City, Landscape, Infrastructure.
Experimental fields
in the dispersed metropolis

Urbe, Paisaje, Infraestructura.
Campos experimentales en la metrópolis dispersa

ELIANA SARACINO

Abstract

The reactivation interventions of peripheral urban stations represent an important opportunity for urban regeneration and, more generally, offer a significant case study to develop reflections on the contemporary city dimension, on the meaning of public space, and on the role of urban design. The linear infrastructural system that spreads throughout the territory, the marginal spaces between the islands of the dispersed city, and the nodes that interconnect them constitute the urban materials at our disposal to trigger broader transformations on the territory and to define new relationships among city, landscape, and infrastructure.

From this perspective, Rome and its peri-urban landscape offer an exceptional testing ground. At the porous boundary between city and countryside, Rome reveals its distinctive metabolic capacity, where the remains of different eras, both natural and artificial, are constantly reused and reinterpreted by the communities that inhabit them, leading to the emergence of alternative forms of urbanity. Rome demonstrates, in its chaotic and imperfect nature and in the informality of some of its processes, how the interstitial space generated and discarded by the city itself is a valuable space as an urban reserve for experimentation, within which to reconfigure the fragmentation of urban fabrics and social relationships.

Keywords

Infrastructure; Landscape; Public space; Densification; Urban metabolism; Rome

Resumen

Las intervenciones para la reactivación de las estaciones urbanas periféricas representan una importante oportunidad de regeneración urbana y, en general, ofrecen un caso de estudio significativo para reflexionar sobre la dimensión de la ciudad contemporánea, sobre el significado del espacio público y sobre la función del proyecto urbano. El sistema lineal de infraestructuras que se propaga por el territorio, los espacios marginales entre las islas de la ciudad dispersa y los nodos que las conectan constituyen el material urbano del que disponemos para activar transformaciones más amplias en el territorio y definir nuevas relaciones entre ciudad, paisaje e infraestructura.

Desde esta perspectiva, Roma y su territorio periurbano ofrecen un campo de prueba excepcional. En el límite poroso entre ciudad y campo, Roma muestra su especial capacidad metabólica, en la que los residuos, naturales y artificiales, de diferentes épocas han sido reutilizados e interpretados constantemente por las comunidades que los habitan, haciendo emerger formas alternativas de urbanidad. Roma muestra, en su naturaleza caótica e imperfecta y en la informalidad de algunos de sus procesos, cómo el espacio intersticial generado y desechado por la ciudad misma es un espacio valioso como reserva urbana para la experimentación, donde rearticular la fragmentación de los tejidos urbanos y las relaciones sociales.

Palabras clave

Infraestructura; Paisaje; Espacio público; Densificación; Metabolismo urbano; Roma

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Dispersion, space, time. A framework

The crisis of the Fordist economic model, which very clearly defined the development of the modern city, together with the transition to a global economy, have triggered processes that have progressively led to the overcoming of the previous compactness of the urban dimension. Globalisation, the breaking down of distances, the increasing acceleration of travel, and the spread of digital networks, have compressed the sense of space and time[1] and dissociated interaction from physical proximity, making direct encounters with the other unnecessary. The improvement of communications, both physical and virtual, has enabled the development of a dispersed, discontinuous and heterogeneous territory, definitively eroding the historical attributes and a measure of the city's functioning. Urban growth has thus become completely detached from the physical dimension in favour of a hyper-connected space[2], profoundly altering the relationship between community, identity and territory.

In fact, while up to a certain point in urban history the community corresponded exactly to a specific place and was based on certain shared concepts (personal relations, hierarchy, welfare, etc.), when the territory fragmented exponentially and commodification replaced relationships, it too disintegrated and de-spatialised, defining itself with principles (competition, individualism, and consumption) that seem to renounce collective improvement in favour of individual survival. Despite this spatial and social fragmentation, the daily practices and rituals of the global city foster forms of light sociability[3], through which post-modern tribes[4] build solid and temporary emotional ties, generating new forms of communal association around partial, transitory, and de-spatialised interests: the concept of community thus becomes open and changeable, producing forms of aggregation with a more complex spatial relationship, not necessarily tied to proximity, and which therefore allow for multiple memberships. By relying on transversal ties, independent of economic, social, political, or spatial constraints, they thus give rise to unprecedented exchanges and intersections that reproduce one of the city's founding characteristics, that of the encounter with the other, restoring that aspect of unpredictability partly lost in the socio-spatial dynamics of the postmodern city.

