

# The architect as a producer : Ugo La Pietra and the theory of the unbalancing system

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# THE ARCHITECT AS A PRODUCER

UGO LA  
PIETRA AND  
THE  
THEORY OF  
THE UN-  
BALANCING  
SYSTEM

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Martin Dumont  
Andrea Alberto Dutto



In 1934, Walter Benjamin wrote one of his most politically committed essays entitled 'The Author as Producer'.<sup>1</sup> In this text, he stresses the role and the efficiency of intellectuals within the proletarian revolution. A crucial question was raised on how to situate an intellectual's work within a living social context or, actually recalling a Marxist dialectical treatment, within the 'relations of production' of a period. According to Marx' philosophy of history, the economic structure of a society is established on a persistent contradiction between two major components: the 'forces of production' and the 'relations of production'. He defines labor power and its means of production as 'forces of production'. Furthermore, the 'relations of production' consist in the class or social relations triggered within a given mode of production (for instance, considering early 1930s' capitalism: bourgeoisie's control over the means of production and the proletariat only controls the labor power). This general structure is the fundamental base on which is implanted a legal, political, ideological layer: its superstructure. By transposing art from economic to the superstructural level, Benjamin puts forward the idea that a work of art itself is a matter of production. In his essay, two general stances emerge:

A first stance concerns the crucial implementation of progressive 'Technik'<sup>2</sup>, in order to stimulate an effective transformation within the relations of production. According to Benjamin, political tendency, or rather the commitment to the proletarian struggle, would not be enough. Therefore, he supports the idea that progress in 'Technik', meaning an effort to break the bourgeois barriers between the different disciplines (literature and photography for instance), is necessary for political progress.

The second stance – inextricably linked to the issue of 'Technik' – challenges the traditional idea of authorship. For Benjamin, the author has to overcome the bourgeois condition of a spectator (next to the proletariat) and embrace that of a producer (in solidarity with the proletariat). What is at stake is not the auto-legitimization of the author, but rather a position about his responsibility to coordinate his role within the forces of production (workers, techniques and scientific knowledge). Such a theoretical formulation is supposed to address the way a politically committed intellectual

should operate: coordinating, promoting and organizing his efforts to strengthen cohesion with proletarians involved in the class struggle. Benjamin's attempt to theorize an operative role for intellectuals resonates with the experimental work of the architect Ugo La Pietra (1938). An active personality on the Italian scene since the early 1960s, he has been associated with the 'radical movement'. Rooted in the anticapitalist movement, radical design was not only an attack on the progressive modernist project but more generally a reconsideration of the role of architects within society. Radical design, mostly developed through publications, manifestos and exhibitions, was, in fact, a strong reaction against the capitalist ideology that was affecting the city. Within this context, the work of Ugo La Pietra has to be seen as an important contribution to the redefinition of the role of architects, both in terms of technical re-enactment and political engagement. To understand the critical attitude that leads him to theorize an operative role for the architects, we first have to consider his opposition to the other protagonists of this movement.<sup>3</sup>

La Pietra's rejection of 'critical utopia' [Utopia critica], constitutes the point of divergence with groups such as 'Archizoom' and 'Superstudio'. Unlike these Florentine groups who developed dystopian projects for the city ('No-Stop City', 'The Continuous Monument' or 'The Twelve Ideal Cities'), La Pietra sets his main references in a previous moment related to the Austrian avant-garde. What he recognizes in the work of Haus-Rucker-Co, Hans Hollein and Friedrich Kiesler is the will to transcend utopia and tackle reality by means of critical, provocative and politicized events – what La Pietra will later call 'critical physicality' [fisicità critica]. The same 'Situationist' tendency, initiated by the Viennese avant-garde, is reflected in La Pietra's work both by a deep aversion to the coercive urban structure and a will to broaden a critical involvement of society. To support his idea, La Pietra devises the 'Theory of the Unbalancing System' [Sistema Disequilibrante].<sup>4</sup> This theory assigns to each project (events, installation, intervention) the duty to contribute to the «identification and definition of the 'degrees of freedom' [Gradi di libertà] that are available within organised structures and the invention of design solutions capable of constituting moments of rupture within the programmed base».<sup>5</sup> Without being an actual proposal, it constitutes a collection of installati-

