna wojna, infrastruktury wojskowe, dziedzictwo architektoniczne, archeologia komunikacyjna, technologia elektroniczna

1. INTRODUCTION: WHAT CULTURAL HERITAGE?

This paper is an excerpt from a broader research project that includes an initial mapping of the entire international network of NATO Tropicscatter bases of the Ace-High communication system used during the Cold War, located along a network connecting Turkey to the United States.

These buildings are currently unprotected and at risk of demolition or gradual decay. Therefore, we aim to analyse their architectural and landscape characteristics to define the significance of this cultural heritage, which has witnessed historical events that can be described as “invisible” and “immaterial” due to the specific nature of the Cold War conflict.

The various features and highly complex technical aspects of both the communication system and the architectures, along with their geographical locations, become key factors for the enhancement and reuse of these sites, suggesting a preliminary definition of “communication archaeology.”

Within this extensive network, this paper will focus on the disused NATO base in the Northeast of Italy, Monte Bosco Scuro in Cavriana (code IMBZ).

The weight of Cold War cultural heritage is strongly evidenced by the considerable scientific output from both former blocs.

Using archaeology in its broadest sense to demonstrate the strong influence of the Cold War on modern culture and perceptions of the world we live in, the volume *A Fearsome Heritage* explores how archaeology can help us understand the Cold War and its implications. The book crosses many boundaries – intellectual, ideological, and geographical – including, for example: displaced peoples from the locations of nuclear testing sites; the challenges of treating Cold War sites as cultural heritage; the inspiration for artists and musicians from Cold War events or architecture; the role of museum curators and those tasked with finding new uses for often massive remains; and finally, the role of archaeologists, anthropologists, conservation organizations, and cultural historians in documenting and interpreting the material remains of the Cold War.¹

In the countries of the former Eastern Bloc, the architecture of this period has, until recently, been treated as a “dissonant” legacy of communism. Memories of the past system are inherently accompanied by the ghosts of the Cold War and the Iron Curtain, symbolizing the isolation of Eastern socialist countries from the Western world. The increasing temporal distance now allows for an objective view of this architecture and a rejection of the political narrative, thus identifying its significant value as cultural heritage.²

This growing interest has led to an increasing number of studies, publications, conferences, and exhibitions, such as the one organized in 2008 at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, titled *Cold War Modern: Design (1945–1970)*. In the same year, Crowley and Pavitt published a book of the same name, the first to offer an international perspective on the Cold War through the arts. This groundbreaking study explores how art and design played a central role in both representing and, at times, challenging the dominant political and social ideologies of the era. The book includes works from the Socialist Bloc, Western Europe, the United States,

¹ See J. Schofield, W. Cocroft, *Introduction: Cold War, diversity and contemporary archaeology* [in:] J. Schofield, W. Cocroft (eds), *A Fearsome Heritage. Diverse Legacies of The Cold War*, Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek 2007, pp. 13–17.

² See M. Żmudzińska-Nowak, M. Krause, J. Bródka, *Dissonant Heritage of Cold War Modernism or European Heritage of Modernist Architecture: Case Study of Residential Houses of Katowice, Poland*, “International Journal of Conservation Science” 2021, no. 12(1), pp. 155–176.

Cuba, and Japan, showcasing extraordinary images from artists and designers ranging from Picasso to Kubrick, while also featuring a collection of essays on topics as diverse as political strategy, domesticity, and the rise of high-tech design.

More specialized research delves into the cinematic portrayals of nuclear fallout shelters from the 1950s to today, analysing them as spaces of social and cultural containment through themes of time perception and management. Films envisioned these spaces as sanctuaries from disruptive historical processes, where daily life could be paused and preserved from total annihilation. By examining a wide range of films, it becomes clear how the nuclear shelter became embedded in American material culture as a moving image, where narratives of time and space containment offered a temporary illusion of escaping the passage of time, creating an eternal present safe from humanity's own destructive power.³

The material culture of the Cold War has garnered interest from archaeologists, artists, historians, sociologists, and politicians. Schofield and Cocroft recount being part of an interdisciplinary group of scholars, drawn to the same topic for various reasons but ultimately for the same purpose: these material remains describe a world we know, and through understanding these remnants, we can begin to question the world around us.⁴

The proximity of the Cold War to current politics makes this topic complex and challenging to manage. Issues can be exacerbated if one adopts an overly naive view of the Cold War legacy, whether material or not. However, this war provides a particularly valuable and relevant arena for reflective analysis, primarily because it easily transcends disciplinary boundaries among archaeologists, historians, anthropologists, artists, and writers (among others), and especially because it encompasses a very recent past.⁵

In England, according to recommendations from the English Heritage assessment, the remains of Cold War installations hold invaluable cultural and educational value, as they express the complex interactions between politics and government technology. Some sites have already been opened as museums⁶, and there is such a wealth of both material and immaterial values that broader international networks of Cold War routes could be developed to narrate the nature of this conflict, which is markedly different from the previous world wars of the twentieth century.

