I like the night, I actually love it
I see so many sunrises and very few
mornings,
The night has adopted me and offered
me a job
that I like a lot, indeed I adore.
My name is Jovanotti and I’m a deejay
I never go to sleep before six a.m.
—Jovanotti

Atmosphere. When you talk or write about
nightlife and discotheques, you feel an urge
to recall their atmospheric environments
in order to describe them. The senses and the
bodily experience of the discotheque are
deply entangled with its atmosphere: scent,
light, sound, movement, touch, and memories.
Because going to the discotheque is an
ephemeral experience that you do in the dark,

Once the light is on it has come to an end. But
the architecture stays. Italian disco culture
saw more than 7,000 discotheques dispersed
around its territory into the 1980s, only about
2,500 of which have survived until today.
A few of them are still running; others have
changed function, but many of them have shut
down and been abandoned.

In recent years, growing interest
in the long-ignored “parabola” of Italian
discotheques, from the 1960s to the present,
has led to the rise of art works, research
projects, and books. The 2014 Venice Biennale
officially opened the door for discos to enter
the Olympus of Art and Architecture, with
a big A. For the Monditalia pavilion at the
Arsenale in Venice, the Biennale showcased
projects foregrounding the current socio-
cultural situation of architecture in the country
today, and there was a focus on the night and
Italian disco culture. A number of projects
were commissioned and displayed, all of them treating discos as an experimental and radical object of research and investigation for understanding contemporary Italian nightlife culture. A project called Space Electronics Then and Now, curated by researcher Catharine Rossi, dealt with the Radical Architecture movement that characterized the nocturnal atmosphere of avant-garde discos in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s. The project focused particularly on Space Electronic, a discotheque designed by Gruppo 9999 in 1969 that is still running in Florence. In late 2015–early 2016, Rossi also co-curated, with Sumitra Upham, a broader exhibit on the Radical Architecture movement and discotheques at the Institute for Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London, under the title “Radical Disco: Architecture and Nightlife in Italy 1965–1975.”13 The 2014 Biennale, Italian magazine Zero presented Notte Italiana, an online project collecting stories by architects, DJs, musicians, event promoters, designers, musical producers, and researchers, as well as movies and soundtracks of Italian disco culture since the 1960s. Artists Marco Fusinato, Felicity D. Scott, and Mark Wasiuta produced the installation La fine del mondo, bringing to dialogue the radical aesthetics of 1960s discotheques, specifically Turin’s Piper Club, with the antagonistic politics of occupied and self-managed social centers in Milan, such as Leoncavallo, COXX, and Virus. Finally, a visual installation called Nightswimming, by photographer Giovanna Silva, delved into the history and evolution of experimental architecture in Italian discotheques from 1960 to 1990, as well as the following crisis that forced many of them to close their doors. Other recent and ongoing photographic projects have drawn on this crisis, portraying the decadence and ruin of many abandoned Italian discos around the country today, such as Paradise Discotheque (by Antonio La Grotta, third place at Sony World Photography Awards 2015—architecture category), as well as blogs like Memories on a Dancefloor (by Jessica Da Ros) and Ascosi Lasciti (by Alessandro Tesei). The liminal, lunatic, hidden-yet-visible aspect of the discotheque has begun receiving attention at a moment when interest in the nightlife economy is growing at an impressive rhythm, and in a country that in the 1980s and 1990s was at the forefront of nocturnal experimentation in the cultural and political scenes.2

From the mid–1980s through the 1990s, Italian municipal politics turned its attention to the temporal dimension, thanks to the temporal politics with a particular focus on the nighttime economy. Following these struggles, law 53/2000 was adopted in 2000 (also known as legge Turco, after Livia Turco, a prominent politician who supported it), which had two major items: the first was mostly aimed at regulating parental leave, while the second had a broader focus on temporal coordination and regulation in urban areas with the institution of a “Fund for Time Harmonization in the City” (Fondo per l’armonizzazione dei tempi della città) and Time Banks. While the first part of the law on parental leave was foregrounded and implemented, the second proposition on urban time regulation was never developed in its entirety, due to further changes in the ruling government. The legge Turco established that Italian regions adopt specific time-oriented local norms for temporal coordination between public and private services, creating an office and a wider temporal policy for time regulation, as well as time banks to improve “solidarity in local communities.”14 The law provided a general and pioneering framework on urban time regulation and coordination, without specifying guidelines or procedures for applying the law at a local level. However, this was a turning point that led to discussions of time-oriented politics in the context of urbanism.15 These first experimentations produced an awareness not only of questions of work-life balance, gender equality, and regulation of the relationship between work time and private time, but also of temporal issues in city planning, especially concerning the nighttime economy. Following these first steps and amidst growth in the role of the nighttime economy, other countries and cities, especially in France and the Netherlands who today lead the field, began to approach temporal politics with a particular focus on the night, to the point that over the last ten years many European cities have adopted “nighttime mayors” and held public debates about nighttime economies and cultures.16