In this dispersed and fragmented context, infrastructural systems organise and measure the territory, creating connections between different places, which are put in communication regardless of their physical distance, diminishing the importance of the concept of proximity in favour of accessibility. Holding together the territorial scale and the local scale, the material city of places and the immaterial city of flows represent the ordering elements of the diffuse city and allow the *homo mobilis*[5], the nomadic citizen of the post-metropolis, to construct a personal narrative, based on his own mental map and the kinematic experience he makes of space. Infrastructural systems heavily influence space and land use; railway networks in particular almost always represent a missed opportunity: they are designed following strictly technical-functional logics, neglecting the opportunity to transform a wound into a landscape[6] and to truly integrate the infrastructure with the places it crosses. Acting as both an ordering and separating element, infrastructure overlays the territory, profoundly modifying its structure, causing a slow and radical transformation of the morphological balance, altering the relationship between the built fabric and open space. In their independence and impermeability, railway tracks produce otherness, separations, caesuras in urban and territorial continuity. Fractures in the landscape, whether urban or natural.

According to this reproductive logic, the urban fabric has relentlessly advanced over the territory through the simple juxtaposition of consecutive objects, generating an overlapping of spaces, unforeseen and unplanned, residual spaces often perceived as negative, unsafe and dangerous spaces, bringing environmental degradation.

1   David Harvey, *The condition of postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1989).

2   Edward William Soja, *Thirdspace* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996).

3   Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Cities* (Oxford: Polity, 2002).

4   Giandomenico Amendola, *La città postmoderna* (Roma: Laterza, 2005).

5   Georges Amar, *Homo mobilis* (Limoges: FYP éditions, 2016).

6   Alain Roger, "Vita e morte dei paesaggi", *Lotus International* 101 (1999): 83-90.

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Paisajes periurbanos
Peri-urban Landscapes

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Secchi[7] defines them as spaces between things and writes that "together, the city and the territory have become immense collections of objects tactically placed next to one another, mute [...]. The space *in-between things*, between objects and subjects next to one another [...] has become *empty* because it plays no recognisable role". Spatial residues are not immediately identifiable and decipherable. They are spaces suspended between what has been and the anticipation of what is possible; they constitute a pause in which we can perceive the parts of the city that rest upon them.

The railway line's intrinsic impermeability does not foster active interactions with the places it crosses; it gives rise to exchange dynamics exclusively at station nodes, points of osmosis between the linear, continuous, and territorial system of the infrastructure and the space, urban or natural, left suspended by the development of the diffuse city. Until the last decade of the last century, train and bus stations were conceived as monofunctional urban elements, dedicated solely to transportation. They often brought disvalue, generating non-places without identity, places of caesura and marginalisation, indifferent to context and urban dynamics. The redefinition of interconnection points between the system of networks and the system of spaces represents today a resource of very high potential. The node is the propeller of a regenerative catalysis of the surrounding urban texture; in fact, it possesses both a centripetal force, as a catalyst of activities, density and urban functions by virtue of its high accessibility, and a centrifugal force, an activating pole from which may reverberate processes of urban regeneration extended even to the surrounding areas.

Therefore, the linear infrastructural system spread throughout the territory, the marginal spaces between the islands of the dispersed city, and the nodes that interconnect them constitute the urban materials at our disposal to trigger broader transformations in the dispersed and de-spatialised metropolis. These are places that, by combining the territorial and local dimensions, can rearticulate fragmentation, defining new relationships between city, landscape, and infrastructure. The challenge lies in elevating these places from a condition of invisibility to paradigmatic examples of urban space, unconventional spaces, rich in meaning, where the contemporary mobile citizenry can develop alternative forms of belonging, rootedness, and identity.

