



Naples Underground

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There is nothing to do, architects like soaring up high. They want to expand into light, into space, occupy the air, the sky, they want to *cubate*. They love extrovert and recognisable forms. Digging is stuff for moles, ants, for intellectuals at the most, for psychoanalysts. Worse still, for engineers.

Geoff Manaugh can write as much as he likes in his blog BLDGBLOG, he can relate the wonders of the hypogeal space through books and films, images and drawings: he hasn't enough gear to convince them, neither do the other lovers of the underground, who in the end are considered little more than a bunch of fanatics. Architects proudly resist with their noses up high.

For over twenty years, one of the more extraordinary public spaces ever created in Italy or in Europe has been under construction in Naples, yet architects have hardly noticed. They have been visiting MAXXI, the Prada Foundation, even the mediocre complex of Porta Nuova in Milan, they have raged about the EXPO gate or Renzo Piano's Turin skyscraper, but few have had a ride on Naples's underground, and those few feel they are cultivated explorers.

The funniest thing is that such infrastructure is one of the very few contemporary underground transport systems that for outspoken political will — basically Antonio Bassolino's, then mayor of the city, never betrayed by his successors — involved prestigious architects in designing the stations, with the aim of creating quality spaces. And,

what is even more, it has been conceived within the framework of a public transport plan which has integrated urban planning, meaning that stations were not positioned according to the logic of transport engineers and the real estate, but in function of public interest, that is of the inhabitants, and above all that the squares and the streets in which the entrances are located were improved and redesigned very carefully, both in the finest areas and in the more degraded neighbourhoods.

Over a period of time that seems extremely long yet is quite proportioned to the orographic complexity, the presence of the sea and tuff caves and the incredible archaeological stratification, the progress of works, articulated by the opening of each single station, has objectively freed tens and then hundreds of thousand of Neapolitans from their dependence on cars. But while in Rome, in Milan and about everywhere else such spaces of transit keep being designed in an almost exclusively functional way, if everything goes well (one has to think of the very recent line 5 of Milan's underground, which is squalid beside being structured over a demented route), in Naples it was decided to monumentalize them, to make them not only comfortable places, but also a source of aesthetic pleasure, in order to reverse the feeling of stress and degradation commonly associated with everyday movement in this city.