RADICAL DISCOS BETWEEN 1960 AND 1970

The interest in the architecture and design of Italian discos, as an object of study and research outside the experimental and avant-garde movement, can be traced back to the 1990s, but the debate on political questions connected to the role of discos in the nighttime economy was never developed in its entirety, due to further changes in the ruling government. The legge Turco established that Italian regions adopt specific time-oriented local norms for temporal coordination between public and private services, creating an office and a wider temporal policy for time regulation, as well as time banks to improve “solidarity in local communities.” The law provided a general and pioneering framework on urban time regulation and coordination, without specifying guidelines or procedures for applying the law at a local level. However, this was a turning point that led to discussions of time-oriented politics in the context of urbanism. These first experimentations produced an awareness not only of questions of work-life balance, gender equality, and regulation of the relationship between work time and private time, but also of temporal issues in city planning, especially concerning the nighttime economy. Following these first steps and amidst growth in the role of the nighttime economy, other countries and cities, especially in France and the Netherlands who today lead the field, began to approach temporal politics with a particular focus on the night, to the point that over the last ten years many European cities have adopted “nighttime mayors” and held public debates about nighttime economies and cultures.

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MEMORIES ON THE DANCEFLOOR


MEMORIES ON THE DANCEFLOOR
NIGHT: DOMAINS

Gheodrome, San Mauro a Mare (FC). Photo Credit: Jessica da Ross, Memories on the Dancefloor, 2014.


(Cap Ciao, Marano Vicentino (VI). Photo Credit: Jessica da Ross, Memories on the Dancefloor, 2015.
During this decade, the first discos were sites for interdisciplinary intersections between music, design, visual art, performance, theatre, and many other forms of art and nightlife experiences. Influenced by American pop art, British music and architectural experimentalism (such as the radical avant-garde—(including the radical architects Hans Hollein and Walter Pichler), as well as an expanding mass media culture, the peculiarity of the first nightclubs that arose in this period in Italy is deeply linked to the historical moment and socio-cultural background. In particular, the design and architecture of some of the most memorable discos of the time have their roots in universities and research. Many schools of architecture at that time contained influential thinkers, and were starting to be occupied by students who formed groups that would then be identified as part of the avant-garde movement and challenged established architecture. These discos lasted longer than in other countries, such as France and the United States, expanding through the late 1970s with the subsequent radicalization of activist and militant groups. This particular social context allowed for a span of ten years of design and architectural projects by young artists eager to innovate and discard prevalent architectural, socio-cultural, and aesthetico-political codes and paradigms. The schools of architecture at the Universities of Florence and Turin, as well as the Polytechnic University of Milan, were extremely active during this decade. In particular, the School of Architecture at the University of Florence saw the formation of many groups of students exploring design and architectural thinking in different and radicalist forms. These groups were not only by architects such as Leonardo Savioli, but also by thinkers from other disciplines such as Umberto Eco. The Italian semiotician was at that time teaching at the School of Architecture of the University of Florence and played a substantial role in its theoretical approach to design. With the growing interest in mass media and popular culture, at the time Eco was engaged in expanding the role of semiotics, the study of the production and interpretation of signs, outside the linguistic circle. He provided these young architects, who were looking to broaden their horizons and were frustrated by the crisis of modernism in architecture, with an answer. Together with Marshal McLuhan—who published his influence in the 1960s (The Gutenberg Galaxy, 1962; Understanding Media, 1964; The Medium is the Message, 1967)—Eco examined the emerging mass media, and proposed a reading of the city and architecture through the lenses of communication and media theories. For his course on visual language at the University of Florence, Eco proposed the study of architecture as a form of media, challenging the notion of “function.” By that time, disapproached by the modernist theories in architecture, the very idea that a function of a building could be at once not only denotative (primary function) but also connotative (secondary functions), gave much inspiration to these young artists who felt liberated in their experiments with changing and mutable design objects and spaces, which were open to multiple interpretations. In the preface to the catalogue of The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943–1968, an exhibition organized at the Guggenheim museum in New York in 1994, Umberto Eco writes about his experience during these years in the School of Architecture at the University of Florence: We spent nights discussing things together; ideas were provoked by visual offerings; the visual offerings were determined according to the spaces; the spaces were delineated on the basis of sound suggestions given by the musicians. […] At the time when I was teaching at the School of Architecture at the University of Florence, I remember that the Archizoom group had already appeared even before the start of the events of 1968, while the UFO group emerged during the occupation of the university… Architecture departments became the arena in which everything was debated, because the architect felt responsible for society as a whole. During that time, architect Leonardo Savioli was teaching in the same department as Eco, and the notion of “function” was at the heart of his research as well. His course in Interior Design for the academic year 1966–67 at the School of Architecture at the University of Florence dealt with “users,” re-thinking the one-dimensional notion of function in architecture. Savioli aimed to discard the one-to-one association between the formal, aesthetic, and material aspects of a building, and its precise function and related use. According to the architect, this univocal and categorical relationship predominated in past architectural forms, precluding all kinds of unforeseen, new, and emerging interpretations of space and genres combinations. The discotheque, or pipers, as it was named after the first night-club that opened in Rimini, by Group UFO, opened the field to new interdisciplinary intersections, as well as relational and changing ecologies between space and time. And the design of pipers was the task that Savioli gave to students for their final work. The course was centred on the theme “space and participation,” and aimed at proposing a new kind of participation within the built environment, starting from the architectural project itself. Students were asked to design spaces wherein users could actively relate and operate, being themselves able to create constantly changing environments based on the relationship between space, time, and their individual or collective presence. Such research projects were the playground for the realization of experimental discos throughout Il bel paese radicantly new, which the radical avant-garde factories. The term was not yet imbued with a dysphoric aura, as it later would be in the 1980s, and it still referred to a kind of wonder and amusement in relation to the discos’ playful influences. The radical avant-garde factory was the core of the radical architectural paradigm. As Fulvio Ferrari writes in Discoteca 1968, “the spell of conceiving a disco is to design something that stays under, under our conscious, where you feel immersed in the fluid of your unknown origins, where the magic of lights and sounds that disorient you is part of a project that no Polytechnic can initiate.”

