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Public space and identity in decayed peri-urban areas

The Quarto Canal Basin North of Naples

EURAU'12

ABSTRACT. Subjected to strong anthropic pressure, peri-urban areas are rapidly being transformed. Some of them are likely to be affected by outstanding decay. The agricultural use of soils, which had outlined the territory, gradually drops off, and built areas appear as major or minor blots, which do not dialogue with each other. Public space is no longer everyone's space, but rather nobody's space. This is the picture of the loss of any kind of identity, collective memory and of any idea of city, territory or landscape. The loss of identity causes an increase of decay. A case study of these phenomena is represented by the area North-West of the metropolis of Naples. This territory has lost its agricultural landscape identity and has not achieved a new one, becoming thus a refused landscape. The Quarto Canal Basin has been the subject for a design of new scenarios that focus on the regaining and the re-design of public space.

KEYWORDS. public space, landscape design, regaining of identity.

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1. Features of peri-urban areas and the loss of identity¹

Many adjectives have been used during the past fifty years to define peri-urban areas that characterize the European landscape. We have heard of widespread, scattered, sprawled, endless, infinite, discontinuous, global, exploded, extensive ... cities; all terms that refers to areas, which are subjected to strong anthropic pressure, to rapid transformations and, often, to remarkable decay phenomena. The urbanization of these areas takes place in territories that were formerly endowed with specific identities, mostly connected to the agricultural use of soils and therefore to the plot of the agricultural landscape with its own rules, measures, structure. The use of these areas is often independent from any recognition of a sense of belonging to the place; new users occupy their space just because of the availability of low cost empty areas, irrespective of their possible formal value. Parcels are occupied, fenced, privatized and tend to be autistic towards the surrounding space, as regards both their use and form. The agricultural use of soils, which had outlined the territory, gradually drops off, and houses, factories, shopping centres appear as major or minor blots, which do not dialogue with each other. Each individual uses a space portion, irrespective of how other subjects use the surrounding surfaces. The unoccupied spatial extent belongs to nobody, and is often misused and abused, and the result is a wide decay. Public space is no longer everyone's space, but rather nobody's space. This is the picture of the loss of any kind of identity, collective memory and of any idea of city, territory or landscape. The loss of identity causes a progressive increase of decay and the feeling towards these areas, which was of indifference, ends to be of refusal, even for those who live there. A sort of schizophrenia arises between the need to use the territory and the want to stay detached from it. This happens even where the occupied territories display, besides the agricultural plot, further structural sign which could be used as regulating principles for a new growth. Among these there are, e.g., infrastructural tracks and new neighbourhoods.

A case study of these phenomena is represented by the area North-West of the metropolis of Naples, spanning the communes of Pozzuoli and Giugliano in Campania². It was a former marshy land which, owing to reclamation in the 1930's, was agriculturally plotted with a number of canals. In the decades following the reclamation, the area was strongly infrastructured (STENDARDO, 2010) with roads and railways and is nowadays delimited by an urban highway (North), the railway Rome-Naples (East), the Phlegraean Fields craters (South) and the Tyrrhenian sea (West). The southern boundary is underlined by a metropolitan railway, while two main roads cross the area from north to south: a National Road and, closer to the coast, the old Domitiana road. Together with the construction of the infrastructural network, a progressive increase of scattered building has taken place, which has ignored both the agricultural layout and the roads directions. When the high quality agricultural activity began to be abandoned, because of its poor profitability, and urban pressure started to increase, the agricultural landscape balance was broken. The hill sides were exploited as quarries, the reclamation canals were abused as open drains, many agricultural plots were illegally built over, the area was not endowed with any equipment (drains, schools, public buildings are missing) but a water purification plant serving the city of Naples, that owing to technical inefficiency, bad management and criminal organization intrusion, has caused remarkable damage to the environment. Later on, the dismissed quarries were used as junkyards. Such a decayed territory has lost its agricultural landscape identity and has not achieved a new one, becoming thus a refused landscape. In this physical and social context, the schizophrenia between the need to use the