2. SPREADING A COMPLEX HISTORY

From the observation of this cultural context, the groundwork emerges for an in-depth study of this disused network of NATO sites, which clearly deserves a comprehensive and articulated valorisation project aimed at making the history of nearly forty years of the twentieth century visible and transmissible.

³ See A. Vesentini, *Sheltering Time: The Containment of Everyday Life in Nuclear-Shelter Film Narratives*, "Material Culture" 2015, no. 47(2), pp. 41–58, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44507757> (access: 29.09.2024).

⁴ See J. Schofield, W. Cocroft, *Introduction...*, *op. cit.*

⁵ See G. Fairclough, *The Cold War in context: Archaeological explorations of private, public and political complexity* [in:] J. Schofield, W. Cocroft (eds), *A Fearsome Heritage...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 19–32.

⁶ See W. Cocroft, *Defining the national archaeological character of Cold War remains* [in:] J. Schofield, W. Cocroft (eds), *A Fearsome Heritage...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 107–127.

One of the main questions is how to make it accessible to the widest possible audience. It will likely be necessary to adopt a systemic view of the reuse possibilities for each site within the network, considering each one as a piece of the overall puzzle.

The network for disseminating this complex history must therefore be transnational and engage in a holistic process, facilitating local regeneration through an articulated interdisciplinary system of actions, spanning architecture, landscape, art, history, education, and entertainment.

All the potential of computing, including artificial intelligence, can certainly support educational and entertainment aspects, as well as ensure rapid and effective dissemination of Cold War history and the characteristics of each site.

A project of this magnitude can be managed by proposing both physical experiential pathways, where users are in close contact with the locations, and virtual activities located far from the explored sites.

Given the extensive network and the potential number of users on a global scale, the project offers the opportunity to address other issues that cause various conflicts in the current era, such as climate change, resource scarcity, and the need for close international collaboration among diverse cultures and genders, culminating in the urgent goal of maintaining peace.

At various intervention scales, from architecture to cities and territories, it is proposed to establish permanent training workshops focused on both the interpretation and transmission of local values related to the context of a site, as well as the understanding of the events of the Cold War and its associated landscapes (physical, political, historical, cultural, etc.). Participants in these workshops could leverage the full potential of creative and cultural activities to learn about and interpret the historical events driven by the actions of the protagonists in this conflict.

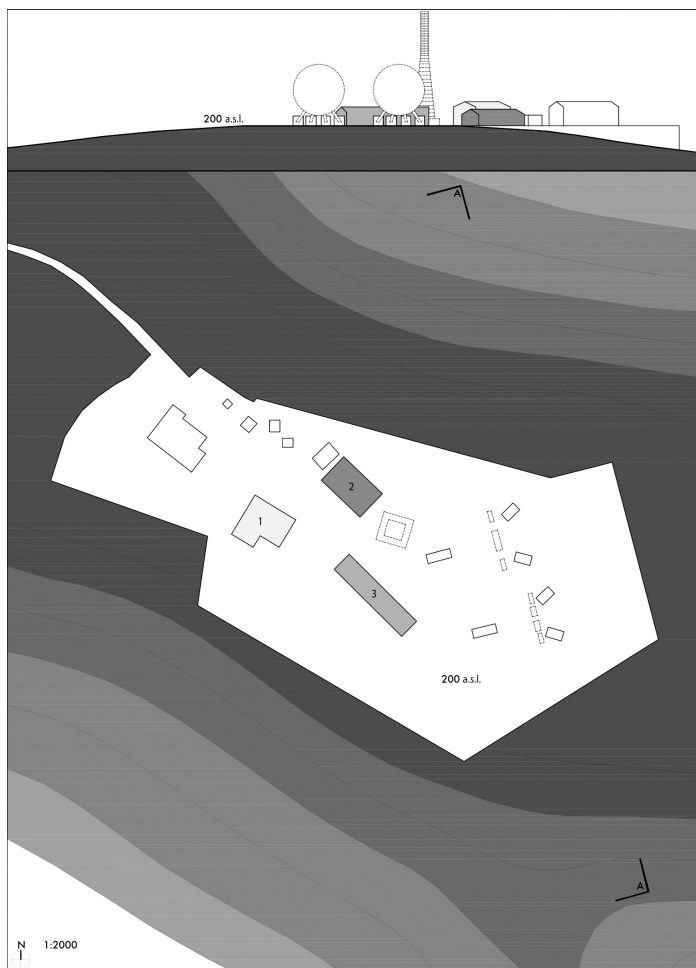
Local communities and external users, whether physically present or connected remotely, could thus contribute to a common global process of creating best practices that are transferable and replicable for the dissemination of human values such as dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, and peace.

