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This is the author's manuscript

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1793275> since 2022-12-02T11:58:55Z

Published version:

DOI:10.1080/09654313.2021.1903399

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SHOPS, FOOD, REGENERATION AND A CONTROVERSIAL SIGNATURE BUILDING IN TURIN, ITALY

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Manuscript; final version published as:

Vanolo A. (2022), "Shops, food, regeneration and a controversial signature building in Turin, Italy",
European Planning Studies, v. 30, n. 1, pp. 178-194.

DOI: 10.1080/09654313.2021.1903399

Abstract

The paper focuses on the case of PalaFuksas, a signature building inaugurated in 2005 and located in the central (but marginalized) area of Porta Palazzo in Turin, Italy. Originally designed to host clothing shops, the building had a history of failures and reconversions, and it is currently mainly used as a branded food hall. By mixing archive and qualitative research, the article focuses on the evolution amongst local stakeholders, of different 'expectations', intended as heterogeneous and not fully conscious and rational sets of ideas, imaginaries, forecasts. PalaFuksas was expected to be a successful and functional building to contain businesses, a flagship for the entire city, and to perform distinction and iconicity, acting as a regenerator for its neighbourhood. Failures in meeting these expectations implied a continuous renegotiation of the meanings, functions and identities of PalaFuksas, revealing the complexity of the processes at play in the attempt to sign, re-sign and ultimately 'become' a signature building.

Keywords

Starchitectures, iconic buildings, geography of buildings, urban regeneration, Turin

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The author would like to thank the Editors of the Special Issue of *European Planning Studies* on Star Architectures and the Anonymous Reviewers for their generous help and their constructive feedback. This article is based on a wider research project on transformations in the Porta Palazzo area carried out with my friends and colleagues Panos Bourlessas and Samantha Cenere.

1. Introduction

This paper analyses a signature building located in Turin, Italy, commonly known as PalaFuksas. The name is derived from the designer Studio Fuksas, led by the star architect Massimiliano Fuksas. Inaugurated in 2005, the building got controversial receptions. As will be discussed later in the paper, it turned out to be inappropriate for the retail activities originally planned (that is, hosting clothing shops), and later the city administration considered and experimented with different possibilities for its use, transforming it successively into a cultural venue and a shopping mall, albeit with limited success. The function, the identity and even the name of the building have changed various times over the last 15 years, emphasizing how buildings' identities (as arguably any identity) are fluid, contested and socially constructed. Currently, PalaFuksas stands at the centre of a controversial food-oriented regeneration program (critics would call it a retail gentrification program: Bourlessas, Cenere, and Vanolo, 2021), as hosts a branded food hall named Mercato Centrale. As it will be discussed in the paper, the analysis of PalaFuksas allows us to explore the variety of urban development strategies and interventions which have characterized the city of Turin over the last two decades, including attempts to acquire international visibility, to promote the image of the cultural city, and to support urban regeneration. With this aim in mind, the case of PalaFuksas is explored in this paper by eliciting how expectations drove different processes of subjectification for the building, ultimately leading to changes in its function, name and meaning. The kind of subjectification proposed in this paper does not refer to a human subject; still, as will be argued later, material and discursive interventions over the years have transformed, represented and produced a series of buildings/characters, each one with a different name ('Mercato Coperto dell'Abbigliamento', 'Palatinum', nowadays 'Mercato Centrale'). Such processes have set the building in different entanglements of relations with the city and the neighbourhood, further reshaping discursive formations and 'expectations' about the building.

As discussed by Goss (1988), buildings are artefacts embodying or reflecting the social relations and productive forces of a society; they can be viewed as structures of purpose – shelter, meeting, making and marketing – created in an environment of perceived opportunities and constraints. Expectations materialize in this framework: from local politicians to architects, from real estate developers to ordinary inhabitants. Stakeholders implicitly or explicitly evaluate projects, supposing or imagining that they will determine a range of outcomes upon urban space, shaping images, scenarios, situations and relations (cf. Farías 2015). This paper suggests an intuitive understanding of expectation deriving from psychology