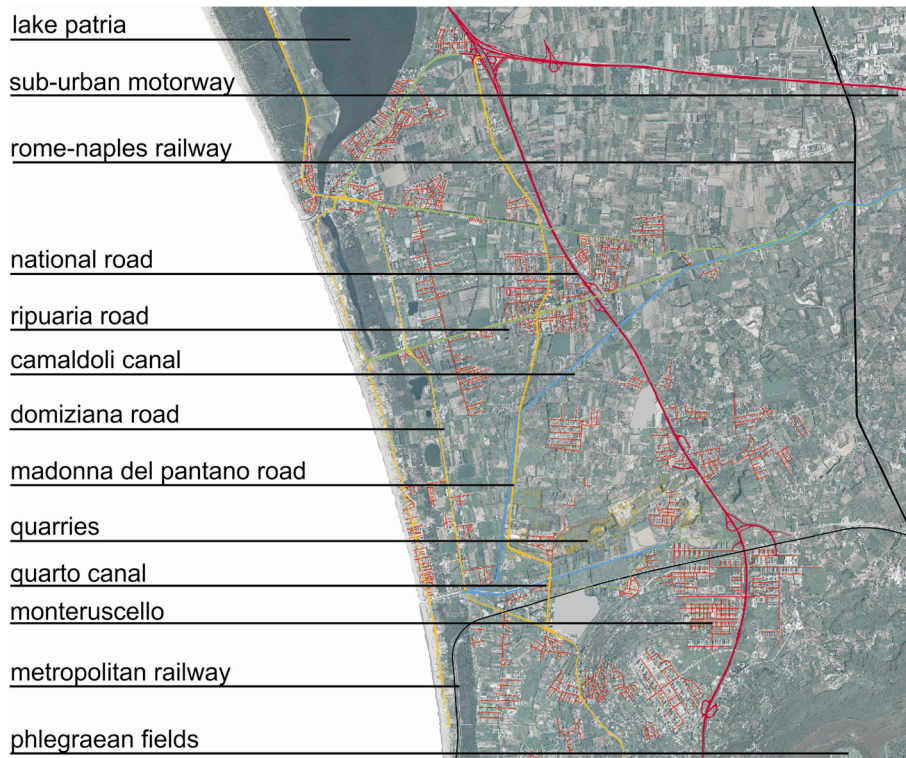


Fig. 1

territory and the want to stay detached from it, has favoured the building of the typical housing of the extensive city: groups of single family or semi-detached houses with a garden and small blocks of flats, fenced neighbourhoods, multi-storeyed residential buildings that arise in high landscape quality sites such as beaches. The new scattered city was built, ignoring the possible suggestions given by the layout of the new neighbourhood of Monteruscello, that was built following the seismic events which struck Pozzuoli in 1980. Monteruscello is located north of Pozzuoli on a hillside sloping towards the examined area, is crossed by the National Road and is delimited by a metropolitan railway at the foot of the hill. Monteruscello is a new town, thought in strong continuity with modern urban planning, it assumes the National Road as supporting axis for the urban layout. The town is laid onto a Hippodamian plot. Monteruscello is the last expression of a shared collective urban and territorial design.

The examined area can be read according to two different ways: on one side it is characterized by a homogeneous horizontal landscape, typical of the extensive city; on the other side a number of overlapped autonomous systems are readable: the agricultural, the infrastructural and the residential one which cause a state of fragmentation (D'AGOSTINO, 2010). Besides, the examined area displays different features in some parts of its territory, which are peculiarly marked by geography and landscape. In the western side a sequence of belts can be described, which are parallel to the coastline and where landscape is very peculiar. The first belt is made up by the beach, that is not perceptible because of the environmental decay of the

beach and of the sea, but also because of the high number of illegal building and difficulties of accessibility. The second belt, the Mediterranean dune, is a site where landscape has still a high quality. The next belt is crossed by the Domitiana road, a strongly decayed axis, that runs through a site where the plot of reclamation is still very remarkable and the few buildings are disposed according to the system of canals. Further eastward, the Madonna del Pantano road, a more winding way, separate the coastal plain from the inner heights. The land east from the Madonna del Pantano road is more densely built along the National Road, and elsewhere displays an extensive building.