Today, the planet is marked by numerous conflicts that result in the death of entire populations and the destruction of their places of origin, erasing the signs of their traditions and cultures. Therefore, maintaining peace in the world must be a shared goal to be achieved at all costs.

Cold War sites, due to their significant historical impact – encompassing nearly all of the second half of the 20th century – the incredible vastness of the territories involved, and their temporal proximity to our era, are perfect candidates to be transformed into symbols of overcoming immaterial divisions, such as cultural, social, and economic barriers, and of breaking down the numerous walls that still physically surround the borders of many nations globally.

Since the end of the Cold War and the demolition of the Iron Curtain, most of these sites have been progressively decommissioned and abandoned. Many facilities have been dismantled, and related documentation has been destroyed, while nature is slowly reclaiming their remnants, erasing the traces of a true “archaeology of communications.”

Based on the architectural and historical features of these sites, the project proposes a method for their enhancement and appropriate reuse, focusing not only on their preservation as such, but also on creating opportunities for local regeneration.



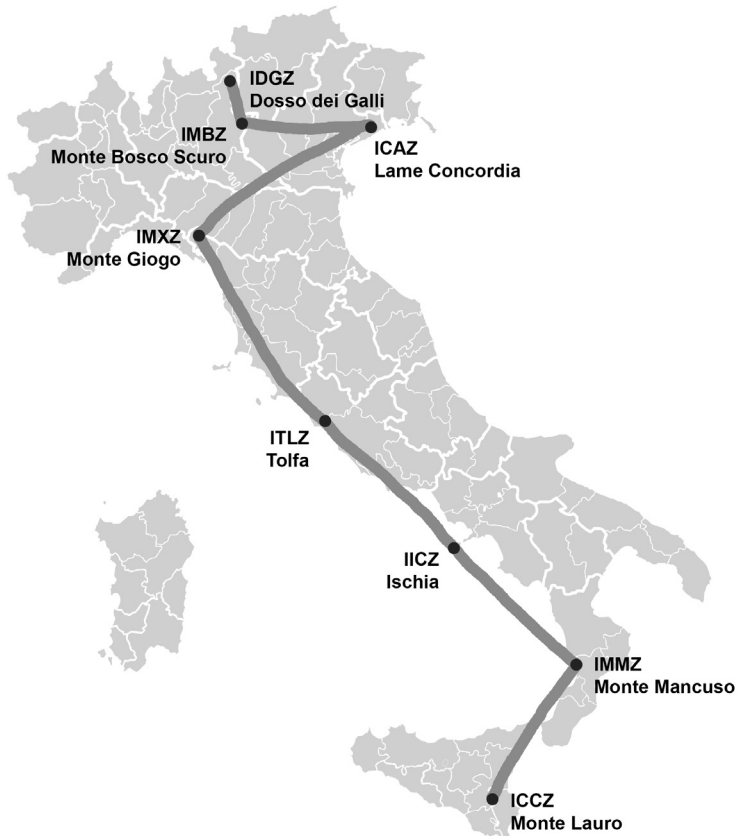
Ill. 1. Code IMBZ Bosco Scuro Station, Lombardy: 1. “Personnel Housing”, 2. “Power Building”, and 3. “Electronic Equipment Building”, image processing by Olivia Longo, 2024.

To achieve this, it is necessary to explore the typological and constructive characteristics common to the sites, determined by military technical development during the Cold War years. In fact, the communication technologies used by NATO led to a type of systemic architecture consisting of a sort of archipelago of interconnected buildings that can be grouped into morphological families.

The eight main Italian troposcatter stations, for which a 1:2000 scale diagram⁷ of one of the two Lombard stations (Ill. 1) is provided, are located throughout the Italian peninsula,

⁷ It should be noted that the redesign and sections were not drawn based on surveys but rather using the information gathered to date. At this stage of the research, the intent is to identify the common aspects among the bases to establish an initial general intervention criterion. In the sections, the hatched elements are no longer existing and have been identified from historical photographs and floor plans.

from the province of Brescia in Lombardy, Dosso dei Galli (IDGZ code), to the province of Syracuse in Sicily, Monte Lauro (IC CZ code). From north to south, the two extreme stations of the Italian network, located 1,534 kilometres apart, were connected through the stations of Monte Bosco Scur o (IMBZ code) in Lombardy, Lama Concordia (ICAZ code) in Veneto, Monte Giogo (IMXZ code) in Tuscany, Tolfa (ITLZ code) in Lazio, Ischia (IICZ code) in Campania, and Monte Mancuso (IMMZ code) in Calabria (Ill. 2).