(Matsumoto 2009), referring to sets of beliefs – realistic or not – about the immediate future, predisposing individuals or groups to conceive reality in certain ways, as well as the likelihood that certain actions will produce specific consequences of a particular magnitude. With similar understandings in mind, a number of classic contributions in social sciences explored the concept of expectation in relation to social systems (Luhmann [1984] 1995); the relations between expectations and self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1968); and most of all, the wide literature on the role of expectations in economics (Shackle 1949). In fact, modern economic theories (theories of rational expectations) focus on the role of forward-looking decisions and behaviours enacted by economic agents, in a framework where expectations (for example about variations in prices) are supposed to influence the economic phenomena, and in turn, the economy influences the expectations of economic agents. Expectations (which can be explored by the means of other concepts and terms, such as suppositions, forecasts) have been variously considered in the literature on urban planning and architecture. For example, Thierstein, Alaily-Mattar, and Dreher (2020) propose a conceptual model, made up of four blocks, to analyse the effects and impacts of star architectures: the first block, named ‘starting conditions’, includes the perception of unsatisfactory urban performances (real or not), while the second, ‘activities’, implies the formulation of ambitions and intentions. The expectations mobilized in this paper lie in the interplay between the two blocks: they are heterogeneous, and in many cases implicit, emotional and not-fully conscious sets of ideas and imaginaries about the effects of an architecture, in this case PalaFuksas, and its performance as a cultural artefact, object of value, sign and spatial system (cf. Goss 1988). The paper hence situates in the strand of literature – presented in the next section – analysing how the material realities of built environments, often called ‘big things’, ‘become’ elements as buildings, shopping malls or skyscrapers as a consequence of social and cultural processes assigning them with certain meanings, functions, relations and expectations. Specifically, PalaFuksas is a case where expectations have been repeatedly unfulfilled, and the building struggled in reaching and sustaining the status of iconicity which was initially expected. The paper thus emphasizes how expectations are fluid and evolving: they are set in relation to social, economic and cultural processes, in a framework where urban development paradigms and strategies constantly evolve.

Methodologically, the empirical material presented in this paper is firstly the outcome of a life-long immersion in the field. The author is an inhabitant of the city, with clear memories of the PalaFuksas project, its opening, and the many debates and passage points (inaugurations, closures, events) which

characterized its evolution. The paper hence mobilizes a mixture of autobiographic memories, archive research, field exploration and traditional approaches to qualitative research. Particularly, extensive interviews with three key local policy administrators were carried out in 2019, together with a number of informal discussions with local scholars and policy actors involved in the regeneration of the area. Secondly, research in the archives of local newspapers was undertaken to identify articles concerning PalaFuksas published over the entire life of the building, composing a set of 37 articles which have been read and encoded by associating them with keywords. Fieldwork explorations allowed to observe, take photos and notes. 181 images have been collected into an archive (together with about one hour of video and audio footage), and each photo has been associated with keywords. Although images have not been used as data sources in strict sense (visual methodologies have not been applied), watching them over and over inspired many of the arguments and the storyline at the basis of this article. Visual materials (images, together with the video presented in footnote #3) have been mobilized in the article in order to support the description of the atmosphere of the place. Finally, fieldwork explorations allowed for encounters and discussions with people, for testing and shaping a better sense of some of the ideas presented in the paper (for example, the fear that Mercato Centrale may produce gentrification, particularly in the eyes of marginal local actors, as street vendors; Bourlessas, Cenere, and Vanolo, 2021). This variegated set of qualitative methodologies composed a set of modes of exploration emphasizing the heterogeneity of ways of approaching, experiencing and making sense of a building.

In order to develop the argument, the next section reviews key ideas on the geographies of buildings and the becoming of 'big things'. Section 3 introduces the case of PalaFuksas and its neighbourhood, and it is followed by an analysis of different kinds of expectations developed over the years, namely unfulfilled expectations about its function (Section 4.1), its role as a regenerator (Section 4.2), and its status and iconicity (Section 4.3). Finally, the concluding section suggests the need for processual views in the analysis of architectural projects, emphasizing the roles of performances and expectations in becoming (or in the failure in becoming) a signature building.

2. Big things and becoming a signature building

Given the vastness of debates and perspectives over architecture, built environment and space, it is difficult to propose a meaningful review of the literature on building geographies. Earlier contributions focused primarily on the materiality of buildings, their format and shape, their architectural style and construction details, using them as evidence of wider and abstract processes or morphological conditions (Goss 1988; Jacobs 2006). Geographers, often inspired by representational theories, have commonly analysed individual buildings by situating them into wider contexts, relations and spatialities, for example by considering their positions, roles, functions and meanings at different geographical scales, by looking at the global circulation of materials, capitals and architectural styles (as famously discussed by King, 1984), or by taking into account the ideological and political perspectives they produce and reproduce, their symbols, or the different ways they are lived and experienced by people (for a review of approaches in cultural geography, see Goss 1988; Kraftl 2010). A classic example in the field may be offered by debates on the skyscraper: since the pivotal contribution of Gottmann (1966), a number of works have explored its symbolic meanings, the landscapes of power they enact, the technologies they mobilize, and their role in shaping our experiences of modernity and capitalism (see the classic works of Domosh, 1988; see also more recent conceptualizations proposed by McNeill, 2005; Harris, 2015).