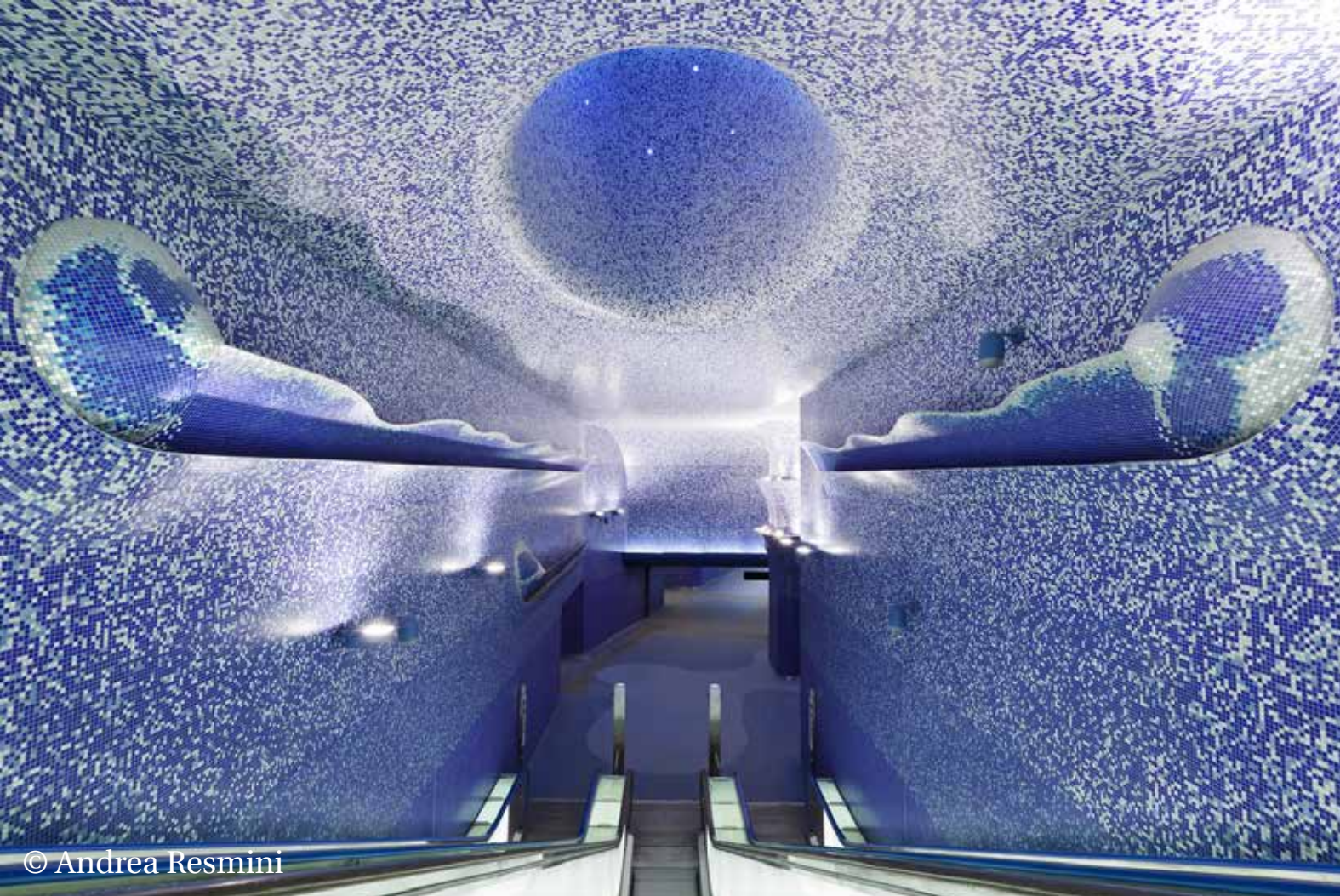
Critical misfortunes

How does one go about explaining such a low-key critical response? Why bottom page articles, or second level, shorts, or in women's publications, touristic brochures, tired reproductions of press releases, even advertorials? Why didn't those papers that devote whole spreads of the cultural section to the tiniest intervention by Renzo Piano's team in a local market of Lorenteggio send their top journalists for a reportage in Naples? Why do architecture magazines publish only paid inserts on the subject? Why don't the architects involved list their stations among the projects in their own websites?



It doesn't take a clairvoyant to guess that communication was poorly managed, not for lack of zeal but as a result of an excessive control by the concessionary company: choosing always the role of the sponsor in cultural events and in publications, they have actually inhibited for market reasons the critique's exercise, even positive, that a project of such dimensions would have naturally stimulated. Who would invite you to a Biennale if you have already bought a pavilion? And what publisher would ever commission a serious piece of writing when you have already paid a hefty sum for a special insert? And if publications are all institutional, and as such the result of endless mediation between political, academic and economic powers, how accessible could the contents be and how effective the publicity?

However, to ascribe the whole responsibility of this media failure to the awkwardness of creators and promoters of the underground would be stupid. The diffidence and the disinterest towards this work in the world of architecture have many explanations, some even rea-