Crossing landscapes: traces for a peri-urban laboratory

Rome is a paradigmatic case of a form of city in which these processes and the types of spatiality that arise from them are still evident. The city seen from above is recognisable by some strong signs, extremely visible: the inner city, dense and stratified, flanked with continuity by pre- and post-unification expansions; the Tevere river, a sinuous watercourse that crosses it from north to south, reaching the sea; the radial system of Roman infrastructures, the road network which is still today the backbone of the city's mobility, and the less visible network of aqueducts, overlaid by the railway network that confirms its directionality; the Grande Raccordo Anulare[8], a circular motorway forming a contemporary osmotic city wall; the large natural spaces that wedge into the urban form, particularly the archaeological park of the Appia Antica to the southeast, and the crown of parks on the edge of the modern city[9]. Beyond these clear elements, the expansions of the last century up until today, in an impressive qualitative decline and structural fragility, fragment, often clustering discontinuously around the radial network of infrastructures, which have thickened so much as to generate deep, physical, and perceptual ruptures. The expansions polarise into islands that, like an archipelago, float among the vegetal remains of the Roman countryside. A countryside increasingly unrecognisable due to urban erosion but which, at the same time, emphasises the distance and alienation of the latter from the city.

Until 1870, the city was little more than a rural village (figure 1). Sparsely populated and thinly inhabited[10], it found itself having to respond extremely quickly to the

7   Bernardo Secchi, "Un'urbanistica di spazi aperti", *Casabella* 597-598 (1993): 5-9.

8   The Grande Raccordo Anulare (GRA) is the ring road that circumscribes Rome and onto which the national motorway network converges. Inaugurated in the early 1950s, the areas crossed were in the Roman countryside, well beyond the boundaries of the built-up city, and its circumference marked the limit of the land to be reclaimed. Today it is largely overtaken by archipelago expansions.

9   These are the remnants of the crown of *villas* and *horti* of late Republican and Imperial Rome, partly inherited by the great noble families in later centuries.

10 The settlement was largely contained within the Aurelian walls. Rome had only 210,000 inhabitants in 1871 and 2,800,000 in 1981, confirmed in 2021 (data by ISTAT, the Italian National Institute of Statistics).