Still, in the framework of a general call for 'new geographies of architecture' (Jacobs 2006), a different set of contributions has destabilized the very idea that buildings are well-defined elements, which need to be 'interpreted'. Lees (2001) explicitly called geographers to move beyond the emphasis on representation and symbolic interpretation, in order to embrace other practical, effective and non-representational dimensions. This is the case of debates on what Jacobs (2006) named 'big things', which are large material elements, including buildings, skyscrapers, plazas or shopping malls. As discussed by Rose, Degen, and Basdas (2010), the emphasis in this literature is placed on the processes of making (or failing to make) these big objects 'buildings', 'icons' or other architectural forms. Putting it differently, buildings, and for the case of this paper 'signature' buildings, are not self-evident architectures, but they come to have a presence through fragments and assemblages of materials, work, discourses, processes, routines, atmospheres and a number of other human and non-human elements, circumstances and events. These works (as well as others, for example Paterson 2011; Latour and Yaneva 2008) have therefore placed emphasis on issues of practice, embodiment and performance, developing theoretical perspectives, which are often close to actor-network theory, non-representational geographies and post-

humanistic geographies. By developing similar perspectives, authors such as Gieryn (2002), Latour and Yaneva (2008) and Wharton (2015) argue that buildings may be interpreted as both objects of human agency (as they are materially and discursively produced by society) and as 'agents' on their own, as they influence the course of action, for example by 'attracting' tourists or by 'regenerating' a neighbourhood.

This paper focuses on iconic buildings, also known in the literature as landmarks, flagship buildings, star architectures, signature buildings (the terms will be mostly used here as synonyms, although it is surely possible to grasp the differences: Ponzini, Alaily-Mattar, and Thierstein, 2020). The literature on this topic is still fragmented, as emphasized by the lack of a univocal vocabulary of concepts. Contributions include reflections on their relations with capitalism and urban development paradigms (Kaika 2010; Sklair 2017); with cultural politics, as in the case of cultural flagship projects (for example the well-known case of Bilbao and its famous 'effect': Gonzalez 2011); and the role of architectural projects in relation to spectacularization, city branding, mega-events and massive touristification (see e.g. Jensen, 2007). Common to these debates, is the idea that iconic and signature buildings can be characterized by quite different styles, sizes, histories, meanings, functions, and they can produce different effects on urban space. As suggested by the abovementioned literature on 'big things', a critical geography of buildings has to consider iconic and signature buildings in relation to: (1) the wider contexts of processes taking place around them; (2) the social and cultural processes attributing meanings to them; and (3) the economic strategies and urban imaginaries casting expectations over them. From this perspective, buildings may acquire different characteristics and meanings in different urban settings: what may be considered a flagship building in one place, may be not such in another. Still, iconic and signature buildings share an emphasis on expectations, intended, as discussed previously, as beliefs about the urban future and about the magnitude of the effects of their construction. Specifically, expectations about exceptionality, recognition, status and visibility may have different origins, referring for example to the prestige of an architect, and by extension of a signature project (as in the case analysed in this paper), or rather to the recognition of the status of a project, regardless of the popularity of its designer. By asking a prestigious architect to design a building, policy makers and developers are expecting to access a certain imaginary of prestige and visibility, hence, to obtain certain positive effects for the neighbourhood or the city, for example, in the case of Palafuksas, urban regeneration. Still, as this paper will show, an architect's name is not always enough. As already stressed by David Harvey more than 30 years ago (in the framework of his discussion on the serial reproduction of urban forms and patterns: Harvey, 1989) and further

elaborated in the literatures on city branding and urban policy mobilities (McCann 2013; Vanolo 2017) an architect's signature does not guarantee exceptionality and visibility, and it does not guarantee that an architectural 'big thing' will transform into a 'flagship building' as expected by designers, stakeholders, inhabitants and policy makers. Analysing failures, ambiguities and discontinuities in making PalaFuksas a flagship building, and specifically the 'narratives of delusion' it has originated, it is possible to access and to question the imaginaries and visions of urban development enacted by the City of Turin over the last twenty years.

3. Introducing Porta Palazzo and PalaFuksas

PalaFuksas is located in a square named Piazza della Repubblica, in central Turin, at the core of an area named Porta Palazzo (formally, quartiere Aurora). Although the neighbourhood is currently undergoing regeneration, upgrading and image improvement processes, the area has been traditionally associated to stigmas and stereotypes concerning immigration, poverty, informality (petty crimes and illegal activities, such as drugs, or commerce of counterfeit goods) and insecurity (cf. Semi 2008). As an example, it is worth mentioning that several well-known old Italian movies used to be set in the area, in order to tell stories of marginality, crime and social exclusion in the industrial city.¹

From Monday to Saturday, the largest open-air market in Europe takes place in the square, and during the weekends a huge flea market named 'Balon' attracts socially heterogeneous crowds, ranging from poor people buying and selling cheap stuff, in some cases retrieved from garbage, to merchants and clients trading costly antiques. Social diversity has particularly unfolded over recent years, hand in hand with a gradual loss of stigmatization and a change in the local atmosphere: as in many other places all over the world, marginality and imaginaries of 'peripheral authenticity' have come to be more and more aestheticized, becoming attractive in the eyes of hipsters, tourists and different kinds of subjects belonging to the creative class (Burnett 2014). A visible trace of this trend may be captured in the changing playscape of bars and restaurants, where old ones get increasingly renewed or replaced, still maintaining aesthetic elements and symbols evoking working-class heritages and imaginaries of (supposed) tradition.