Ill. 2. Diagram of the location of the main stations of the troposcatter network in Italy, image processing by Olivia Longo, 2024.

The repetitiveness in both the arrangement of buildings and technological equipment, as well as in the architectural characteristics of the three main buildings (Ill. 3) – “Personnel Housing”, “Power Building”, and “Electronic Equipment Building” – allows for the definition of a general intervention method that can be applied at each of the eight main troposcatter stations in Italy.

The concept of replication can also be applied to the activities of the functional programs that can be anticipated: narratives, events, and artistic installations could, in fact, be opened to the public simultaneously at each site, in order to reactivate the network of communications and convey messages through interconnected immersive rooms and tools, so that users can learn as well as imagine and reinterpret the legacy of the Cold War.

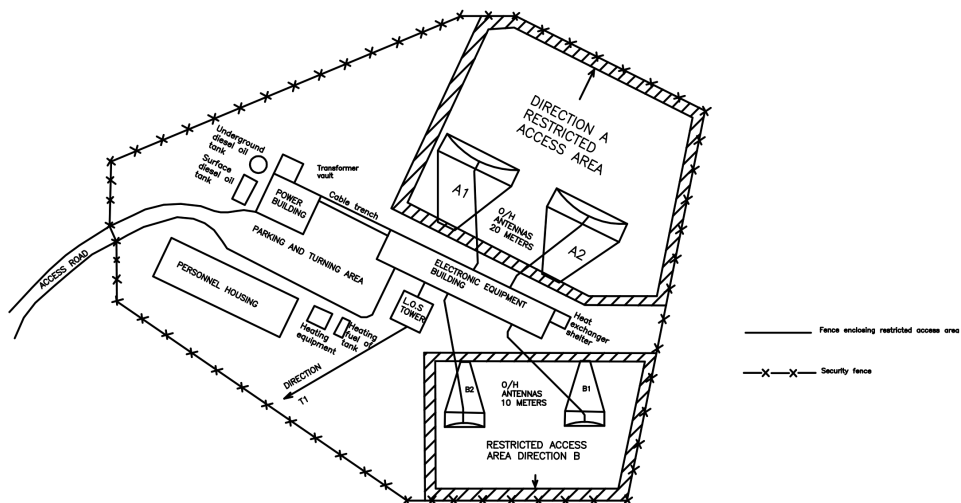
By systematizing these activities within different sites, an archipelago of connected points characterized by common elements, but made distinct by the cultural, geomorphological, and anthropological specificities of the contexts in which they are physically located, will be created. In this way, within a common grid of architectural interventions, different activities will unfold, allowing the multiple local identities to emerge that will line the transverse thread of shared historical events.

The representation of this diversity will be entrusted to artists who will immerse themselves in the contexts of the individual stations to provide their interpretation of local identities, transforming the legacy of the Cold War into a sort of living canvas of artistic narratives, fostering a deeper and more immediate connection between users and the history of this conflict.

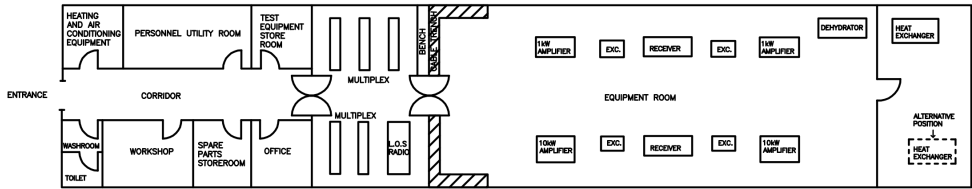
By relating the sites of the Cold War to their respective territorial contexts, through the use of innovative information technologies (e.g., immersive rooms and tools), not only does it symbolize the use of these innovations to achieve peace objectives through the management of issues underlying current conflicts, but it also offers a new model for repurposing military sites that transcends the traditional approach based on the establishment of static museums or, at best, equipped with innovative technologies used merely as aids during visits to historical artifacts and testimonies.

