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Rome and the intermediate territories: the connective ability of the green areas

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Abstract

Today urban fringes represent the reversal of the traditional relationship between the city and the surrounding area than in the past. They can be considered as one of the paradigmatic changes in the relationships between the components of the landscape. Among them there are the physical, as the social, political, economic, cultural ones.

In observing the cityscape, however, we can realize how many open areas are no longer able to maintain their original agricultural functions. A lot of them have become abandoned areas waiting for future urbanization where urban and rural conditions co-exist side by side without any dialogue.

Dealing with this state of things, the paper suggests some planning guidelines in terms of approaches and methods, focusing on how the urban fringes can become the place where interweave a fruitful dialogue between city and country. The aim is to bring out novel considerations regarding the components of the open territory and their relationship.

Town planning shows some delay in handling dynamics affecting urban fringes. However, more and more new urban agriculture initiatives spread out by inhabitants who recognize the potential of such as areas in terms of farm income and valuable resources. Recent experiences show that the recovery of the agricultural function, especially in urban and peri-urban area, can help to combat the consumption of soil and the spread of urbanization. Urban farming can also redevelop and improve the quality of open spaces, promoting new forms of solidarity economy, creating new employment, generating wide spread active citizenship behaviours and care of the land.

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1. The intermediate territories in the contemporary city

One of the prevailing dynamics of the transformation of the city of Rome consists in the continuing expansion. The extension of the city is one of the predominant characters of its metropolitan connotation (Indovina, 2011), recently confirmed administratively by the institution of the Metropolitan City of Rome as a territorial entity of large area (January, 2015).

In the city we are witnessing more and more frequently to an urban growth dominated by the dispersion and by the heterogeneity (Secchi, 2000). The image of the city is not compact and characterized by an alternation of built-up areas and open spaces of different nature. Urban dilatation becomes more evident as one moves away from the city centre, in its peripheral areas (Mattogno 2008).

These areas are intermediate territories, fringe areas with fragmented physical structure, where are juxtaposed, in an undifferentiated, large shopping malls, parking, technological equipments, multi-lane highways, houses and land plots, abandoned factories, sheds. But also there is an alternation of agricultural green spaces, like splinters, that wedged the city up to its historical and modern parts (Mattogno, 2009). In intermediate territories, we are witnessing, then, at an intersection between the urban dimension and agricultural dimension. So the countryside is no more separated from the city as in the past, but it is an integral part of it.

2. Rome: the countryside and the city

The relationship between agricultural and urban space is influenced by the deep connection that Rome has always had with its surroundings. The Roman countryside has always aroused strong emotions in painters, poets, and travelers. They have celebrated over time the grandeur of archaeological features, the peculiar character of the landscape, carved by streams and volcanic incisions, used mainly for wild grazing. In the past, the Roman countryside was a place dominated by the oppressive presence of large estates and extended malarial areas, which generated strong conditions of oppression and poverty. After 1870 the first legal provisions were promulgated to undertake the land drainage and but the first practical steps were activated just in the early twentieth century. Since Rome became the capital of Italy, the agricultural land amounted to about 200,000 hectares. But, starting from this date, the social and economic relevance of the gradually declines. Among the reasons the fall in agricultural profitability, the specific structure of the agriculture property, which originates from the system of large agricultural estates, owned by aristocratic families and member of the clergy. In the same time there is a gradual contraction of agricultural areas in favor of an increasing urbanization. Especially between the '50 and '90 of the twentieth century, the countryside has been gradually destroyed by the construction of affordable housing, by real estate speculation, and spontaneous settlements. Right after World War II, the widest shrinking of agricultural land reaches its maximum peak. Although the city continues to be the largest European agricultural town, the area used for agricultural purposes is continuously decreasing. Now the agricultural areas account for the 28% of the territory. Among the large farms, Marcigliana Farm extends for about 4,480 hectares, Castel di Guido Farm about 2,000 hectares, and Massimi Farm about 868 hectares. Overall, about 39% of Roman farms are located in protected areas. Thus, the production local production capacity is combined with the high landscaping value (Dipartimento di Tutela ambientale e del Verde, Roma Capitale, 2011).