¹ For example: *La donna della domenica*, by Luigi Comencini, 1975; *Al bar dello sport*, by Francesco Massaro, 1983. A more recent example is *Il luogo delle fragole* by Maite Vitoria Daneris, 2013.

The square is commonly attended by foodies, and during the weekends hordes of tourists fill the neighbourhood, mixing with ordinary inhabitants who still access the open-air food market. All over the neighbourhood, development projects and entrepreneurial initiatives have been mushrooming, at least up to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. These include, for example, the redevelopment of an old firehouse and its conversion into a trendy multifunctional space named ‘Combo’, composed by a hostel, a bar, a restaurant, a radio station and a boutique (inaugurated in January 2020); the redevelopment of a 30,000 m² industrial site for the new Lavazza headquarters, which includes a museum, a gourmet restaurant and several multi-functional spaces (April 2018); the reconversion of an old factory into a niche eatery named ‘Edit’ (November 2017). The emphasis on food is clear, and food consumption is currently a core element in the city’s promotional strategies (Vanolo 2015). PalaFuksas fits into this framework, as it currently hosts Mercato Centrale, a gourmet food hall (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – *Different views of PalaFuksas, currently Mercato Centrale, and a view of the square from its top (bottom right picture)*



Source: photos by the Author, July 2020.

The site where PalaFuksas is located, used to host an indoor clothing market named 'Mercato Coperto dell'Abbigliamento' up to 1999. At the end of the 1990s, in a period characterized by meaningful urban policies for the regeneration of urban peripheries and by the search of international visibility (i.e. branding) for the city (Governa, Rossignolo, and Saccomani 2009; Vanolo 2008), the municipality chose to build a new, iconic building for the clothing market. Studio Fuksas won the public competition and designed a five-storey building, with two levels underground (one for parking cars and the other for technical facilities), three floors destined to shops, and a restaurant on the upper floor. The building was inaugurated in 2005 with celebrations and triumphalism, and several critical reviews praised its aesthetic qualities. In her review of modern Italian architectures, Diane Ghirardo (2013, 278) described the building in this way:

The three floors of commercial space for shops, bars and the like are enclosed with a steel frame and layers of pale-green glazing, ingeniously gliding smoothly from airy and transparent to increasingly dense towards the lower levels. Within, the shops frame an open core crisscrossed by ramps and escalators. A wonderfully tactile and original treatment of surfaces.

Still, as will be discussed below, the project quickly turned into a failure, deluding expectations, and both the building and the surrounding area experienced crisis and decadence for years. The ongoing regeneration, gentrification and touristification of the area (terms which clearly overlap here: Rossi and Vanolo 2013) is a recent trend supported by local policy makers with controversial interventions. For example, the poorest section of the Balon flea market, commonly named 'Barattolo', was displaced in January 2020: vendors were forced to move to a peripheral area of the city, causing protests and fights, while the more elegant and tourist-friendly part of the flea market has not been affected, confirming that just some selective forms of marginality are becoming fashionable and attractive.² In 2019, a 25-year-old local squat ('centro sociale') named Asilo Occupato was violently evicted by the police. The entire area has been militarized for months, and despite rumours, the new function of the site is still unknown.

² To give an idea of the atmosphere of the place, a movie has been recorded and uploaded. The video has been shot on an ordinary Friday morning, i.e. the 3rd of July 2020, at 10 am It records a walk around and inside PalaFuksas: <https://youtu.be/b10DbFh-hmU>

4. Expectations and delusions

This section analyses evolving expectations and failures 'of', 'in' and 'about' PalaFuksas (cf. Rose, Degen, and Basdas 2010). Specifically, the analysis will focus on three different narratives of delusion, among the many possible. The first one describes how the building failed to achieve a functional meaning, as it did not host any shop for 13 years since its inauguration. Secondly, PalaFuksas did not support urban regeneration as initially expected, at least until recent times and its conversion into a food hall, which has triggered further rounds of expectations (of upgrading the area) and fears (of gentrification). Third and finally, it will be considered how PalaFuksas lacked recognition, visibility and status, ultimately failing in becoming a space of distinction and iconicity.

4.1. Function

PalaFuksas was designed to perform a specific function, which was replacing the old Mercato coperto dell'abbigliamento ('clothing market') which was located on the very same site (Figure 2).