1. Benjamin, Walter: 'Der Autor als Produzent: Ansprache im Institut zum Studium des Faschismus in Paris am 27. April 1934,' in: Tiedemann, Rolf and Schweppenhäuser, Hermann (eds.): 'Gesammelte Schriften', Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 1972, vol. 2 (1977), pt. 2, p. 683-701 and pt. 3, p. 1460-1464.  
2. The word 'Technik' is used in Benjamin's essay to denote the aesthetic technique of a work, but with considerable scientific and manufacturing connotations. Thus it can also be extended to the concept of 'technology' – the technical means by which a work is produced; its means of production.

3. See: La Pietra, Ugo: 'Il sistema disequilibrante: ipotesi progettuale per un superamento de 'l'utopia-come evasione', in: Brianza (ed.): 'N Anno II n. 1', Arti Grafiche Meroni, Lissone, 1971.  
4. Ugo La Pietra, 'Il Sistema Disequilibrante [n.1]', Milano, Galleria Toselli, 1970, pp.45. Ugo La Pietra, 'Il Sistema Disequilibrante [n.2]', Genova, Edizioni Masnata, 1971, pp.53.  
5. Translation by the authors, see Ugo La Pietra, "La sinestesia delle arti 1960-2000" (Milano, Mazzotta, 2001) p.44.