...
Discos allowed, then, not only for the application of new theories learned on Space Electronic’s dance floor, a project that would be showcased at the 1972 MOMA exhibit celebrating the Radical Architecture movement. Created out of an old engine repair shop, “furnished with discarded washing drums, refrigeration casings, and the latest technologies,” Space Electronic is one of the few discos of the era to have survived the massive disco-culture explosion of the late 1970s and 1980s, and the subsequent crisis period. Researcher and curator Catharine Rossi has discussed the role that Space Electronic, as well as other discos designed by radical architects, played in Italian nightlife and architectural culture, in the 2014 Venice Bienalle and her more recent ICA exhibition in London. Reflecting upon the evolution and legacy of such a space, and on the situation of Italian discos today, she asks: “Is Space Electronic a metaphor for Italy for the apparent disappearance of an earlier radical energy? But who is to say what happens in, or outside, of Space Electronic is more or less radical in the 1970s or today?”

In the mid-1970s the radical movement saw a dramatic shift, as did discos. Piper and similar venues that survived became more commercial and less experimental. Space Electronic bears witness to this important change, evidenced by the Biennale exhibition, as journalist Bruno Casini underlines: “In retrospect, Space Electronic enables us to follow the transition that occurred between the 60s and 70s, during that generational switch from beatnik to rock. Following the protests in ‘77, and the release of Saturday Night Fever, the venue was transformed into a discotheque.”

During the 1970s Italy went through a period of violent protests and repressions, and saw a dramatic shift, as did discos. Piper was replaced by a staged architecture. Radical design of 1960s–1970s nightclubs was thus replaced by a staged architecture. But who is to say whether what happens in, or outside, of Space Electronic is more or less radical in the 1970s or today? The hidden, open, mutable, and flexible concerning issues such as noise were in the process of diversifying their offerings with restaurants, swimming pools, shops, and other services in their space. In the 1980s, more than 7,000 discos opened in Italy, a proliferation that continued into the 1990s. La Riviera Romagnola on the Adriatic coast became the glittery entry point to a nightlife, with discos such as Baia Imperiale (1984, Gabicce Monte, by Studio Tausani Ferrini and Lucchi); Bounty (1991, Rimini, by Antonello Mambelli); Jovanotti, Italian DJ and songwriter, released the track “Gente della notte” (people of the night), a quote from which opens this essay, reflecting the burgeoning disco culture of this decade. Moreover, discos were in the process of diversifying their nightlife, with discos such as Baia Imperiale (1984, Gabicce Monte, by Studio Tausani Ferrini and Lucchi); Bounty (1991, Rimini, by Antonello Mambelli); Jovanotti, Italian DJ and songwriter, released the track “Gente della notte” (people of the night), a quote from which opens this essay, reflecting the burgeoning disco culture of this decade. Moreover, discos were in the process of diversifying their offerings with restaurants, swimming pools, shops, and other services in their space. In the 1980s, more than 7,000 discos opened in Italy, a proliferation that continued into the 1990s. La Riviera Romagnola on the Adriatic coast became the glittery entry point to a new Italian nightlife, with discos such as Baia Imperiale (1984, Gabicce Monte, by Studio Tausani Ferrini and Lucchi); Bounty (1991, Rimini, by Antonello Mambelli); Jovanotti, Italian DJ and songwriter, released the track “Gente della notte” (people of the night), a quote from which opens this essay, reflecting the burgeoning disco culture of this decade. Moreover, discos were in the process of diversifying their offerings with restaurants, swimming pools, shops, and other services in their space.
PARADISE DISCOTHEQUE


The Parabola of Italian Discotheques: ... who created the Baia, was more visionary than the sea-view gym with swimming pools, terraces has had a place like Baia degli Angeli: a former riverbank location, drawing large numbers of dancers as well as coaches filled with the merely curious, anxious to have their pictures taken in front of its majestic entrance.