3. EIGHT DECOMMISSIONED ITALIAN STATIONS: HOW TO ENHANCE THEM?

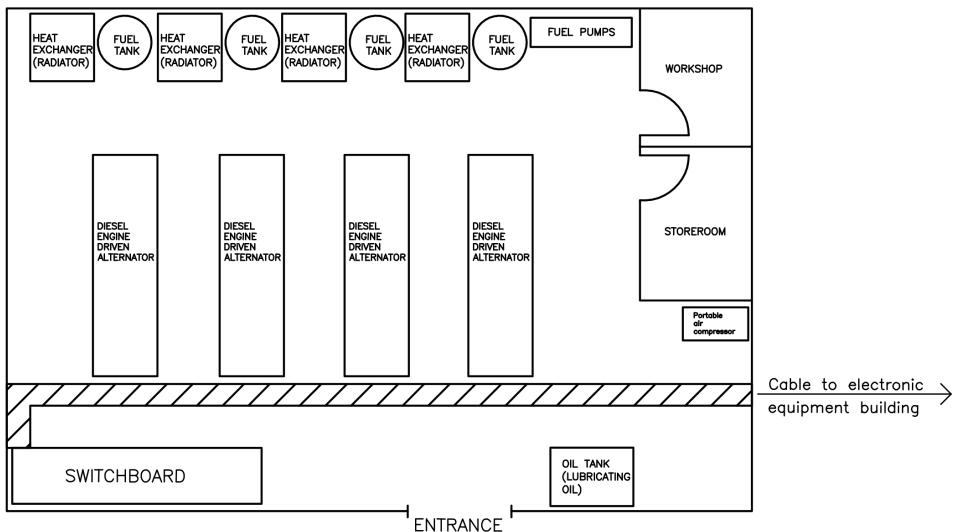
Figures 3, 4, and 5 illustrate the compositional schemes of the stations and the main buildings which, according to NATO guidelines, were to be included within a typical troposcatter base (Ill. 3): Personnel Housing, Power Building, and Electronic Equipment Building.



Ill. 3. General composition diagram of a troposcatter base, image processing by Alessandra Vazzoler, 2024.



III. 4. Compositional diagram of the communications building of a standard troposcatter system base, image processing by Alessandra Vazzoler, 2024.



III. 5. Compositional diagram of the power building of a standard troposcatter system base, image processing by Alessandra Vazzoler, 2024.

In the proposed project, the first building (Personnel Housing) can be reused as temporary accommodation for users and artists involved in the training and event creation processes (see the Bosco Scuro station in Cavriana, Ill. 6a). The smaller size and high ceilings of the second building (Power Building, see Bosco Scuro station in Cavriana, Ill. 6b) make it ideal for hosting a permanent art workshop. Finally, the third building (Electronic Equipment Building, Ill. 4), due to its narrow and elongated form, can house a system of immersive rooms and tools that would form part of an exhibition/educational pathway. This pathway could lead from the main square to the technological elements (antennas and parabolas), from which visitors could observe the surrounding landscape and engage in recreational activities.

Many of the personnel buildings are equipped with small bunkers for ammunition storage (see Bosco Scuro station in Cavriana, Ill. 6, 6c, and 6d). These bunkers could serve as starting points for visitor tours, allowing users to descend below ground level before passing through the Electronic Building – sometimes partially buried to connect to antennas and parabolas via underground conduits – and gradually reach the higher parts of the system. In these elevated

areas, the large technological communication elements, designed to rise above the landscape, would gather and transmit signals.



Ill. 6. Bosco Scuro Station in Cavriana. Top left photo 6a, Personnel Housing building; bottom left photo 6b, Power Building; top and bottom right photos 6c and 6d, entrance and passage of the small ammunition bunker located under the Personnel Housing building, photo by Olivia Longo, 2021.

Below are the floor plans and sections of one of the eight bases, highlighting the three main buildings mentioned above: Personnel Housing no. 1, Power Building no. 2, and Electronic Equipment Building no. 3 (Ill. 1).