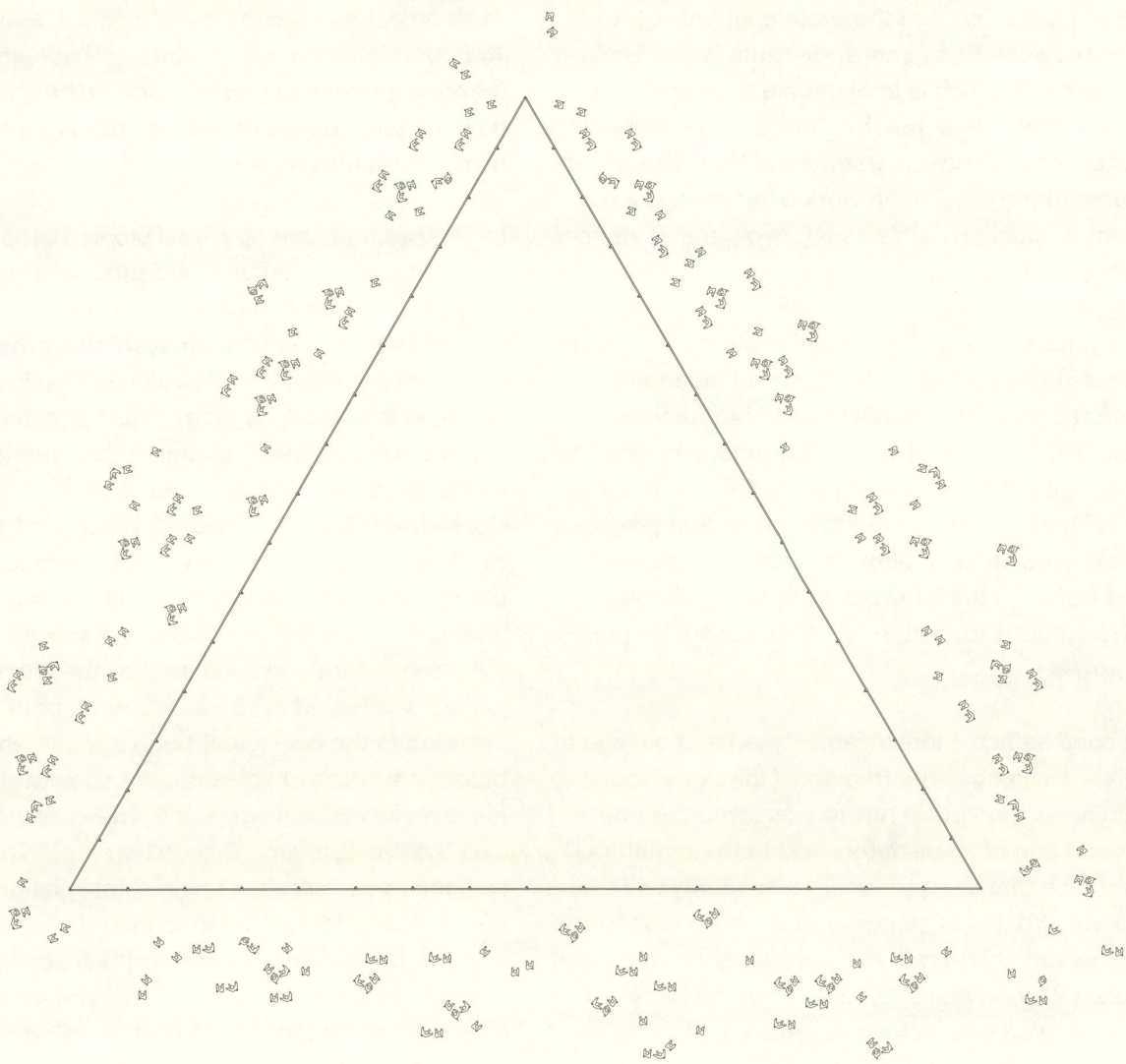
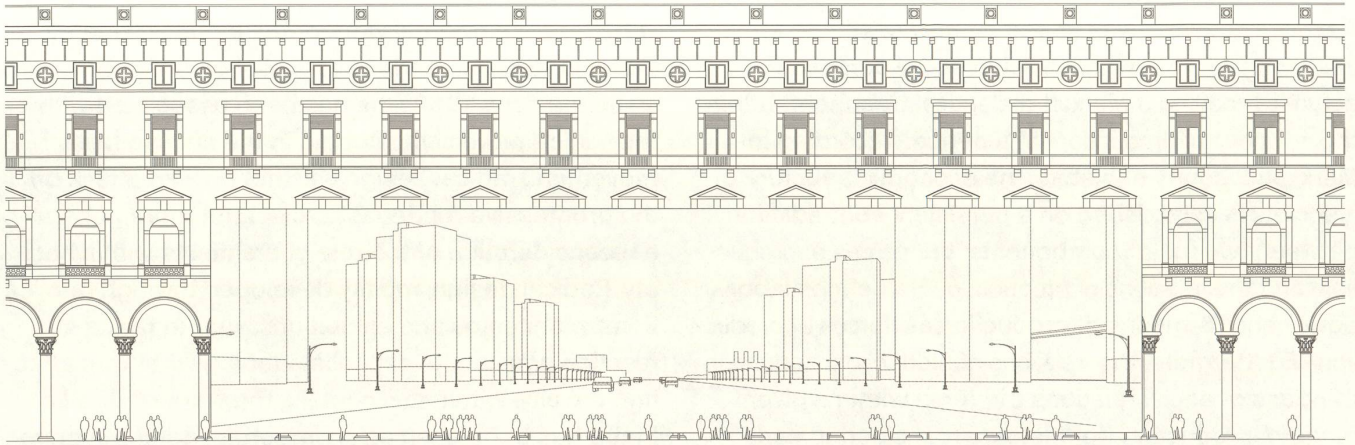


fig. a  
Front elevation, and plan (1/500) based on Ugo La Pietra: *Verso Il Centro*, installation, 1969.  
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ons, suggestions of constructive possibilities or rather breaches in the urban fabric. The aim was to let the local citizens shape the town, rather than leaving the town to mould their behaviour. Simultaneously a new operative direction was given to the architect, to let him intervene within the city structure (streets, squares, and houses).

Besides disapproval towards their respective intellectual context, Benjamin and La Pietra share an operative approach that is able to prioritise the ‘position in’, over ‘attitude to’, the socio-productive apparatus. More precisely, the manifestation of a political tendency (Benjamin), or a way to re-enact a collective ethos (La Pietra), was supposed to follow a preventive critical re-consideration on the domain of ‘Technik’. Therefore, to extrapolate a more general attitude that underlines the operative commitment of these two authors, the present article will orbit around three general issues which are listed at the end of Benjamin’s producer essay.