Figure 1. Topographic map of the Roman countryside. *Carta topografica della parte più interessante della Campagna di Roma*, engraving by Giovanni Battista Cipriani based on a drawing by Giovanni Enrico Westphal, 1827.
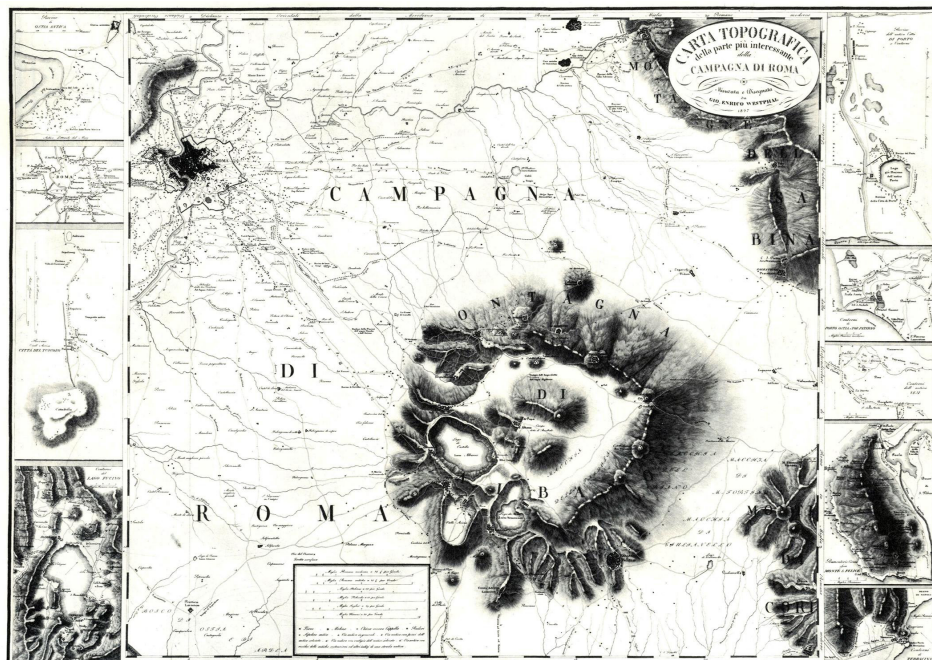
needs arising from its designation as capital of the newly unified nation[11]. This event meant, on the one hand, the creation of spaces intended to accommodate all the new administrative functions (ministries, offices, hospitals, universities, etc.) and, on the other, housing for the massive influx of new citizens, both those from the bourgeois employer class, for whom the existing housing stock was insufficient and qualitatively inadequate, and the working classes, attracted to the capital by job opportunities linked to the construction sector. The development of the modern city has effectively rewarded the alliance between land rent and financial capital. Official planning chased private speculative impulses, authorised from time to time in the name of emergency with conventions, exceptions, and amnesties, and was unable to define the new (or at least *a*) vision and form of the city. The dynamic was essentially always the same: real estate speculation anticipated the birth of new autonomous settlements, far from the city centre, polarising the direction of expansion; in order to reach them, public services had to cross large portions of undeveloped areas, whose value increased exponentially; shortly thereafter, these too were densified and welded more or less compactly to the distant settlements to the city. At the same time, informally, the working poor, expelled from the bourgeois city, moved further and further outside, in shacks in the abandoned lands of the nearest countryside or in spontaneous *borgate*, small clusters of illegal housing, devoid of any rules and services, usually along the radial infrastructural system (the consular roads and railway lines, or along canals and waterways), in a topographical and social distancing. The *borgate* could only survive thanks to external sources of labour, since being extremely poor ghettos they could not be self-sustaining; instead, sustenance was ensured by the needs of the bourgeois city, for which it was necessary to have small local services, offered by the working class; but both social classes shared the same space. By expelling one of them, the reciprocal relationship between the city and the social fabric is broken, marking more and more the gap between the bourgeois city and the periphery, which is becoming increasingly difficult to reabsorb into a normal planning framework[12]. While the underlying motivation may have changed, today these trends are confirmed in a condition common to many large centralising cities: urban expansion phenomena are no longer linked to demographic pressure, but to spatial reorganisation processes involving economic activities and services - many of which are related to tourism - that continue to concentrate in the central areas, perpetuating de facto the expulsion of inhabitants and social and economic networks from the urban centre, upon which they nevertheless continue to depend.

11 For a comprehensive description of the modern development of the city, see Italo Insolera's studies on modern Rome, in particular the recent expanded edition, Italo Insolera and Paolo Berdini, *Roma moderna* (Torino: Einaudi, 2024).