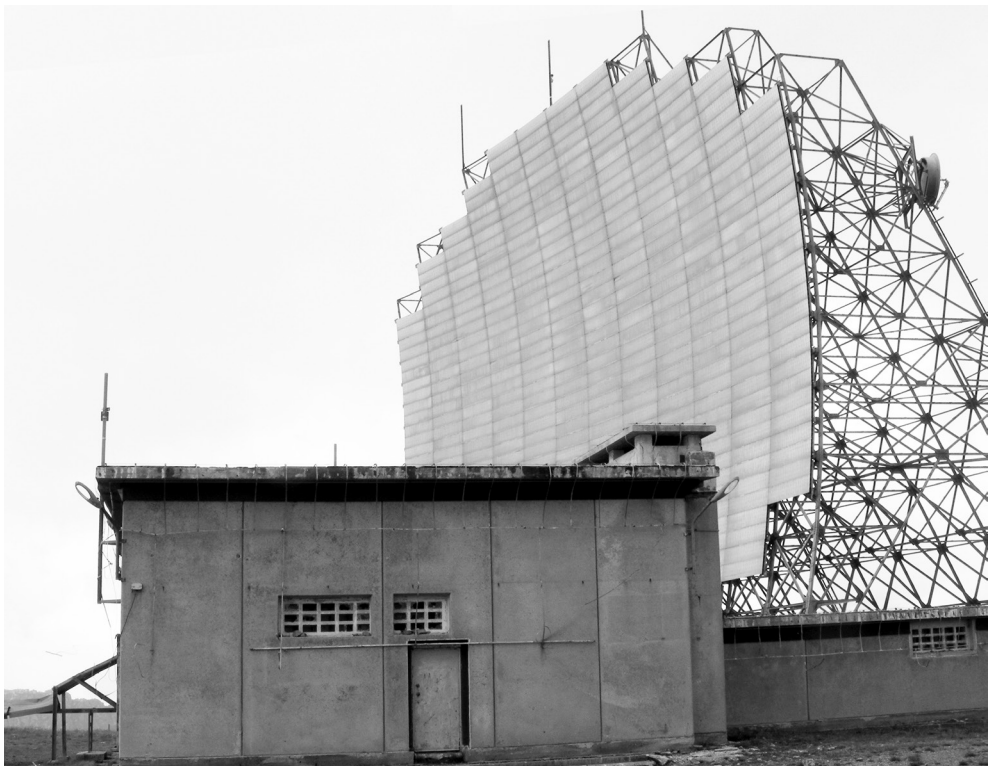
Except for the Lama Concordia station, which is located at an altitude of 1.3 meters above sea level, all the other stations occupy strategic and privileged positions relative to the surrounding territory. To ensure signal transmission and reception, all sites enjoy exceptional vantage points over landscapes predominantly characterized by vegetation.

The issue of secrecy, and the subsequent need to make the site less visible, ensured that these stations were immersed in areas with dense vegetation, from which only the antennas and parabolas emerged. Due to their large dimensions, these elements seem designed to harmonize with the scale of the mountains and plateaus where they are located. The giant scale of the technological elements starkly contrasts with the relatively small size, in proportion, of the architectural buildings at each station. Designed to meet specific military needs, these buildings were scaled down to the minimum dimensions necessary to fulfil their required functions.

The evident contrast in scale between the antennas, parabolas, and buildings (Ill. 7) presents an intriguing opportunity to explore the sudden shift from human scale to the scale of the landscape. Each station could be characterized by architectural elements that, once made habitable, guide users through narrow, dark spaces confined between solid walls – such as the small bunkers beneath the residential buildings – followed by large, light-filled areas surrounded by dense vegetation.

The design of the network of Italian troposcatter stations would thus be dotted with large-scale elements visible from afar, resting on bases carved and tunnelled to create small connecting spaces between the buildings and technological elements.

Regarding these technological structures, two types of interventions could be proposed. Where antennas and parabolas still exist, after assessing their load-bearing capacity, they could be redesigned to host vertical gardens, small hanging observatories, fitness trails, and other recreational activities suitable for such structures, capitalizing on their potential as privileged viewpoints. In cases where these devices have been decommissioned, a new object could be placed on the same site to preserve their memory. However, research in this area is still in its early stages, requiring further exploration of all design aspects as well as a detailed assessment of the historical and cultural issues related to preserving this heritage.

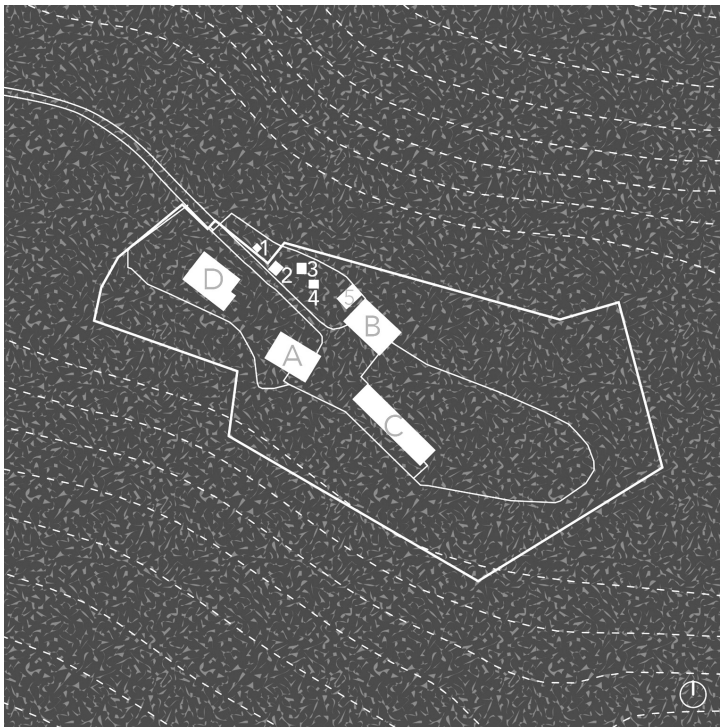


Ill. 7. Dosso dei Galli Station. The contrast between the giant scale of the dishes and the small size of the buildings, photo by Davide Sigurtà, 2014.