Benjamin’s first question addresses the possibility of intellectuals transforming the function of a literary work. Referring to the Brechtian concept of ‘Umfunktio-nierung’<sup>6</sup> – which literally means the ‘re-functioning’ of one medium in terms of another – Benjamin states that intellectuals should not simply transmit the apparatus of production, but rather change its direction towards socialism. Intellectuals are thus asked to break down the barriers between techniques, aiming for more general progress. This statement introduces a dialectical consideration of intellectual work, meant to find a place within the living social context. Looking back on the example of Soviet newspapers, where a strong commitment to the proletarian struggle was embodied in the figure of an operative writer, Benjamin grants journalism a paradigmatic position where any distinction between author and public, writer and poet, tends to disappear – therefore allowing labor to speak for itself. Moreover, Benjamin finds in the advent of the newspaper the model for a polytechnic culture through which the ‘literarization’ of all vital relationships synthesizes the purposes of the producer’s role. A similar tendency, aiming at dissolving the barriers between urban users and producers, can be found in La Pietra’s ‘signals elements’.<sup>7</sup> This series of installations, developed between 1969 and 1972, were meant to interfere with the relationship between the needs of social

groups and decision-making structures. One emblematic example, entitled ‘Towards the center’ [Verso il centro, 1969], was located in the square facing the cathedral of Milan. It consisted of three huge screens in a triangular plan projecting scenes of the periphery<sup>fig.a</sup>, thereby establishing a moment of perceptive reversal between city and suburbs. The signal element, therefore, becomes the utmost expression of a non-referential object, aimed at representing the most distant reality from that in which it finds place. Involving citizens’ participation is meant to stress the effort of architects to address a political ‘spatialization of vital relationship’, or rather a crucial point where the social and urban living contradictions are left to speak for themselves.

The second issue addressed by Benjamin concerns the organization of intellectuals to intervene on the means of production, rather than on the products. Sharply polemic against a renewal based on the prophetic masterpiece, Benjamin advanced the possibility to address a renewal where the author adopts first and foremost a didactic behavior.<sup>8</sup> This advice has the purpose of establishing the intellectuals’ role within his disciplinary area. The author, refusing individual exhibitionism in favor of political commitment, attempts to lead other producers to production, while providing them with an improved apparatus. It’s apparently with the same disciplinary critical purpose that La Pietra addresses his famous installation entitled ‘Commutator’ [Commutatore 1970]. This inclinable wooden board, able to direct the observer’s attention towards a target object, metaphorically reconsidered the range of relationships between inhabitants and their physical environment<sup>fig.b</sup>. At stake is a laconic experience which exemplifies the general knowledge of the urban ‘deep structure’ which La Pietra classifies by three parameters: the support (element that conveys the sense of the object), the variant (evaluation of the absence or quality that characterizes and closes the relation), and the object (elements that receives the signification).<sup>9</sup> In that sense, La Pietra’s ‘commutator’ is meant to investigate the process of transition between the topological space (superficial structure), the relational aspects that activate the space and the semantic content of their organization (deep structure). As such, this ‘didactic behavior’ seems mainly addressed to architectural discipline, generally intended as a doctrine of spatial

6. See: Gough, Maria: ‘Paris, Capital of the Soviet Avant-Garde.’ In *October* 101 (Summer 2002), p. 69.

7. La Pietra, Ugo: *Abitare la città: ricerche, interventi, progetti nello spazio urbano dal 1960 al 2000*, Allemandi, Torino, 2011, p. 106-115.

8. See: Benjamin, Walter: *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), vol. 2, pp. 770.

9. Ugo La Pietra, “Il Sistema Disequilibrante” [n.2] (Genova, Edizioni Masnata, 1971) pp.5-7. Ugo La Pietra *“Abitare la città: ricerche, interventi, progetti nello spazio urbano dal 1960 al 2000”* (Torino, Allemandi, 2011) pp. 73