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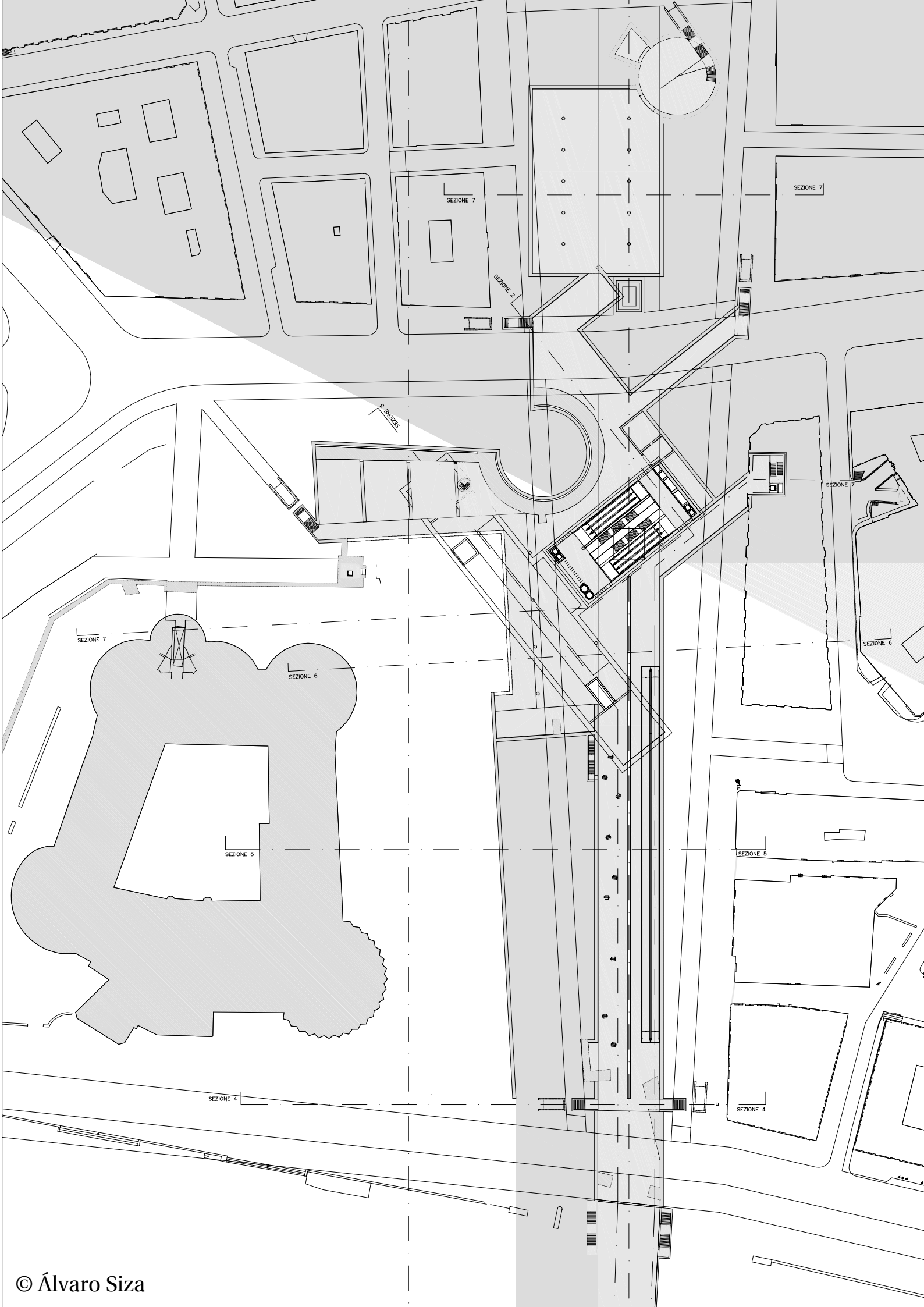
sonable. The choice of the architects, for one: Mendini, Gae Aulenti, Fuksas, Perrault himself among others, are not among the most loved on the national and international scene (but Siza, Souto De Moura, Karim Rashid or Tusquets already much more). They aren't "sexy" enough or even sound controversial. The results, in such a complex piece of work, one that is fragmented in space and time, are then very diverse, and the same concept of each station corresponds to tastes that are absolutely heterogeneous. There also exists a reason of a social order: like every major infrastructure, the underground concentrated on itself funds and energies that could have been distributed otherwise in the city, particularly in the suburbs, and this dampens the enthusiasm of many that in theory could have been attracted by a high quality public service. Finally, but perhaps this is the most important element, the size of the architectural project is more difficult to identify compared to a building or even an airport. Who defines the spaces, an architect or an engineer? Does the architect draw the itineraries or do they confine themselves to choosing the materials,

to the installation and the decoration? Does anyone notice that the underground space was designed or are the artworks the only things people notice? Let us proceed orderly.

Project development

The earliest core of this design story goes back to the involvement of Alessandro Mendini and Achille Bonito Oliva. Mendini, in particular, took care of the Salvator Rosa and Materdei stations (opened between 2001 and 2003), but above all built the archetype for the interventions of those architects that would afterwards work with the remaining stations. The contamination of art and architecture, which suited him particularly well, and a unitary design of the underground as well as overground space, that is of the station's interior space along with the surrounding urban context, were the cornerstones of such infrastructure, and it was Mendini who first formalized them in this context. The exit of Salvator Rosa station, in particular, was an apparently inextricable urban challenge, a fragmented void in the middle of the backside of blocks of flats that were the outcome of the worst real estate speculation, whereas Mendini's project recomposes the pieces in a sort of urban mega-installation, transforming the blind walls into painted canvases and linking with stairs and footpaths the different heights of the pseudo-square. The entrance to the underground is a building in the form of a shrine in a perfect Mendinian style and the deep ramp leading down to the platforms is a jubilation of fluorescent colours covered with artworks, including Perino e Vele's iconic Fiat 500s.

In this, as well as in the other stations, the selection of artists and works was curated by Achille Bonito Oliva, who was offered the prestigious assignment in the heyday of contemporary art in Naples, that is when Bassolino, in his first years as a mayor, decided to give a very strong signal of cultural renovation with concentrating on art in public spaces with the installations in Piazza Plebiscito, the exhibitions at the Museo Archeologico, to continue with the new museums Madre and Pan, up to the so-called "art stations". In the occasion,



ABO coined a slogan that turned out to be very auspicious in terms of publicity yet deeply unfortunate on the semantic level, “the obligatory museum”, which implied that thenceforward any user of the underground, whether they liked it or not, would have to take in their dose of Transavanguardia and Arte Povera, Clemente’s and De Maria’s mosaics as well as Pistoletto’s mirrors, Kounellis’s rails with used shoes, Kosuth’s neon lights and Mimmo Jodice’s photographs — prevailingly installed in Gae Aulenti’s Dante and Museo stations (opened in 2001-2003), whose spaces remind one very clearly of an art gallery.