12 Since the 1980s, specific recovery plans began to rehabilitate illegal plots by providing network services and social amenities.
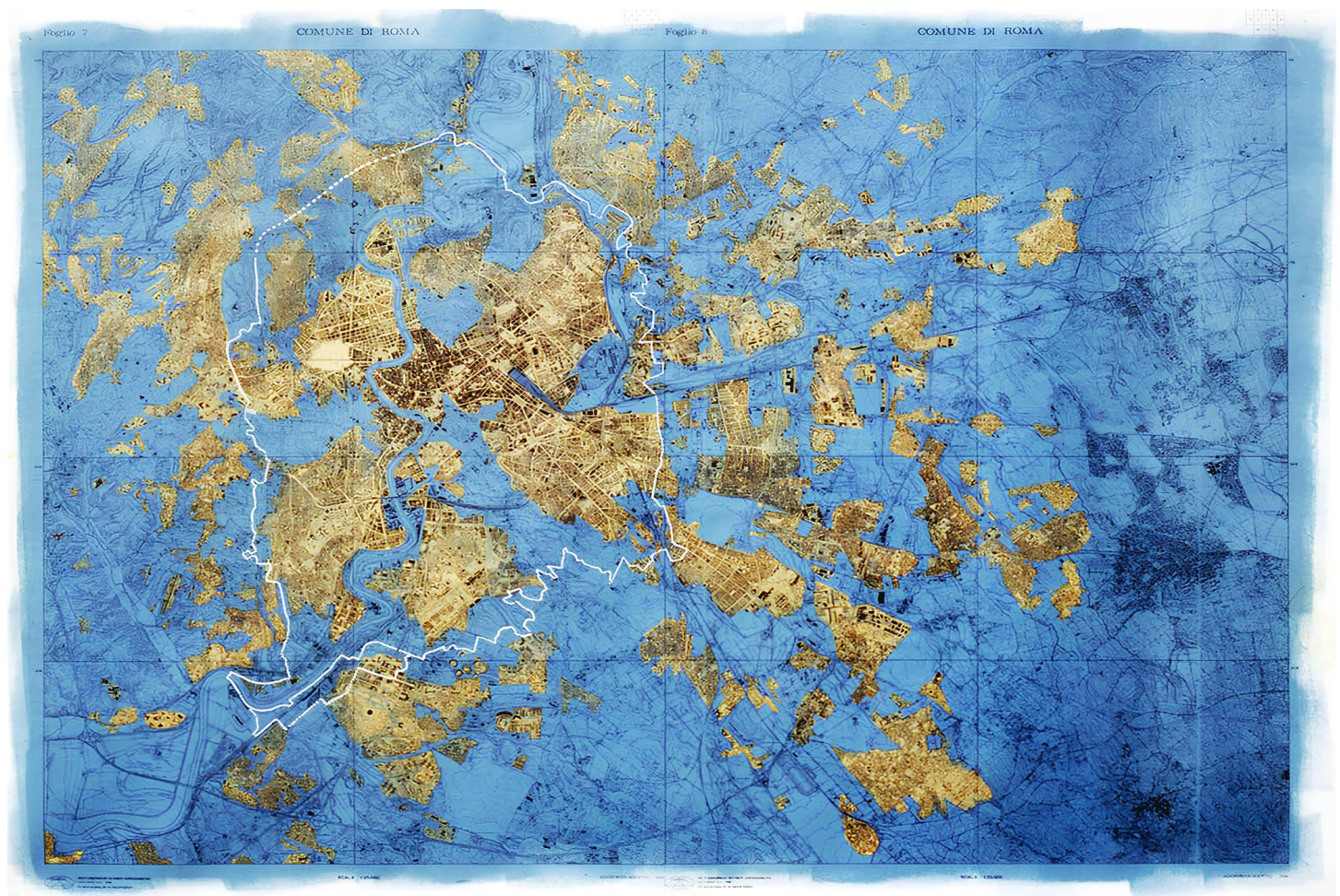
Figure 2. Stalker, *Stalker attraverso i territori attuali, 5-9 Ottobre 1995 / Stalker through the actual territories, 5-9 October 1995*, acrylic on map, 1995.

13 Stalker is a neo-situationist collective that, by walking about 60 kilometres through the interstitial areas of Rome, has produced a psychogeographic map of these places.

14 The documentary film by Gianfranco Rosi is based on the book by Nicolò Bassetti and Sapo Matteucci, *Sacro romano GRA* (Macerata: Quodlibet; Milano: Humboldt, 2013).

15 Franco Purini, "Memorie verdi", *Lotus International* 157 (2015): 4-25.

16 The subject was studied in the Architectural Design Studio 3M (a.y. 2022-23 and 2023-24) of the MSc in Architecture of the Università degli Studi Roma Tre.

17 Many films shot in the post-war period depict urban marginalization phenomena and living conditions in the shacks. Many of these shantytowns appeared in the arches of the aqueducts, where hundreds of families found refuge, against the backdrop of a city that was beginning to transform. Particularly effective is Pier Paolo Pasolini's narrative in *Mamma Roma* (1962), filmed precisely in this area of the city.

