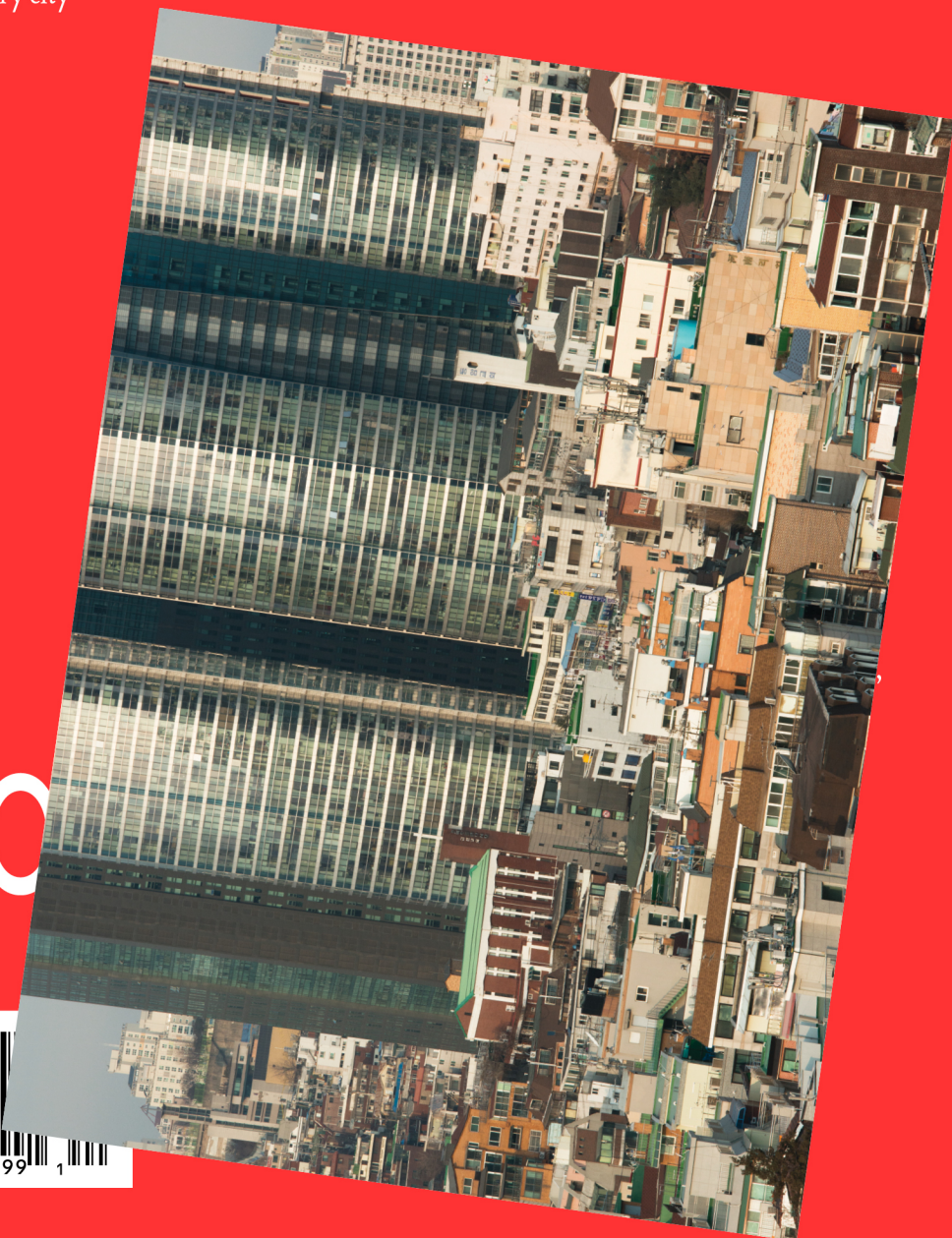


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Observations on
architecture and the
contemporary city