3. The connective capacity of the margin urban areas

The border between the city and the country (the intermediate territories), is ever-changing, is undefined and fragmented. Nowadays there is not more a strong boundary between the urban and rural, but only fringe areas (Dèzert, Metton, Steiberg, 1991).

City planning categorizes these fringe areas as part of the environmental system, without indicating specific regulations. The Urban expansion, in fact, consumes often edge areas, causing the disposal of agricultural traditions, land abandonment, environmental damage (Romano, 2013). Fringe areas, however, can be considered as new places with unexplored potential, including the ability to restore and re-establish landscape layers and their agricultural

origin (Mattogno, 2009). They are as fragments, which have accumulated storytelling, life patterns, memories, deep textures between past and present. In these places we can plan environmental recovery and encourage local production, reduce land consumption, design new public spaces, and improving the social context (Ferraresi, 2009). According to this perspective, the open spaces in the fringe areas have a strong connective ability. Indeed, they can become places of dialogue between the urban neighborhoods and landscape. They could combine urban life and agriculture. They provide enhance the ecological networks by “mending” disconnected urban areas, and recomposing dispersed social identities. The open space has been, until now, mainly regarded as something alien to the urban sphere: in the practice of designing, incorporate the territories into the urban plot have mainly meant operate in terms of densification. We must, however, new urban forms through the development of voids and open spaces. Like other urban materials, they have the ability to develop one of the essential processes to the base of the city consolidation, that of forming relations (Piazzini, 2012). A new dialogue between built areas and open spaces you can give a new meaning to urban areas without identity (Anselmi, 1998).

4. Transformations and Urban dynamics in intermediate territories: new agricultural practices in the San Basilio neighborhood

The fringe areas disclose two sets of problems: on one side they suffer the effects of real estate pressure and the progressive overbuilding, on the other side they show up a new potential in terms of innovative micro-transformations and vast participation of inhabitants. The northeast district of the city, between Nomentana road, the Big Ring Road (GRA, Grande Raccordo Anulare), and Tiburtina road is an emblematic case study of this main dynamics¹.

The area is characterized by settlements of affordable housing, very different in typology, years of construction and characteristics: the Village Unrra Casas, dating back to the immediate post-war period; the so-called “historic” neighborhood of San Basilio, completed between the Fifties and Sixties; the Zone “2V” Plan finished by the end of the Eighties, and the Torraccia neighborhood built in the Nineties with a geometric matrix tissue. Two large tracts of green space surround the different neighborhoods. The first is the Aguzzano Park² at the western edge. The other one that is not protected by any kind of measure consists of a large undeveloped area between the historic neighborhood of San Basilio, Torraccia district, and the GRA. Externally of the GRA, a wide country area, called Agro Romano, keeps some agricultural features (Carosi, Marcelli, 2008). These large open spaces are enriched by a wide dissemination of interstitial green spaces, owned by public institution and private properties. These, however, do not generate a real green system for the lack of a network of pedestrian and ecological connections. A renewal urban plan provides for regeneration actions by a specific implementation tool (Programma di Recupero Urbano n.2 San Basilio)³ (Fig. 1). It involves the construction of new housing, shops and office buildings, the expansion of factories, a subway stop, and two large parks, one in the north area (Nomentano Park) and one in the south (San Basilio Park). The underground project and the creation of two big green areas would undoubtedly improve the local quality of life and protect the environment. Nevertheless, the renewal plan also allows a considerable densification that involves an excessive decrease of land and the following alteration of ecological systems, the cancellation of its values and its original agricultural identity. The program expresses an urban vision in which, once again, the open spaces are transformed into built-up areas. Dating back to the Nineties it has not yet been realized (fortunately).

¹The territorial case is object of studies conducted within the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering of the Sapienza University of Rome and coordinated by Claudia Mattogno and Fabiola Fratini, professors of Urban Planning.

²The Aguzzano Regional Park was established in 1989 and covers an area of about 70 hectares and it has an original agricultural vocation (Roma Natura, 2016).