If the fragmentation is the main feature of the examined area, the main purpose of the architectural design is to structure the landscape through the building of sites capable to create relationships among different element existing in the territory. The starting point is the acknowledgment of the formal value of the territory of the extensive city, where the horizontality of the agricultural plot with superimposed extensive buildings is now a consolidated landscape image. With regard to this image, the design works onto public space to introduce hierarchies, to build remarkable and recognizable sites. Thus, in the examined area, three east-west oriented belts can be described, where the homogeneous and isotropic features of the extensive city can be interpreted and re-structured, while using landscape elements as project materials: the agricultural plot, the canals, the infrastructural axes.

Starting from north, the first belt lies along the sub-urban motorway. Here the large infrastructure, which often runs as an overpass, can become the place for building public space. The second belt is situated in the middle of the examined area and develops starting from a National road junction with the Ripuaria road. The belt enlarges westward as a delta. Here the design of public space aims to connect different systems (National Road, urban fabric, beach). The third belt lies downstream of the sloping plan of Monteruscello, along the Quarto Canal. In this case the design of public space starts from the re-interpretation of geographical and infrastructural features: the large dismissed quarry on the east side, the canal, and the water purification plant on the south side.

2. The design of public space and the regaining of identity³

The area of the Quarto Canal Basin is conceived as a large park, capable to accommodate different uses. The main purpose is to design the territory form, in order to stop and prevent decay phenomena and to give public space back to the community.

The basic concept is the transformation, as far as possible, of decay into resource, and therefore the sense of underground alienism – which the legal or illegal immigrant and the local share – into a sense of citizenship. The people must regain possession of the public space, and transform the sense of extraneousness into a sense of belonging. In the same way, the offence and the injury can be sublimated into a meaningful sign, endowed with historical and aesthetic value, i.e. into a monument.

The actualization of this principle takes into consideration concepts, tools and materials. In the course of history, the different forms of space, have been coherent with views of the world belonging to cultural communities, which were set in defined spatial and temporal context. These views were acknowledged by the people, that – in spite of differences in class, health and education – would share their identity. The city of stone was the expression of a *civitas*, a community of

cives, that was, after Alessandro Manzoni – *una d'arme, di lingua, d'altare, / di memorie, di sangue e di cor*⁴. Besides, the form of territory, corresponding to a sole culture, has been defined, through times, according to separate and often mutually exclusive uses (hence the sharp separation between the city and the countryside). Nowadays the territory inhabited by different people who use it in different ways. Different cultures, spaces, times coexist, develop independently from one another and come across each other. History is not set along a unique straight timeline, but along a set of mixed broken lines, with varying widths, that alternatively reject or attract each other, mutually avoid or intersect, finally melt themselves together for some stretch, to split again into hybrid curves. Time hasn't just one direction; speeds are changeable and so are accelerations. Whereas countless individual memories would correspond to a single collective memory, nowadays many collective memories stratify, at first impermeable, one over another, overlapping along larger or smaller contact surfaces. Then, the collective memories mutually intersect, leak their humours, get mixed up, as liquid as the society that produces them. What is known and given for granted by one group, is unknown and inaudible for others; the very same event can be tragedy, pain, offence for some people, and victory, joy, satisfaction for others, and finally nuisance, boredom, indifference for someone else.

The preservation of the differences, along with the cancellation of the conflicts, is an Utopian purpose for a society where there be neither winners nor losers, where hostility be replaced by solidarity, distrust by knowledge, indifference by participation. Nevertheless, in the shift from unity to multiplicity, the strength of Utopia pushes towards an increase of perception, audibility, mutual acknowledgment of different collective memories and towards an exponential strengthening of possible relationships. The shift from unity to multiplicity implies an availability to not expectable relationships, along with the shift from the close to the open, from the whole to the fragment, from the finite to the infinite, from the commensurable to the incommensurable. These considerations have matches in the field of territorial composition.