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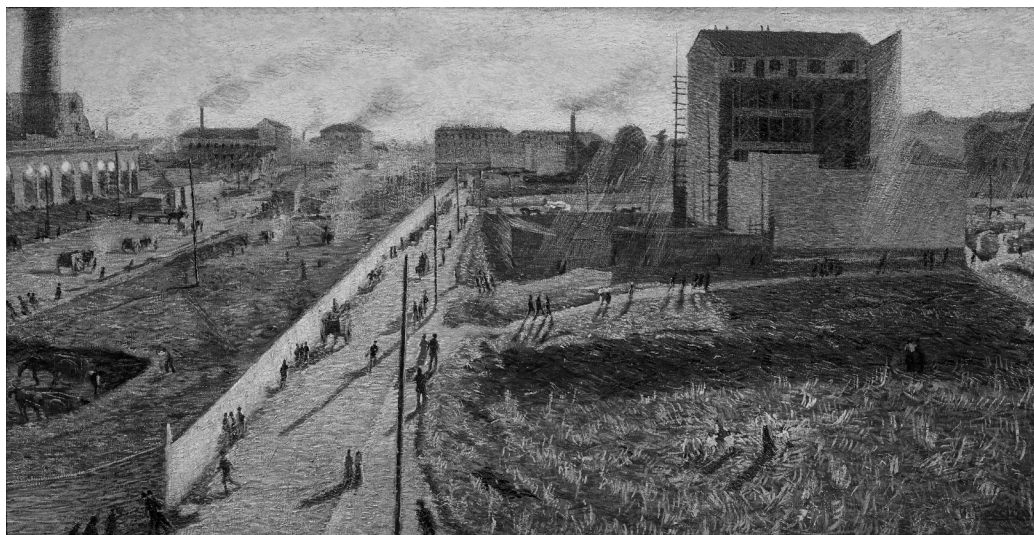
Specchi a Milano

When you visit the area of Milan where Rem Koolhaas and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture have converted a century-old distillery into a new center for the Fondazione Prada, you feel you've been there before, or, at the very least, you're familiar with that kind of place. The straight avenues lined by endless walls and half-empty buildings recall the dawn of industry. Seeing them today, in an afternoon light, they evoke the sense of a melancholic ending rather than the raucous beginning of industrialization that the artist Umberto Boccioni recorded in his 1909–10 painting *Officine a Porta Romana*. Facing the same blinding light of the afternoon sun, Boccioni embraced the vast complex of buildings rising in empty fields outside the southeastern city gate, with the remnants of agriculture in retreat. Set apart from densely built-up residential quarters, the forlorn outskirts were then being optimistically developed by industrialists as the factories at Porta Romana. Today, standing near the spot from which Boccioni surveyed the prospect of modern times, one faces the inverse condition: emptiness prevails, and time appears frozen. Where bustling factories once stood and throngs of workers reached them at their appointed hours, an eerie stillness has settled over crumbling walls and hollow window frames, casting a sense of loss and futility over everything.

It had all started gloriously. A long period of industrial expansion, beginning well before the turn of the century, secured Milan its preeminence among Italian cities. So vigorous and promising was this awakening that Boccioni exclaimed, “Sento la voglia di dipingere il nuovo, il frutto del nostro tempo industriale” (I’m entirely taken with painting the new, the result of our industrial time). He captured not only the cityscape in the throes of transformation but also the energy that wrought such dynamic change.

The excitement was justified. A rail yard had been built at Porta Romana in 1891 in order to ease the traffic of goods to the southeast edge of Milan, where industry had begun to prosper and produce thousands of jobs. Growth continued unabated for decades, attracting a myriad of other activities to the area. When Boccioni painted *La città che sale* (*The City Rises*), shortly after *Officine a Porta Romana*, the transition

Office for Metropolitan Architecture, Fondazione Prada, 2015. The gold-leaf-clad “haunted house.” Photo: Bas Princen. All photos courtesy Fondazione Prada.



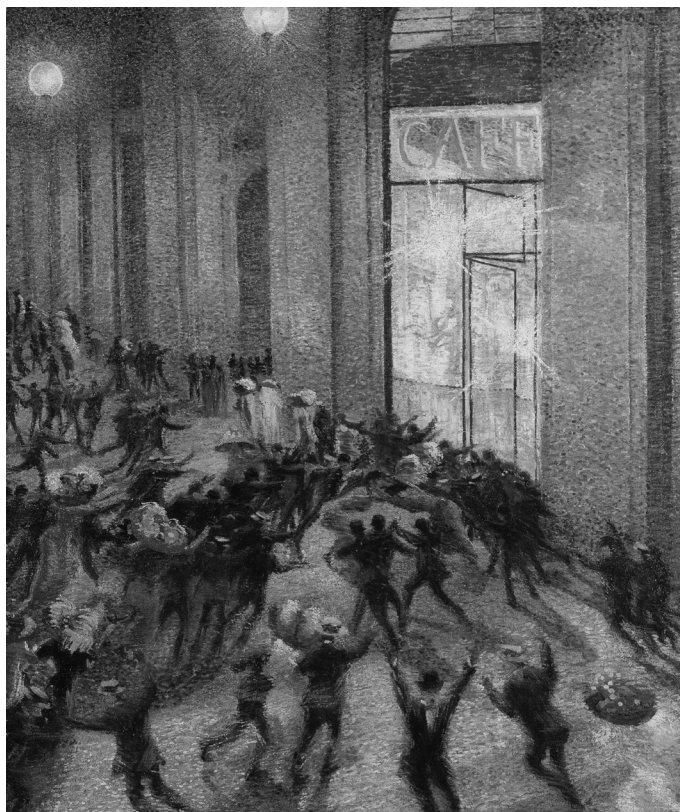
Umberto Boccioni, *Officine a Porta Romana*, 1909–10. Oil on canvas, 75 × 145 cm. Courtesy Collezione Intesa Sanpaolo, Gallerie d'Italia, Milan.