During the 1980s, discos were celebrated and demonized at the same time. In 1985, Domus published an article by Gini Alhadeff titled “Il divertimentificio,” or “Factory of Entertainment” in the English translation. In it, Alhadeff uses the term divertimentificio in a more negative way than Trini did in the 1960s when writing about l’Altra Mondo Club and the Piper in Turin. His critical article refers to the club as “demonized at the same time. In 1985, Palladium. Previously a concert hall, Palladium was taken over by entrepreneurs Steve Rubell and Ian Schrager, after their success with Studio 54 (1977–1981). They awarded the prize to the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki, whose original design was based on the idea of a “Stage of Caesars, lending a touch or irony to the game of stylistic references.

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A place for amusement as theatre and cabaret were in the past. However, it is only incidentally considered. Generally, in a museum or in a Concert-Hall only the arts recognized as institutional are exhibited or represented. This hardly encourages the crisis ever over their lives from adults that can only lead to generational clashes, today as always. Without wanting to divide nightclubs into two distinct groups (those of series A and series B), there exist some areas where sheer fun is constantly accompanied by an effort to create cultural production and exchange, expressed not only in the quality of proposals that present everything that is trendy, but also in the design of a space that is, indeed, ephemeral, but not architecturally insignificant.35

A common thread runs through the aesthetic metamorphosis of the Italian discotcheque, from the first discs of the 1960s to those of 1990s: their marginality within architecture and cultural production, which has been their force. Discos offered the potential for design experimentation, for the emergence of new artistic, music, and fashion trends, as well as serving as very important indicators of social, economic, and cultural practices related to the economy of the night, then and now. For this reason, they should be taken into account as events in the chronicle of politics related to time and rhythm in urban areas. In fact, after the grandeur of the 1980s and early 1990s, the mid-1990s saw the birth of a new kind of nightclub that went back to urban or suburban areas, recouping the dismissed, empty, and abandoned ruins left by the slow de-industrialization of Italy (a development that occurred in many other Western countries as well). Some of the experimental nightclubs opened in this era include: Magazzini Generali (1988, Milan, by Massi Isola Ghini and Giancarlo Soresina), La Gare (1994, Milan, Ismaele Marrone), Link (1994, Bologna), Guerra e Pace (1996, Casoria, by Gnosis Architettura), and Stop Line (1995, Curno, by Studio Archea). As renowned Italian DJ and music producer Claudio Capucci explains the Nightswimming: Discotheque’s architectural concept, a legacy from the 70s with its dance halls and disco-club, has become somewhat obsolete. No evolution occurred. Nowadays, a disco is any space that can accommodate large numbers. In recent years this type of venue has become more palatable than other club formats, like those in industrial warehouses, underground parking lots or a deconsecrated church. These times we are more inclined to dance in a museum than in a nightclub.37

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The Manila disco-club was, in fact, a cultural and design experiment. Its interior design was the first discos of the 1960s to those of 1990s: their marginality within architecture and cultural production, which has been their force. Discos offered the potential for design experimentation, for the emergence of new artistic, music, and fashion trends, as well as serving as very important indicators of social, economic, and cultural practices related to the economy of the night, then and now. For this reason, they should be taken into account as events in the chronicle of politics related to time and rhythm in urban areas. In fact, after the grandeur of the 1980s and early 1990s, the mid-1990s saw the birth of a new kind of nightclub that went back to urban or suburban areas, recouping the dismissed, empty, and abandoned ruins left by the slow de-industrialization of Italy (a development that occurred in many other Western countries as well). Some of the experimental nightclubs opened in this era include: Magazzini Generali (1988, Milan, by Massi Isola Ghini and Giancarlo Soresina), La Gare (1994, Milan, Ismaele Marrone), Link (1994, Bologna), Guerra e Pace (1996, Casoria, by Gnosis Architettura), and Stop Line (1995, Curno, by Studio Archea). As renowned Italian DJ and music producer Claudio Capucci explains


37 Ibid.


51 According to scholar Sandra Mallet, the debate over temporal politics that took place in France in the 1990s was inspired by the pioneer work done in Italy by the Feminist and union movements. (Mallet, “Aignerare le rhythmé,” 2.)


166 The Parabola of Italian Discotheques: ... of the night. You reach the morning by riding the night.