4. A CASE STUDY: ENHANCEMENT OF THE FORMER NATO SCATTER BASE IN CAVRIANA

Until 2022, the site remained abandoned, and its state of degradation was exacerbated by the fire on January 31, 2016, which affected the southern side of the Electronic Equipment Building. This fire caused the combustion of the wooden ceiling, the linoleum floor, and various plastic, wooden, and plant materials that had been stored inside. In recent years, the site has attracted the interest of the Civil Protection Agency to create, with funds from the Lombardy Region, one of the multifunctional emergency centres to support the provincial mobile columns of Civil Protection, to be used in the event of natural disasters. Indeed, part of this enhancement project includes the incorporation of functions related to Civil Protection activities.

The enhancement of this site must focus on preserving its historical identity, ensuring that its cultural legacy and collective memory are passed on to future generations. At the same time, it is crucial to keep the site active throughout the year so that it can be enjoyed by as many users as possible. Visitors will find a system of cultural, recreational, and educational activities here.



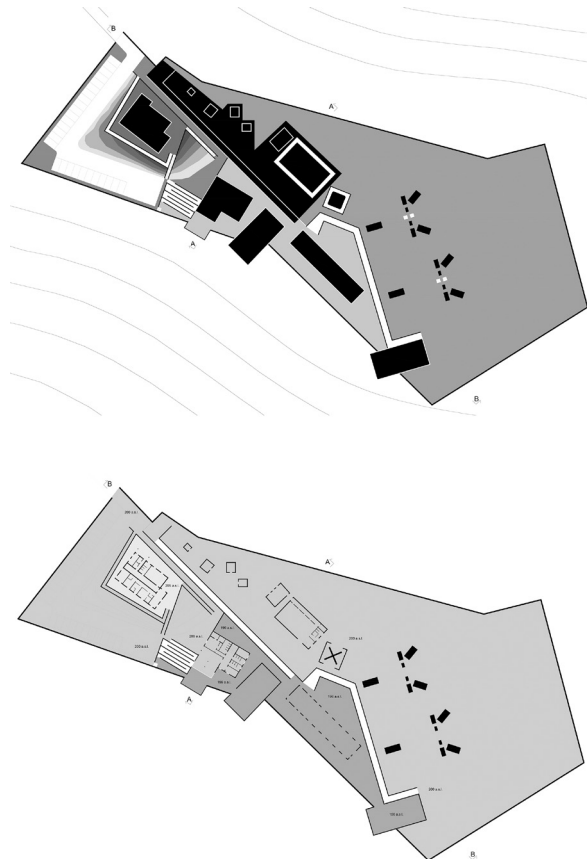
Ill. 8. Plan of the current state of the Bosco Scuro Station in Cavriana. Building A: Personnel Housing, Building B: Power Building, Building C: Electronic Equipment Building, Building D: Carabinieri Barracks. Small buildings: 1: ENEL transformer cabin, 2: guardhouse, 3: fire control room, 4: water pump room, 5: garage, image processing by Vincenzo Paolo Romeo, 2021, and Olivia Longo, 2024.

The reuse plan proposes to house the activities of the Emergency Multipurpose Center in Building D, while Buildings A, B, C, and the smaller buildings numbered 1 to 5 will host functions related to the museum, artistic, educational, and recreational activities system, aimed at promoting knowledge of the Cold War events (Ill. 8).