from the pastoral to an industrial landscape had already occurred. His new canvas, with its swirl of color and motion, conveyed the prevailing sense of speed and excitement, but it also hinted at the fearsome machine called progress. The beast was out there, and the workers were only cogs in its gears and prisoners of its deafening madness.

If you look carefully among the factories that rise in the background of *Officine a Porta Romana*, you will find on the right side a new distillery taking shape. The Società Italiana Spiriti would open in 1910 and for nearly a century produce, among other spirits, a brandy that became a household name: Il Cavallino Rosso. The image of the brand, a little red horse, is a bit more domesticated than the runaway stallion in Boccioni's *La città che sale*, but it gained an equally powerful place in the collective memory.

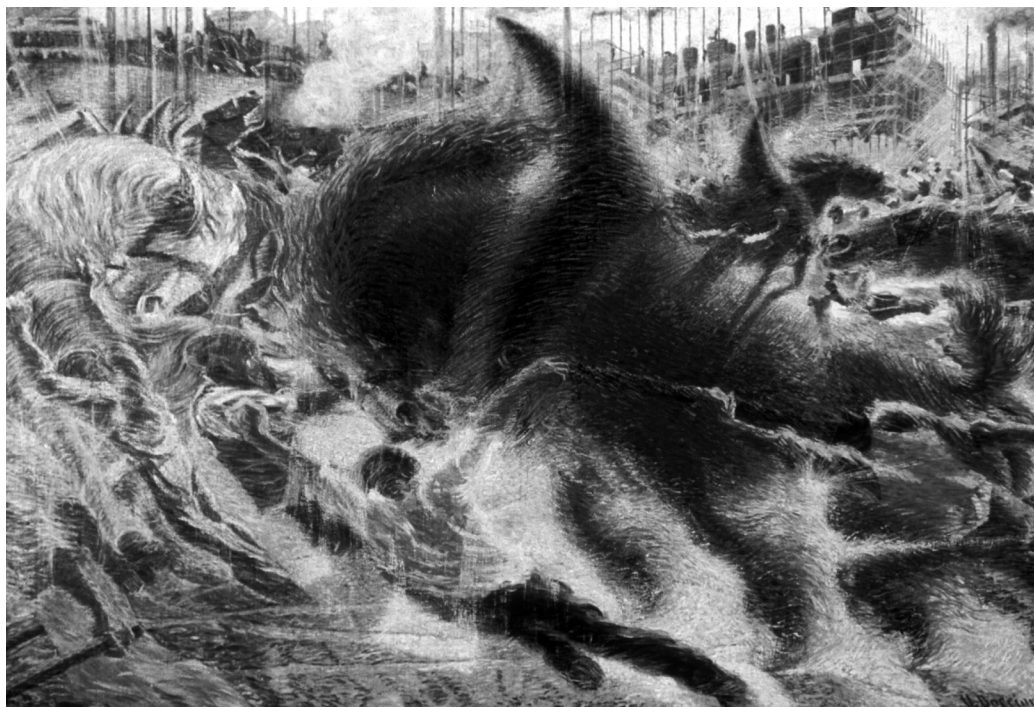
The rise of industry and the violence it wrought were in sharp contrast to the old elegance of Milan, which had its fulcrum in the town's *salotto*, the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II. Begun in 1865 during the Risorgimento, or unification, of Italy, the galleria connects two of the city's symbolic landmarks – the Duomo di Milano and La Scala, Milan's opera house – its large glass-and-iron vaulted roof sheltering a place of entertainment, fashion, and myth. Restaurants, cafes, and other establishments vied for prominence, and the ritual *aperitivo* hour became an institution, although it was Campari and Zucca rather than Cavallino Rosso that tended to win the day. Zigzagging through the galleria at all hours, a mix of elegant burghers, tattered beggars, outlandish tourists, workmen, musicians from the opera, and, on occasion,