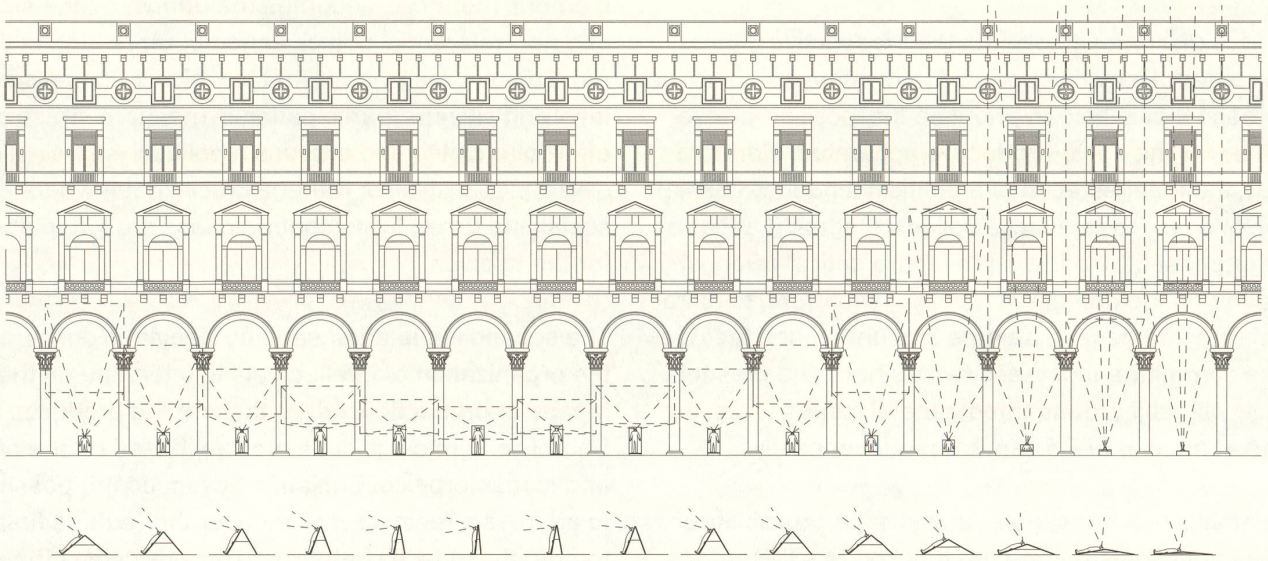


fig. b  
Front elevation, side elevation (1/500) based on Ugo La Pietra: *Il Commutatore*, 1970.  
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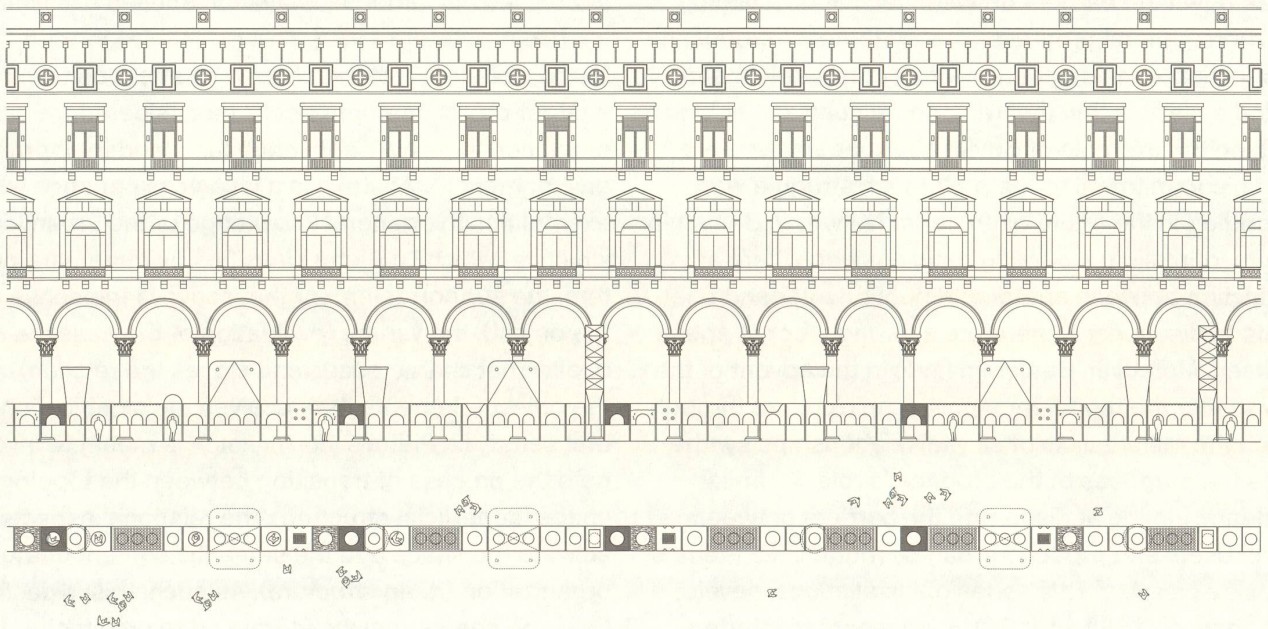