Shops in the old Mercato coperto dell'abbigliamento mostly targeted non-wealthy clients, mostly by selling affordable clothes, including counterfeit brands. The old building needed serious renovation, and the decision was made to demolish and rebuild it.

In order to build PalaFuksas, the old Mercato coperto dell'abbigliamento was physically displaced at the beginning of 2000. The clothing market was dense with social relations: the place was often crowded, and well known to the inhabitants of the entire city. In order to free space for the construction site, shops were relocated far away, in a temporary building on the outskirts of the city, causing meaningful protests by merchants, worried by the potential erosion of their businesses (Mondo 2000; Minucci 2005b). The temporary building was supposed to be 'temporary' just for the clothing shops (no more than two years, according to original plans), as the building itself was intended as permanent and destined to other functions (municipal offices and shops).

Figure 2 – *Mercato Coperto dell'Abbigliamento in the 1970s*



Source: courtesy of Archivio Storico Città di Torino, photo by Trevisio, 1970.

The construction of PalaFuksas started immediately after the displacement, and it was supposed to be completed in a couple of years. Expectations were high, connected to both a perception of an actual under-performing of the area, and to the capability to act in order to increase the attractiveness of the area (cf. Thierstein, Alaily-Mattar, and Dreher 2020). In the enthusiastic words of the Councillor for Commerce, pronounced in 1999:

Piazza della Repubblica will be as the courtyard of the Louvre museum, with a palace-sculpture with an iridescent personality inspired by the Ming Pei pyramid. Time for building that: no more than two years.³

The works actually lasted for six years, and PalaFuksas did not host any shop for the following thirteen years. The temporary structure in the periphery of the city kept on hosting the displaced clothing shops up to 2011, and it was eventually demolished the following years, without hosting any other function.

PalaFuksas was inaugurated with much triumphalism few months before the beginning of the 2006 Turin Olympic Games, but practical problems appeared quickly. Rents and costs for running shops inside the signature building were too high for most local merchants. Moreover, during the 6 years used for the construction of PalaFuksas, the displaced shop-runners developed different forms of embeddedness in the new neighbourhood, and they ultimately decided to stay there, and not go back to Porta Palazzo (Martinengo 2005). The retail project at the core of PalaFuksas hence failed before even starting, and the building lacked any function and meaning. Given that its realization cost more than 10 million euro, this failure posed huge political pressure: a function was needed in order to perform iconicity, status and regeneration.

The city hall considered various possibilities, including unrealized water and chocolate museums, reflecting the centrality of culture-led development strategies and 'creative city' discourses in Turin (Minucci 2005a). A couple of temporary art events were hosted, but for most of the time PalaFuksas simply stayed empty and closed, causing massive critiques by the local population, who perceived the whole project as an absurd waste of public money (Laugeri 2014).

In 2011, the original idea of hosting clothing shops took form again. The building was rebranded 'Palatinum' (or 'Palatino centre'), which was the name of the old temporary structure that hosted the displaced shops, and the internal space was rented to an association of 34 local merchants. By referring to the literature on big things (and particularly Rose, Degen, and Basdas 2010), the whole experiment may be intended as an attempt to 'remake' PalaFuksas into a new attractive shopping mall. However, the project failed after few years. Technical problems with the building, together with excessive costs and an overall lack of economic success in the businesses, moved the association close to bankruptcy causing the

³ The quote, attributed to Councillor Fiorenzo Alfieri, is reported here:

<https://teoriedelprogetto15.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/palafuksas-torino-maurizio-vaccariello1.pdf> (last accessed 30 June 2020).

impossibility to pay rents to the city hall, as it became fully clear in 2017. The city hall had to yet again face the problem of finding a function and a way to pay the costs for the maintenance (and renewal) of the building, specifically by searching for a private investor.

During the years of the Fassino left-wing coalition in Turin (2011-2016) before the collapse of the Palatinum project, an entrepreneur named Umberto Montano showed interest in locating a Mercato Centrale in the city. Mercato Centrale is a format and a brand for food halls, originally located in Florence and then in Rome. A public competition for running PalaFuksas saw the unique participation of Umberto Montano's company, which consequently won in 2017. With 4500 square metres of commercial activities, Mercato Centrale was inaugurated on 13 April 2019. As described in the promotional booklets distributed at the entrance, Mercato Centrale assigns PalaFuksas the role of place for the experience of local, high-quality and sustainable food. Apparently, the city administration finally found a function for PalaFuksas.

4.2. Regeneration

Despite several years of economic, functional and identity crisis, PalaFuksas has always been deeply interwoven with expectations about the regeneration of Porta Palazzo.