³The Urban Recovery Program (Programma di Recupero Urbano) is an implementation tool regulated by article 11 of Law 493 of 1993. It is characterized by the presence of affordable housing. For the implementation of interventions, this type of instrument is based on consultation between public and private subject.



Fig. 1. Urban Recovery Program n.2 San Basilio (Roma Capitale).

The proposal for an agricultural park. Bureaucratic delays have resulted in the lack of implementation of the program and made it possible to draw up alternative proposals. The most shared proposal⁴ that has emerged over the years has been the creation of an agricultural park, on the same area covered by the proposals for the completion of the Urban Recovery Program. The project of the agricultural park is based on specific targets: redesigning the peri-urban landscapes and green infrastructures, keeping the value of the open areas, developing new forms of economy and community-supported agriculture. The realization of this agricultural park can realize a green corridor with the Aguzzano Park and with the other green areas, and also protecting biological connection greatly at risk today. The park could be a place of common socialization between neighborhoods, allowing the connection between urban materials now characterized by extreme fragmentation.

Micro-transformations of green spaces. Besides to the proposed establishment of agricultural park, small interventions of punctual character show that the recovery of the original production function of the places can be considered an important process in order to re-create relationships between the parties or define new ones. On a border area of Unrra Casas neighborhood, residents have transformed an abandoned area into a garden with fruit and ornamental trees in whose shade they arranged rest areas and children's games. This space organization increases an environmental, functional and aesthetic regeneration of the site. So organized, the border area establishes a dialogue between urban and agricultural demands, between the built space and the most extensive agricultural areas of the Agro Romano. This space, moreover, has become the place where the agricultural function performed privately by the people within the gardens of their homes took on a collective role. In this space, the city and the countryside draw a new picture of public space. Even in this case, therefore, the open space becomes material of communication not only between different territorial instances but also between people (Fig. 2).

⁴ Alternative proposals to spatial planning outlined by the Urban Recovery Programme have been made in the laboratories of Urbanism 1, coordinated by Claudia Mattogno and Fabiola Fratini, together with the inhabitants and local associations.



Fig. 2. Rome, San Basilio: small gardens along the border of the neighborhood (Photos of the authors).

The establishment of new relationships with the agriculture landscape is the focus of other forms of urban agriculture. On the border area of San Basilio Zone Plan, residents have organized areas of urban allotments. Their presence promotes the recovery actions of the original agricultural function and the establishment of new shared identities. However, in this case, the absence of an appropriate regulation for the management and the organization of the allotments generates of misappropriation conditions of space. However, experience has allowed the functional reorganization of degraded and derelict area. The importance of networks and productive local functions in the new planning process

The open spaces and the recovery of the local productive function have, therefore, the potential to build or rebuild new relationships, precisely because of the undeveloped state of these areas and the value of their environmental, ecological and landscape.

The recovery of local productive function has the potential to restore the territory relationships, connections and links through environmental, ecological and landscape values of open spaces. Moreover, the described experiences show that these experience always involve different components of urban landscape.

In fact, the urban landscape is characterized by an intersection of different networks: ecological, historical, cultural, social, perceptual and functional (Pavia, 2003). For this reason, the ability to connect of the open spaces must involve the various networks.

The sustainability of the relationships that are re-established through the presence of these areas depends heavily on the ability and capacity to realize a system between the different networks (Finotto, 2007) as inseparable parts of a single dimension.

In the city of Rome, the planning processes still tend, primarily, to urban densification. However, the practices of certain groups of people advancing new land conservation bodies and implementing actions in order to protect the open spaces. According to this perspective, the recovery of the local productive function represents a key role. It becomes the main action that defines unusual conformations of the border urban areas, to search on them the deepest values and to put these value in connection with the surrounding urban context. The traces of the past, agricultural heritage, traditional values and underlying places become invaluable material for imagining new images and characterizations of urban fringe areas.

The Roman planning in recent years is trying to open up to the consideration of these issues through the establishment of a specific task force that are able to encourage all those processes aimed at protecting the territory. However, the traditional urban planning procedures need to be renewed so that the connective ability of open spaces can become a central objective of urban transformations.

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