Umberto Boccioni, *Rissa in galleria*, 1910. Oil on canvas, 76 x 64 cm.
© Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.



strikers and rabble-rousers filled the space with commotion. Noisy gatherings and political rallies drew swift reactions, and frequent run-ins often became something of a public spectacle. Boccioni was ever alert to new experiences and chronicled one of the more clamorous incidents in his 1910 painting *Rissa in galleria* (*Riot in the Gallery*), in which slashes of color, bursts of light, and dark featureless figures convey an atmosphere of excitement and alarm and the kind of event for which a curious audience was always at hand: a strident fight has broken out between two women beneath the golden lights of the Bar Zucca, near the entrance to the galleria and its colorful mosaics in *stile liberty*.

As a forum of luxury to this day, a site of excess and exaggeration, as well as one of discretion, shielded behind curtained windows, the galleria offers display and privacy, reverses outside and inside, and thus coalesces into the very image of Milan. For all of these differences must coexist in one and the same space. As the city's grand living room, the galleria is the stage for urban life and all that supports it. Not by chance, one of the four storefronts at the crossing of the galleria's two arcades has been occupied by a Prada store since



Umberto Boccioni, *La città che sale*, 1910–11. © Museum of Modern Art. Licensed by HIP/Art Resource, New York.

1913. A second storefront directly under the central glass dome has recently added Prada's golden logo to the jet-black panels above its windows. One can now say that no other fashion house is more centrally or more lastingly a part of the city.

There is no doubt that Prada and Milan are deeply intertwined: the fashion house represents the kind of enlightened patronage that stems from an era when giving more obliged you to show it less, and when false pride ceased to frustrate the drive to excel and to make the right choices for the future. One such choice – unpredictable perhaps, but absolutely right – led Prada to the site near Porta Romana. A largely derelict precinct crisscrossed by Corso Lodi, Via Ripamonti, and Viale Ortles, it had little to recommend it, but Prada did not overlook its potential or let the opportunity to bring it back to life go by. They decided to nestle the Fondazione Prada headquarters in a site only two kilometers from the galleria by air, but miles removed in character. For decades, others' attempts to revitalize the area had failed. It obviously required a more potent and farsighted effort and a more thoroughgoing intervention to restore the abandoned distillery of Largo Isarco.

The factory compound is architecturally unremarkable, a sober assembly of buildings for administration, production, and storage, like so many others in the neighborhood. No frills, just a smartly planned series of spaces whose component