As for many other architectural projects of the 1990s, PalaFuksas was intended to be a starchitect's iconic signature building. The project took form during years of grandeur, optimism and entrepreneurialism for the city: in that period, Turin was receiving huge funds from the European Union for urban projects (particularly for the one named 'The Gate' in Porta Palazzo, 1997-2001; see Governà, Rossignolo, and Saccomani 2009); the bid for hosting the 2006 Winter Olympic Games was won in 1999, and in the same year the city presented its first strategic plan, named 'Torino Internazionale', setting the vision of putting the city on the global map (cf. Pinson 2002; Vanolo 2008). Hence, Turin was undergoing massive branding and re-representation projects: it is sufficient to mention that the communication strategy for the 2006 Winter Olympic Games was based on the slogan 'Torino always on the move', suggesting an imaginary of change, as the city was no longer a Fordist one-company town, but rather it was turning into an exciting place for culture, creativity, taste, technology, tourism, distinctive consumption and night-time entertainment (Vanolo 2008). In line with the literature on the agency of buildings, it can be argued that PalaFuksas was intended to 'perform' that urban vision, with the old, modernist building hosting the clothing market of Porta Palazzo being substituted by a new hyper-

modern, glittering starchitecture, made up of sharp lines, inclined surfaces, multiple levels, diffused lights and a wide use of glass and steel. The materiality, presence and visibility of the new signature building were supposed to perform actions as bringing cultural capital, shaping economic relations, and subverting the stigma of Porta Palazzo. In this sense, the building was not expected to simply 'host' shops, but to upgrade businesses and the whole area, thanks to its outstanding uniqueness and iconicity.

Still, it was clear that something had gone wrong even before the inauguration: the building was simply too costly for shops and clients, and it did not really fit the needs of shop-runners. The project did not attract 'higher quality' retailers, who would be able to afford the higher rents, and it only produced displacement. With the exclusion of some minor and temporary events, PalaFuksas remained closed to the public from the 2005 inauguration up to 2011, when the original idea of hosting commercial activities took form again with the ruinous Palatinum project.

It has to be stressed that, in 2011, optimistic expectations about the future of the city were over, as well as the enthusiasm of the Olympic fever. Crisis, unemployment, austerity and collapsing real estate values were in the air, European-funded regeneration programs reached an end, and expectations about economic development were modest: hosting shops was basically meant as a strategy in order to avoid the progressive degeneration of the building and the surrounding area. 'The political pressure was high, and clearly it was necessary to do something with Palafuksas: it was going to become a real problem' (interview with local policy maker, 9 July 2019).

As a matter of fact, enthusiasm for PalaFuksas faded away quickly after its inauguration, as it became clear that other than being an iconic, flagship or landmark building, it was simply a problem. Being empty for years, it turned into a marginal space. An article entitled 'PalaFuksas disaster. With junkies on the outside' was published in the main local newspaper in 2014: it described the place as smelly, cold during the winter, hot in summer, costly and useless. According to the article, every time it rained, the building got flooded, and needles used by drug users would be floating in puddles in the basement (Laugeri 2014). Rather than being the flagship for the regeneration of the area, the building become a flagship for its marginality; rather than being a regenerator, it was intended a place in need of regeneration; and rather than upgrading the area, it was considered a 'broken window' and a source of progressive decay for the entire neighbourhood. According to a shop runner, 'the municipality promised regeneration for the area, and a structure with parks and restaurant [...] They were lies' (Laugeri 2014). The 2011 project of bringing

back clothing shops was meant to offer a solution, but it turned into a commercial failure, adding a further layer of delusion and pessimism to the building.

The idea of PalaFuksas ‘becoming’ a tool performing urban regeneration regained momentum in more recent times with the Mercato Centrale project. In the vision of local policy makers, the food hall offers great possibilities for the regeneration of Porta Palazzo. The narrative of regeneration and expectations was explicitly mobilized by the Mayor of the city on the inauguration day: ‘This place was not a source of energy, nor was it pulsating, nor giving life to this important area [...]. [This is a place for] opportunities, and this can be the driving force to set an area which is definitely in need, in motion once again’.⁴ It has to be mentioned that, according to interviews with policy makers, it was clear that Mercato Centrale seemed like the only possibility for getting out of a situation of massive debt and bankruptcy, thanks to the involvement of a private stakeholder investing about 6 million euro. In the words of a local administrator, ‘a private investment was absolutely necessary; it was necessary to find an investor’ (interview, 10 January 2020). However, the official narrative about the Mercato Centrale project – both according to local policy makers and to the company running Mercato Centrale – tells a brave story of urban regeneration. According to the official website, ‘the places chosen for Mercato Centrale openings – hubs in the urban fabric and often neglected venues – are brought back to life and returned to the city, which can experience and enjoy them fully again’.⁵ New customers, new events, new shops, means new life and new possibilities for the marginal neighbourhood. For example, because of the new customers and the light of the building, according to local narratives the square is supposed to be safer and less deserted during the night. Mercato Centrale also cares for cleaning the surroundings and, according to interviews, the company is expected to beautify the square, most probably by adding trees, benches, and other elements of urban design.