The *forma urbis* of the historical western city was defined through sets of elements that established hierarchic and bijective relationships. The typological units of basic buildings would form morphologically defined urban blocks. Urban fabrics were crossed by a layout of streets, and primary elements were illustrative expressions of the settling principles that ruled the city. The endless variations of forms, connections, hierarchies have generated an extraordinary wide atlas of urban forms. Nevertheless, in spite of the differences, comparative classifications show the mutual match between different sets of elements in the historical city; each one is complementary to the other. With due exceptions, all the elements of urban composition – which are, at first, partially inherited from the agricultural territory – find their exact place, perfectly slotting into each other in a coherent whole. In the *forma* – that after the Latin acceptance is also *beauty* – of the historical city, each single part and the whole do correspond, according to the principle of *concinnitas* described by Leon Battista Alberti (ALBERTI, 1485). In this finite and closed form, nothing can be added or subtracted. All possible modifications are already foreseen inside a given set of rules and are, generally, reduced to the possibility of saturation. Beyond saturation, the growth of historical city goes on by addition of new neighbourhoods or by means of traumatic operations, that establish a new order and new hierarchies, to whom pre-existing elements must comply. One of the most interesting attempt to break the rule of bijective complementarity between sets of elements was the *murder* of the *rue corridor*, along with the breaking of the connection between the parcel perimeter and the linear building that lies along the heliothermic axis. Nevertheless the breaking of the typo-morphological unit of the urban block erases an existing connection but does not create a new one.

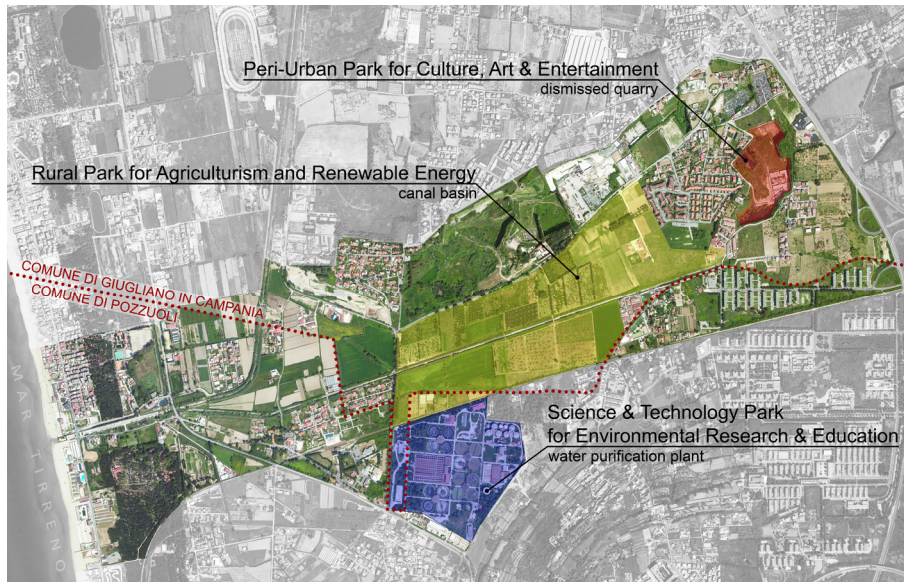


Fig. 2

At the basis of the project for the area there is the aspiration to design a form of a contemporary territory where sets of elements are capable to establish more sets of relationships at the same time. The project – still having among its premises a thought on the organization of territory that is linked to contemporary culture along with political and social issues – is an architectural design, a project of the form of territory and not of its political management. The project uses the very tools of territorial and architectural composition. The used elements and materials are collected either from inside the project area or from the reservoir of architectural and urban elements.

In the whole Quarto Canal Basin area, the project focuses on three peculiar sub-areas, that are homogeneous as for morphological and functional features, and the park is divided into three parts: the Peri-urban Park for Culture, Art and Entertainment, situated in the dismissed quarry; the Science and Technology Park for Environmental Research and Education, in the water purification plant in Cuma; the Rural Park for Agriculturism and Renewable Energy, along the Quarto Canal.⁵

Accessibility to the park is provided by an infrastructural system composed of a metropolitan railway and several perimetrical roads to which are added: a number of parking lots; a system of internal public transport through electric shuttles, an electric car/van sharing service, a bike sharing service, horse rental, bike- and horse-lanes, and equipped paths for pedestrians.