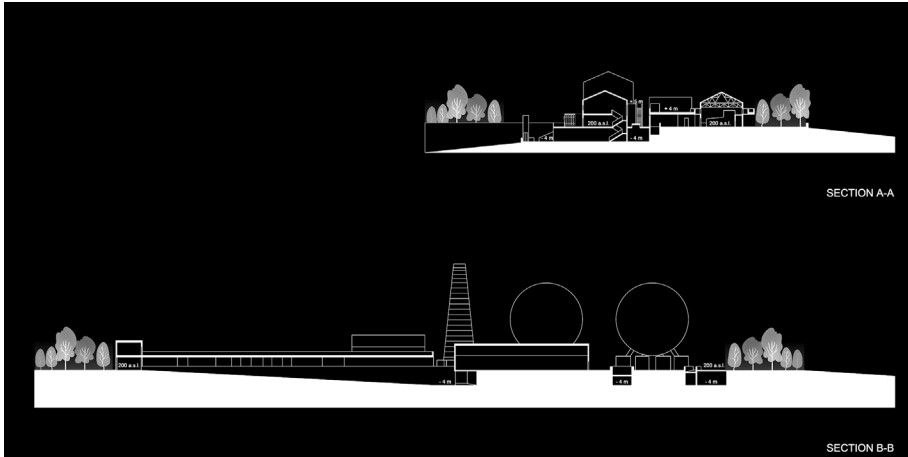
To initiate the multimedia museum route from a significant area of the site, the entrance will be located at the underground level of Building A, where the compressed and winding space of the small bunker (Ill. 6c and 6d) will transition into the designed hypogeal space. This new space will connect Buildings A, B, and C through underground passages leading to the bases of the antenna and the parabolas.

The level of the existing bunker will serve as the floor level for the covered path, which will guide visitors from Building A toward the immersive rooms located inside Building C. From there, narrow underground corridors will lead to the newly designed antenna and parabolas (Ill. 9 and 10).

These antennas and parabolas will be made of steel structures with dimensions and shapes like those that have been dismantled. They will house recreational and relaxation activities, such as vertical gardens, small hanging observatories, fitness trails, and more.



Ill. 9. Floor plans of the enhancement project for the Bosco Scuro Station in Cavriana, drawing and project by Olivia Longo.



Ill. 10. Sections of the enhancement project for the Bosco Scuro Station in Cavriana, drawing and project by Olivia Longo.

From the panoramic area of the elevated elements, visitors will return toward the building system to complete the route in Building B, designated as a permanent art studio. Here, an elevator will take them to an upper level, offering a bird's-eye view of the artistic activities taking place in the workshop. At the same time, they will have the opportunity to observe the trusses and the overhead crane up close (Ill. 11).



Ill. 11. Permanent artistic workshop in the “Power Building” Building B, photomontage and project by Olivia Longo.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In 1956, Hauser described modern art as a rejection of Impressionism and an aspiration toward a form of “ugliness” that, by principle, opposed harmony and beauty. It seems that the 20th century opened the doors to a new way of experiencing art, one that drew predominantly from the intellect rather than from the emotion and sensualism of the illusory world of art from the previous century. This attraction sometimes manifested in the purity of structure, sometimes in the ecstasy of metaphysical passion, often driven by the pursuit of truth that unites the works of Picasso, Kafka, Joyce, and many others.⁸

The buildings of these decommissioned NATO bases have an appearance that we could describe as aesthetically “unpleasant” and far removed from the traditional canons of proportion and harmony of classical architecture. They also lack the characteristics common to buildings of any other era. We cannot even categorize them among the phenomena of contemporary architecture as described by Biraghi in 2008.⁹

Yet their allure intrigues us, and as we observe them, we realize that thousands of people passed through those rooms over forty years, affected by military and political events that we civilians could only read about in newspapers or hear on the radio and TV, unaware of their proximity, so close to our homes and cities.

Stripped of their original function, today they represent a memory to be preserved and can be viewed with fresh eyes, eventually becoming, within the realm of communication archaeology, true relics of the 20th century – pieces of the larger puzzle of recent history. Their value, therefore, can change only as a result of how we choose to think about them, accepting that our planet is already scattered with such relics and that, sooner or later, we will need to decide how to manage them and what they might become.

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⁸ See A. Hauser, *Storia sociale dell'arte*, vol. 4, *Arte moderna e contemporanea*, Giulio Einaudi, Torino 2001, pp. 223–231.

⁹ See M. Biraghi, *Storia dell'architettura contemporanea II. 1945–2008*, Giulio Einaudi, Torino 2008, pp. 509–532: Biraghi recalls these phenomena by describing the concept of “Globalization”, “Identity” and “Cloning”, defining “Architecture as a work of art”, the spread of the “devouring historical fever”, Architecture as a catalogue (standardization), the buildings with prestigious signatures. He underlines the importance of eco- and bio- prefixes, the architecture of “Continuity” strongly linked to the search for figuratively abstract architecture with purist and neoplastic references, the conquest of “new promised lands” (the People’s Republic of China and the United Arab Emirates), the concept of “Lightness” that attracts many architects from Calvin to science till the complete disappearance of architecture, the numerous large engineering companies that have colonized the Earth from the twentieth century to today, the brands of the “Archistar system.”

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