Still, these positive expectations clash with the negative visions mobilized by those fearing ongoing gentrification and loss of authenticity in the neighbourhood, and as a matter of fact, a number of cheap shops, activities, places, practices and subjects look more and more out-of-place on the ‘new’ square and inside and around the ‘new’ Mercato Centrale (Figure 3). The regeneration narrative mobilized by policy makers implicitly assumes that the place was somehow on its deathbed, requiring ‘new life’, but actually Porta Palazzo was already crowded with life, people, economic activities and social relations (Semi 2008;

⁴ <https://it-it.facebook.com/chiaraappendinosindaca/videos/2263074427291856/> (last accessed 15 July 2020).

⁵ <https://www.mercatocentrale.com/format/> (last accessed 15 July 2020).

Rossi and Vanolo 2013). According to activists and critical voices, there is a political vision at play for substituting elements of marginality with new, appealing and more consumable landscapes, businesses and experiences, and Mercato Centrale is a flagship and an active agent of transformation. It is not a coincidence that at its inauguration, alongside the food enthusiasts massively filling the square, a group of people raised banners and opposed the opening, evoking concerns on the gentrification of the neighbourhood, or better, its 'foodification', using a neologism quite popular in Turin (Bourlessas, Cenere, and Vanolo, 2021).⁶

Figure 3 – *Mercato Centrale and its conflicts*



Note: The two writings in the upper side of the image can be found next to PalaFuksas; they mean 'Requalification = neighbourhood for the rich' and 'requalification = rising prices'. The images on the bottom refer to people consuming food inside.

Source: photo by the Author, November 2019.

⁶ Foodification is also the title of a theatrical piece and its related blog: <https://www.foodification.org/> (last accessed 20 September 2020).

4.3. Status

Theoretical perspectives on ‘big things’ and the geographies of buildings allow to interpret the history of PalaFuksas as a series of failures in its discursive construction, and specifically failures in branding the building and reaching a status of iconicity. The fact that the building had so many different names is meaningful.

As discussed, the former building on site was known as ‘Mercato coperto dell’abbigliamento’: the name was a description of its function, meaning literally ‘covered clothing market’. During its construction, PalaFuksas was still referred to as the ‘new’ Mercato coperto dell’abbigliamento, but with shop runners refusing to relocate, the new building lost its designed function and hence its name. The building became to be known in popular, political and promotional discourses as PalaFuksas, emphasizing its signature status. However, given the decadence, lack of meaning and bad reputation of the building, Massimiliano Fuksas disavowed it, accusing the city hall of bad management and distortions of his original project.⁷

Although the building is still commonly known as PalaFuksas, the 2011 relaunch of the site as a shopping mall was accompanied by a promotional strategy mobilizing the brand ‘Palatinum’ (or ‘Palatino centre’, or some variants of it). As the Palatinum project failed, basically no one currently uses that name, but the brand is still visible on the external walls of the building, as a kind of relic evoking failures in the quest for a meaningful status.⁸

The Mercato Centrale project set a new tone, and gave the building a new role in the regeneration narrative: as mentioned, foodification and the new public-private partnership for the relaunch of the building are supposed to accompany wider transformations in the area, targeting foodies, tourists and middle-class consumers, as accused by activists. Massimiliano Fuksas was quite critical about the project of Mercato Centrale, which he described as ‘vulgar’; Guido Montanari, the vice-mayor of the city, replied by arguing that the project is good, while PalaFuksas is architectonically ‘the worst project in the city in the last 20 years’. Umberto Montano, the entrepreneur leading Mercato Centrale, replied to Fuksas with a different tone: ‘to come and see how *his creature* is re-born’ (quotes from Fuksas, Montanari, and Montano reported in Ricci 2018).

⁷ <https://nonsoloturisti.it/2013/09/architettura-palafuksas-torino/> (last accessed 15 July 2020).

⁸ There is still a Palatinum Facebook page, which has not been updated since May 2016: <https://it-it.facebook.com/CentroCommercialePalatino> (last accessed 15 July 2020).

These words put emphasis on the processes of subjectification, de-subjectification and re-subjectification at play. As discussed, for most of its history, PalaFuksas has been characterized by a certain aura of anonymity and unrecognizability, lacking a well-defined function, a proper name, and failing in performing regeneration and acquiring an iconic status. On the other hand, the relaunch of the building as Mercato Centrale, in a way similar to what happened with the 2011 Palatinum project, has been accompanied by discursive strategies playing with ideas of anthropomorphization, ultimately transforming the building into a kind of character/ subject which is an active spatial 'agent' of change, that is, a regenerator. The reference to 'a creature which is re-born' hence acquires specific meanings, reflecting failed expectations (the creature was implicitly dead), upcoming ones (it is no longer dead), and wider optimistic visions of food-driven urban development for the area and the city.