The design of the park inside the dismissed quarry, inherits at first the layout of the former agricultural plot, that was deleted by the opencast mining, and that is still readable in the surroundings plots; nevertheless the grid, that would frame the urban form and unify the relationships between the elements, is erased in favour of an autonomy of the axes that would draw it. Geography was modified by the action of digging, that shaped a high sheer edge, bare rock scratched by the track of the digging machineries, on the east front, and a gentler slope on the western hillside. The quarry has two entrances: from above, through long ramps, excavated along



Fig. 3

the rock face, and from below, through paths joining the quarry to the agricultural area. Inner paths are located at different heights and allow to watch the landscape from different points of view. Each of the four axes – that, unbound from the former grid, run through the quarry from north to south – looks for its own peculiar relationship with the inner space of the quarry, the surrounding landscape and the architecture. These are rooms, generated by actions on the quarry inner surface, dialoguing with the different forms of the surface. Along the western rock face, big solid block-rooms, together with minor fragments, detached from the rocky front, are displayed in order to form a thicker fabric and give shape, as a negative, to the first axis, the most urban one, endowed with major interiority. The block-rooms accommodate an open-air *cavea*, a covered *auditorium*, minor halls for chamber music and several recording studios. In the central area, at the bottom of the quarry, the tank-rooms are shaped by portions of soil that are pressed down or lifted up until they detach from the bottom floor. The tank-rooms accommodate a creative centre where there are artists' ateliers, showrooms and stores. Above the tank-rooms, a second axis runs outwards, looking at the urban landscape on the built northern hillside of Monteruscello. This metaphysically featured axis, detached from both soil and buildings, runs faster southward and, after going over the undulated green strips covering a cultural and documentation centre, ends all of a sudden when the outside landscape is no longer perceptible and you get in the bushes where parking-lot-rooms are cut out; at its northern end the axis bends upwards and forms a slim tower, a visual pivot in the quarry. Further westward, slower again, a third winding path allows an exploration of the quarry space from



Fig. 4

different points of view, while linking garden-rooms, which are partly excavated in the gentle slope and partly projecting downwards as terraces. The last path, faster again, brushes the inner space of the quarry, while running halfway up the hillside along the contour line, snaking across hall-rooms excavated in the steep slope, which accommodate sport equipments.

South of the area, the water purification plant of Cuma, is bound to become a Science and Technology Park. The plant displays a very neatly drawn layout, with green, rectangular plots, occupied by large circular tanks. The nearly military guarded plant is surrounded by walls and high railings. The project aims to open the park outwards and to find formal and functional relationships with the agricultural park and with the little village of Licola, north-west from the plant. After an environmental rehabilitation and the installation of odour-control systems, the projects aims to work at the perimeter of the plant and then in the inner space, arranging paths and providing equipments, in order to make the plant enjoyable for the locals, for scholars and for pupils, so to prevent the present continuous abuse against environment.

In order to design the Park for Agriculturism, situated in the belt along the Quarto Canal, sets of elements are used, which are typical of the construction of rural areas and historical cities: the surfaces of fields; the lines of the crossing axes; the points of a system of isolated architectural elements. Even in this case, the different systems of elements do not slot into each other in order to give shape to a blocked whole, but overlap one onto the other on different layers, keeping their