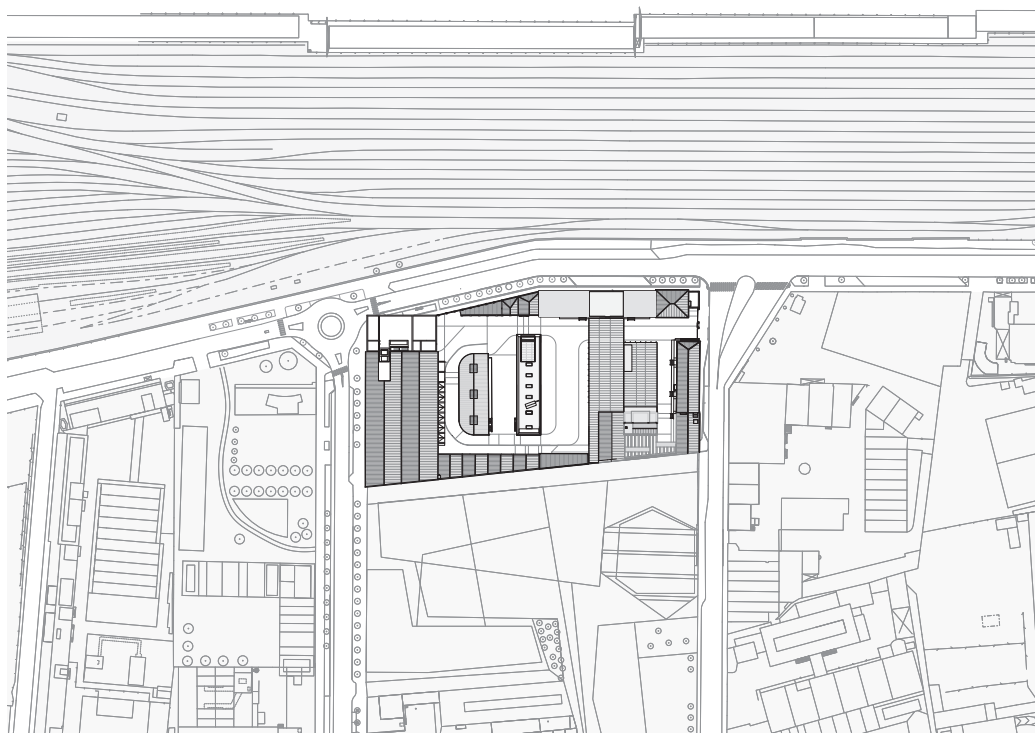


Severo "Sepo" Pozzati, "Old Brandy"
Cavallino Rosso advertisement, 1953.

parts differ from one another ever so slightly according to their purpose and date of construction. To convert such a dormant complex of buildings with its rudimentary alignments and minimal differentiation into a center for the arts, one needs to think and act outside the rigid standards for conservation, renovation, and so-called heritage rebuilding. History cannot automatically set new priorities, and the physical condition of the building stock must not determine what is to be kept, transformed, or demolished. Instead of simply adhering to the criteria for restoration, the foundation required some entirely new structures that would not clash with the preservation of defunct elements. One of the most challenging issues arises precisely from competing objectives. Success is measured by the degree to which new requirements for display can be met within the old structures and how preserved buildings can offer up new possibilities for use. Specially commissioned works of art are now installed in some of the extant factory spaces: Thomas Demand's artificial grotto, for example, occupies the depths of a fermentation cellar.

The unique character introduced into the conglomeration of buildings is a result of Koolhaas's determination to alter our experience of the entire site by dramatizing the qualities of every one of its newly named parts: podium, library, cinema, "haunted house," and various galleries. He laid down new pedestrian surfaces – in wood, metal, stone, and cement – that appear to have been shaped by a sudden tectonic event or worn down and deformed across many layers of time. Like an archaeologist (but without the customary inhibitions), Koolhaas unearthed some areas and dissimulated others. From the original wrought-iron entry gate to a new nine-story tower at the far end of the compound, Koolhaas gives the complex bridgelike volumes, allowing it to descend along old loading ramps, and carves out platforms, passages, and quiet eddies, thus transforming the diverse and seemingly random open spaces of the old factory into an extended ground for spontaneous activity and unexpected experiences. These areas have a familiar feel – a slight rise here, a short flight of stairs or gradual transition there – because we know them from our daily movement around the city. In this way, Koolhaas has greatly expanded, rather than restricted, the range and intrigue of incidental spaces in the former distillery.

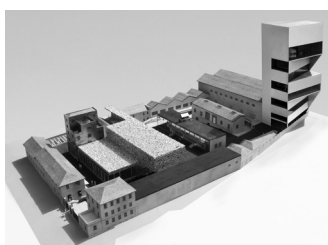
Often these interventions expose what was previously in place but hidden. They also introduce a new palette of materials one rarely encounters: polycarbonate sheets, polished steel surfaces, wood blocks, cast-aluminum panels, and gold



Fondazione Prada. Site plan. © OMA.

leaf, all of which exercise a powerful effect on our perceptions of the place. Wandering through the generously proportioned spaces and passages around and through the buildings, one feels free to linger and explore or just to amble from one building to another. One comes across many striking modifications: a curving descent, a slight rise instead of steps, the spare use of color, and calibrated joints between parts. As if invited into a laboratory of experience, we feel heightened sensations because so much attention was given to the choices and manipulation of all the parts that now constitute a new and different whole. No detail is overlooked, but there are also no restrictions; rather, there is a sense of freedom and joyful inattention that allows us to be led by our own feelings, not the architecture.

Although the history of the site goes back barely a century – its beginnings recorded by Boccioni and its gradual abandonment documented in an atlas of photographs by Gabriele Basilico – the recent resurrection has achieved an improbable return to the urban character it first acquired, perhaps audaciously, after 1900. There is more of the elegance and reserve of Milan on the site of the Fondazione Prada than is still alive in many parts of the city, including the experiences of display and dissimulation. Mining a Milanese vein



Fondazione Prada. Model, view from the northeast. Top: Cross section. Images © OMA.

of mirage, OMA uses reflective materials in strategic places to mirror adjacent facades: the doubled images constantly change with the light of day and the movement of visitors. Instead of providing a sense of symmetry and balance, however, they destabilize our perception of the space and, more importantly, raise questions: Is symmetry trustworthy? Does movement change the picture? In effect, these split images warn of the impossibility of reflecting anything exactly, because there are many stories embedded in each object – different ages, technologies, materials, and ways of working. To accept such complex conditions we need to see them as different from the familiar, not as governed by values according to current conventions and opinions but as a somewhat baffling realignment of them. A simple reflection that mirrors a section of the old distillery momentarily creates an illusionary continuity that delivers a powerful statement against the lark mirror of preservation at any cost.