As in the end it wasn’t difficult to foresee, such a blatantly 1980’s connotation in a Zero years public space ended up producing some resistance, albeit never too vocal. In fact, the stations commissioned just after and finished in more recent years or still in progress, Municipio (opened in 2015 but still in a stage of completion) Garibaldi (2014), Toledo (2012), Università (2011), Aeroporto (in progress), Centro direzionale (in progress), were assigned to architects such as Oscar Tusquets, Karim Rashid, Dominique Perrault, Richard Rogers, studio EMBT and to the sublime pair Siza-Souto de Moura, and house artworks by William Kentridge or Bob Wilson. Yet what has changed isn’t only the international allure and the alignment to a taste that is more widely shared. In most cases the design of interior and external spaces – also thanks to a process which has expanded in time following the extraordinary archaeological findings – has become dominant compared to the display of artworks. Piazza Municipio (by Siza and Souto de Moura), already open but still unfinished, is an immense stage set showing the Spanish walls discovered under the Maschio Angioino, to arrive layer after layer down to the famed roman ships, with a unique, very imposing system of stairs. Karim Rashid (Università) created an undivided space, bright and coloured like a discotheque, from the platforms to the exit, completely covered with a vocabulary of signs of his own invention, as well as in the main mezzanine, supported by four black pillars freely inspired by Bertarelli’s *Profilo continuo del Duce*, which more than Mussolini remind one of Dart Vader. Toledo station, which all considered is the best loved to date, was conceived

by Tusquets as a progressive immersion into the ground to sea level, accompanied by the shimmering mosaics that cover entirely the liquid forms of the walls. The wells of light opening like gashes over the spectator's head, Kentridge's wall processions of Neapolitan subject, Bob Wilson's lightboxes with waves build up a seamless environment, one of an infinite sensory power, resulting in a daily experience that bears no comparison with the one that a commuter in Turin or Paris or anywhere else may have.

There certainly is the recent case of Stockholm, an international paradigm, or the historical underground systems of the Soviet tradition or American modernism. And coincidentally we are always talking about operations that were born in a political context strongly oriented towards income redistribution and the struggle against inequality, the type of instances that today's fashion likes to define "populist". Because monumentalizing the underground space is the anti-Thatcher and anti-liberal symbol par excellence. It is the opposite of skyscrapers named after banks, but it also is, contrary to the commonplace which sees them associated, the opposite of a grand event: the underground transforms public money into artworks that are permanent and open to everyone, whereas the EXPO and the World Cup concentrate the same money in spaces that are restricted and temporary, extraordinary, in a regime of emergency.

Still, going back to the initial questions, why are architects distancing themselves from an intervention which is unique in the Italian scenario? Why does the need, however legitimate, to call oneself "non-mendinian" prevail? Or the dissociation from the taste of this or that construction, more or less accomplished, in relation to a grandiose operation which on the whole proves generous?

Aside from the swanky type, who isn't interested as a matter of principle, the only plausible answer lies in the aversion for the nature of such an operation, which is intrinsically tied to compromise. An underground system will never have the coherence and design lightness of New York's Highline or of a Japanese school, only to quote two univer-

sally appreciated examples. The underground is mired in power and propaganda, its burdensome decisional processes reflect themselves unpleasantly onto the chain of people that are called to participate in those decisions, spaces and decorations are the result of endless mediations with the claims of safety, slowness, even opportunism. Above all, the underground is by necessity a hierarchic enterprise, it is made and wanted "from high up", and it is in fact one of those complex systems that seem to be there with the sole aim of burying the archetypes of common good, open source, sharing economy, self-management – like healthcare infrastructures, for example.

So, an underground system offers too much resistance to the architect's overflowing ego and is uncomfortably reactionary in the eyes of those anarcho-foucauldian architects who produce the bulk of theory. Fortunately it is appreciated by users, and this is a phenomenon that architects are not always happy to accept.

References

An easily consultable timeline, albeit not really updated, can be found on: http://www.tiki-toki.com/timeline/entry/234164/COMPLETAMENTO-LINEA-1-METROPOLITANA-DI-NAPOLI/#vars!date=2018-10-29_19:13:01!

A short guide to the artworks and the architects is published on ANM's website: http://www.anm.it/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=687&Itemid=295