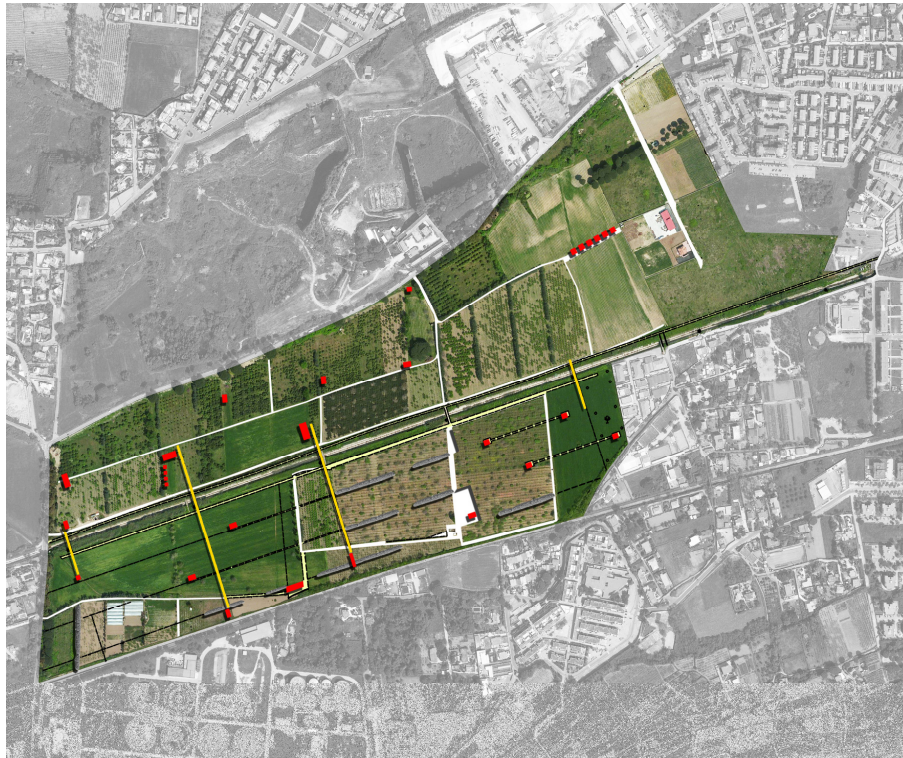


Fig. 5

autonomy. The layer of fields lies as a background for the other two systems that cross over it. The layer of lines, composed of canals, rows of trees, paths, footbridges that span over the central canal, is a system which measures and draws directions through the agricultural park and allows the crossing both on foot and by means of light electric vehicles. Together with the central canal banks, these lines make a skeleton that supports equipments for sport, leisure, market. The third layer is composed of a sole kind of architecture and makes up a peculiar system of monuments. Each architecture is made through a shallow and wide earth box, which is excavated from the width of soil and lifted up to. These suspended architectures are the sole elements that are perceptible to those who walk through the agricultural plain – that has no depth of field – and stand as measuring and orienteering points inside the perimeter defined by the skylines of surrounding heights. Underneath the suspended soils, semi-hypogeous spaces are shaped, where the ground line of the surrounding fields becomes the horizon and the flat plain gains a new width. The hypogeous spaces accommodate housing, equipments, manufactures, restaurants, stores, spaces for education and leisure. The suspended volumes are shaped as shallow open boxes, trays of memories, that support the exhibition of material history. The earth itself, cut up and exhibited, becomes a monument. Some of the trays are nothing else but pieces of living orchards, gardens, fields exhibited as expression of the agricultural identity of the park. Other trays contain different memories, tell different stories. One of them collects the hulks of the boats of the immigrants who shipwrecked along the Italian coasts; on another one, the shells of old cars, removed from the nearby illegal

junkyards, are displayed; another tray holds the rubble of illegal building, finally knocked down from the nearby beach; on top of another tray the iron gates, railings, fences, barbed wires, that used to bar the entrance of public spaces, get rusty and rotten.

The large quarry, a scar in the hillside, the water purification plant, sewage and miasma tanks, the fragments of cultivated or offended fields, become the landmarks of contemporary territory. Architecture is the building of scattered monuments that give shape to territory, remind and warn; monuments where those citizen of a community of differences can recognize themselves as well as other people, their history, their memories, intersecting across each other. Being citizen does not mean being all of the same kind, it means having all equal rights.

¹ Text by A. D'Agostino.

² This area has been studied in the PRIN 2007-09 (National Importance Research Project) *Landscape Design for Refused Sites*, and at present is one of the case study in the PRIN 2009-11 *Form Urbanized Countryside to Expanding City*.

³ Text by L. Stendardo.

⁴ *One in arms, in language, in religion, / in memories, in blood and in heart*, A. Manzoni, *Marzo 1821*, vv. 31-32.

⁵ The principles dealt with in this paper and the following design concepts have been given as guidelines for three graduation thesis, that are being developed at the Master Degree in Engineering/Architecture at the University 'Federico II', as follows: R. Candela, *Park for Culture*; D. Celeste, *Rural Park*; I. Mazzante, *Science & Technology Park*.

Legends

Fig. 1 _ The Plain North-West of the Metropolis of Naples

Fig. 2 _ The Quarto Canal Basin Park

Fig. 3 _ Peri-urban Park for Culture, Art and Entertainment

Fig. 4 _ Science & Technology Park for Environmental Research and Education

Fig. 5 _ Rural Park for Agriculturism and Renewable Energy

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