In the 2011 installation of “Cronocaos” for the New Museum in New York, Koolhaas was very clear on the issue of preservation as he divided the ground floor of the museum’s incubator space next door into two symmetrical spaces, leaving one untouched and painting the other white. The tension between them sprang from the demarcation line, which, instead of dividing the space, gave rise to a neither/nor condition. One’s initial impression of the contrast was undermined by the suspension of habitual categories: radical restoration and categorical newness are mutually contaminated. Similarly, the mirrored facades at the Fondazione Prada start a conversation between the extant and the virtual, between what is there and what will not be rebuilt. Each space is familiar to us, but seen together and in parallel they open up a



Fondazione Prada. Photo: Bas Princen.

new discussion about heritage and historical time. “Our commitment to heritage is jeopardizing our sense of linear history,” Koolhaas claims. “Our current obsession with the past is so intense that time is no longer functioning as a chronological phenomenon” – but instead, one might add, as a roadblock on the way to historical understanding.

The conditions that shape our urban experiences today have been isolated and displaced at the Fondazione Prada complex. They are narrowly confined within its perimeter, as if assembled for an experiment in a laboratory. As in all experiments, certain conditions have to be created and maintained in order to succeed. To begin, you need to find a site that is sufficiently anonymous and generic to escape designation by heritage agencies, but also interesting and peculiar enough to allow a negotiation of the maze of regulations and city code exemptions, such as density, traffic, and safety. In this way, it becomes a pilot project in a new kind of urban regeneration.

Koolhaas declared that his intervention is neither new nor strictly a restoration. As he explained in a 2015 interview published in *Metropolis*, he recognizes that “existing architecture has so many conditions [attached to it] that, even if we wanted to, we couldn’t reproduce it anymore. It would be



Fondazione Prada. Photo: Iwan Baan.

too expensive, and there are so many invisible rules now that didn't exist before." The total restoration of a place as heterogeneous as the former distillery is precluded by its conditions, and simply ignoring or replacing the former fabric runs counter to the desire to keep something of the past even when it has become useless. Only a different kind of approach can offer a way out of this dilemma, one that neither submits to the idea of heritage nor violates our attentiveness to things from the recent past that may still be linked, however tenuously, to the present.

It may be coincidence that a recent exhibition at the Fondazione Prada broaches, through nature, a condition we also find in this architecture. Michael Wang's "Extinct in the Wild" features specimens of flora and fauna that have vanished from their natural habitats but persist under artificial conditions "only through heroic human efforts," as the artist explains in the exhibition leaflet. He argues that "in an age of extinction, displacement and collage are not only aesthetic techniques – they are strategies of survival." What is intriguing here is the assumption that only through artificial means can certain species be kept alive, all while others continue to become extinct.



Fondazione Prada. Photo: Bas Princen.

It appears to be a reversal of fate that a conventional factory that fell into disuse could be revitalized thanks to a calibrated inoculation process that stimulated defensive antibodies and thereby secured its revival. By contrast, the splendid Zanoletti metal factory building, built nearby in 1940, was long ago made vulnerable and ultimately fell victim to the infection of forgetfulness, finally succumbing to demolition a few years ago. Until then, it was a proud, if ailing neighbor on Viale Ortles, displaying in its elegant windows the signature of its authors, the architects Mario Asnago and Claudio Vender, who had made a name for themselves with a spare, even minimalist modern vocabulary that established a style at once unmistakably personal and completely generic for Milan's factories and apartment blocks.

In a similar way, Koolhaas has produced diverse and rich results from a narrow palette of existing pieces on the site of the distillery. It is not the magnitude and aggressiveness of the intervention but the subtle transformation of the whole that makes time wobble. Like communicating vessels that connect different generations of illuminated clients and bright architects across the span of a century, the Fondazione Prada establishes a perfect balance between oblivion and rebirth, and confirms that only by passing the torch can the race continue.

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