5. Conclusions

PalaFuksas was originally conceived in a period characterized by optimistic expectations about the future of the city, which was insisting on policies of branding, visibility and internationalization, and supporting a celebrative attitude, epitomized by the grandeur of a mega-event as the Winter Olympic Games. By mobilizing perspectives proposed in the literature on 'big things' and critical geographies of buildings, it has been argued that the analysis of the processes which originated, transformed and shaped PalaFuksas – in terms of materialities, discourses, practices and particularly, for the aims of this paper, 'expectations' and 'narratives of delusion' – allows on the one hand to detect and to explore the logics of the development strategies enacted by the city, and on the other hand to investigate how a controversial 'big thing' had to constantly renegotiate its status and function – and even its name – in order to maintain or to try to perform its role of flagship signature building.

According to the first perspective, the enthusiastic Olympic urban culture is arguably palpable in the original project of PalaFuksas, which has been intended as a kind of architectural mega-event: an exceptional building, performing iconicity. Its construction was discursively represented as a spectacle celebrating and showing off the regeneration of the neighbourhood and the city. In the short run, PalaFuksas maintained expectations: up to its inauguration, it supported a certain amount of political enthusiasm, celebrative discourses, attractive imageries and hopeful expectations. However, in the longer term, the whole project turned into a disaster, being economically unsustainable and, from many points

of view, meaningless, as the building lacked a proper urban function for many years. For sure, the project lacked a solid long-term business plan that considered commercial viability and the covering of building maintenance and running costs: the making of a big thing into a star architecture is clearly connected to the hard reality of these practical aspects, and PalaFuksas did not pass what Held (2020) named ‘the market test’.

However, the failure of the market test has been determined not only by economic problems. As suggested by the literature on ‘big things’ (Jacobs 2006; Rose, Degen, and Basdas 2010), the failure reveals how the making of a signature building entails complex social and cultural processes, dealing with issues of credibility, status, distinction and cultural capital: PalaFuksas, as a building, was materially built and inaugurated in 2005, and was initially appreciated and celebrated for its aesthetic qualities, but it failed in becoming effectively a flagship architecture. Over the years, rather than being the carrier of prestige and distinction, PalaFuksas has become a synonym for waste of public money and uselessness. As a matter of fact, for many years the costly building has been a bulky urban and political presence for the neighbourhood and for the city, and an unpleasant legacy of the optimistic expectations of urban grandeur that characterized Turin in the late 1990s. Local urban managers have been asked, over the last 15 years, to solve the intrinsic problem of the big thing known as PalaFuksas and to regenerate the neighbourhood, behind its metaphorical shiny façade.

Over the years, PalaFuksas mirrored urban interventions based on the idea of the shopping mall as a space for neighbourhood regeneration; the use of culture in order to attribute meaning and function to unused buildings; the passage from an economy based on consumption of commodities (clothes) to an economic scenario focusing more and more on the consumption of experiences (food cultures); the growing (largely stereotyped) celebration of the diversity and multiculturalism characterizing the neighbourhood as vital elements for urban promotion, touristification and gentrification. All these urban development strategies originated expectations and delusions, ultimately leaving scars, signs and heritages which are still embedded in the materiality of the building, in its biography, physical layout, atmosphere and sense of place, and which can be explored and mapped (for example through fieldwork: see Colombino and Vanolo 2017). In this light, it is potentially possible to reflect on the methodological approaches which may allow investigating the relation between architectures, expectations and urban development paradigms: this paper has mostly focused on qualitative and archive research; other possibilities may include quantitative approaches (see for example Held 2020), the development of

building biographies (McNeill and McNamara 2012; Wharton 2015), ethnography and research techniques focusing on emotional geographies (Lees and Baxter 2011), and further possibilities may be explored (Paterson 2011).

Finally, it has to be observed that the expectations developed over the years have influenced spatial identities and relations, discursively turning PalaFuksas into a kind of active urban agent. Despite a growing literature on materialities and the agency of buildings (see for example Gieryn 2002; Yaneva 2008; Wharton 2015), empirical analysis on the investigation of signature buildings as active agents in regeneration/gentrification strategies is limited. Considering buildings as objects, subjects or processes 'doing things' further destabilizes the idea of the building as a pre-given, autonomous and independent entity, and suggests for future research to consider how the entanglements of materialities and expectations shape possibilities and action: the analysis of PalaFuksas proposed in this paper illustrates how the building was interwoven with fluid and dynamic expectations, mirroring different paradigms and visions of urban development, ultimately stressing its role as an architectural agent in the production of meanings, discourses, strategies and relations.

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