fig. c  
Front elevation, and plan (1/500) based on Ugo La Pietra: *Immersioni*, 1968-1970.  
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operators, in order to find a possible relation within given urban structure, considered in all its complexity. Evidently referring to the dialectical Marxist approach, it manifests an operative tendency which, starting from a theoretical acknowledgment on the generic urban system, is meant to intervene on its inner ‹process›, understanding its variables and their mutual relationship.

Finally, Benjamin considers the character of a productive apparatus through its ability in furthering the socialization of the intellectual means of production. This issue emerges from an impressive process of fusion and renewal of the means that consider the possibility of transforming readers or viewers into collaborators, hence leading consumers to be producers. To support his position, Benjamin refers to the Brechtian's Epic Theater.<sup>10</sup> He explains that Epic Theater – by the use of progressive techniques derived from new media – prevents the viewer from falling into the illusion of reality given by the plot. By using the technique of *gestus*, which interrupts the current action, Brecht forces the viewer to take a position in relation to the event. Transposing this previous tendency on the suburbs, La Pietra's ‹Immersioni› [Immersioni. 1967–1969]<sup>11</sup>, can be seen as a pure object of disruption. This series of installations – roughly at the scale of the body – was meant to establish a temporary perceptual distortion on the individual.<sup>fig c</sup> Helmets, translucent spheres, sounds and images were used to create fictional spaces that provided individuals with a collective awareness. Innovative technologies and new spatial patterns of behavior become the apparatus through which the alienation of reality is revealed – offering to the user a state of ‹conditional discharge›. In this perspective, ‹Immersioni› represents the need for ‹temporary isolation› perhaps better than the rest of the ‹unbalancing› experiences – an interruption as an alternative to the collective participation in the social riots. Therefore, they may not be considered a cynical stance but rather an attempt to investigate and manifest the collective consciousness towards the modifications of vital functions triggered by progress and functional transformations occurring within the domain of techniques.

Facing a lack of theoretical production entirely absorbed by the power of reality, the figure of the architect, in recent years, has abandoned its commitment to be a

‹producer›. As suggested by both authors, being a ‹producer› meant operating in respect to some theoretical stance. On one hand, there is the will of an intellectual to be identified as the main subject of his theory, in other words identifying his activity within the same collective effort aimed to react towards the system. On the other hand, there is a reconsideration in the domain of technique and more precisely in the will to be progressive. As such, intellectuals are supposed to overcome the barrier of disciplinary specialization to finally share a collective target. These former observations note a crucial detachment from the theoretical production since the 90's. More recent theories, deeply rooted within the capitalist ideology, mainly seemed to concentrate on the legitimization of architectural objects. By tracing back along the range of La Pietra's experiences, a reappraisal of the central role of theory is manifested. Intended as a critical process in solidarity with the condition of the social apparatus, it actually led to a rediscussion of the effects and value of progressive techniques.

In this context, reformulating an operative project for the present condition means re-establishing the fundamental role of the architect within society. The more he is able to orient his didactic role towards a collective involvement and a sense of shared consciousness, the higher the technical quality of his work will be.

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10. See Walter Benjamin, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 777

11. Ugo La Pietra, "Il Sistema Disequilibrante [n.1]", (Milano, Galleria Toselli, 1970), p.9-16. Ugo La Pietra, "Il Sistema Disequilibrante [n.2]", (Genova, Edizioni Masnata, 1971), p.8-13. Ugo La Pietra, *Abitare la città : ricerche, interventi, progetti nello spazio urbano dal 1960 al 2000* Torino, Allemandi, 2011 .p. 62-86.