These dynamics have therefore defined the socio-political characteristics of the city and have spatially generated a system of urban sprawl, effectively visible in the cartographic narrative elaborated by Stalker[13] in the mid-1990s (figure 2), which identifies, through direct experience, the interstitial and continuous spaces existing between the different islands of built city. A narrative confirmed in numerous literary and cinematographic works, from Federico Fellini's *Roma* (1972), in which the GRA – recently completed – is depicted as a segment through which the entire city is narrated, to *Sacro GRA* (2013), which explores the fragmentation of the territory, from whose interstices emerges, at the same time, the richness of an informal and unexpected city[14]. A discontinuous city, like the marble fragments of Piranesi's Forma Urbis, which finds in the vegetal mosaic, in the original ground that emerges and at the same time sinks[15], the element of unity.

In the southeast sector of the city, the stratification of these processes is still very clearly visible. Along a thirteen-kilometre line (figure 3) that extends from the centre of Rome towards the southeast, following the direction of the via Appia Antica and two urban railway lines, one crosses consolidated city, industrial districts, diffuse city, *borgate*, fragments of the Roman countryside, archaeological areas, reaching as far as the Grande Raccordo Anulare. It is a horizontal coring, an ideal sample of cases and landscapes to verify the processes described so far[16].

Leaving the city centre and Roma Termini behind, through the window, the discontinuous and porous boundary between the park of Via Appia and the peripheral urban fabric emerges, between ancient and contemporary infrastructure. The ancient consular roads Appia and Latina are still structural axes of urban mobility. The ancient aqueducts, before they begin to stand out in the landscape, merge with the urban fabric, as is evident at Mandrione and Porta Furba, in spaces that, as vividly shown by the masters of neorealist cinema[17], have always welcomed the informal settlements of those progressively expelled from the right to the city (figure 4). Then the railways, fences, and empty spaces of contemporaneity delineate the image of an evolving territory, where past and present intertwine.

Figure 3. Extract of landscapes. Radial section of Roman territory developing south-eastward, along the direction of the via Appia (in the middle, horizontally) and along two urban railway lines, between the city centre and the GRA.

One traverses building fabrics made of low and medium-rise houses with high density and small productive settlements; Appio-Pignatelli and Statuario emerge as fragments of spontaneous cities, where urban dynamics have developed freely and unconventionally; then more structured settlement fabrics, such as the great densification of Tuscolano and Cinecittà. Where the railway line bifurcates, the train skirts the popular settlements of the INA-Casa[18] (figure 5) designed by Libera, De Renzi, and Muratori, which demonstrate how, through careful overall planning, a varied and complex urban landscape can be produced, reinterpreting the characteristics of domestic architecture.

Immediately afterwards, once again the gaze opens up to the Roman countryside, dotted with the traces of history and the signs that testify to how humans have interacted with the territory in the various epochs. The Torre del Fiscale (figure 6), a punctiform vertical element, and the linear and massive signs of the Roman and Renaissance aqueducts stand out in the landscape of the Roman countryside and, together with the rows of pines and the dense groups of trees (figure 7), provide orientation in the vast horizontal field. They provide a measure to the landscape. As the train approaches the Torricola-GRA station (figure 8), the landscape changes once again. The Grande Raccordo Anulare, perhaps the most significant sign that contemporaneity has left on Rome, creeps into view, a boundary overlooked by urbanisation, perceived in the city's mental geography as the edge of the built environment, which it is not; a boundary beyond which the airport and the continuation of the Via Appia lead towards broader territorial dimensions, a tangible symbol of an increasingly connected and global world.

From the node to the potential territory

The Municipality of Roma Capitale, in agreement with RFI Rete Ferroviaria Italiana, plans to construct two new stations along the railway lines under consideration – Selinunte station, in the Quadraro area near the INA-Casa settlement, and Statuario

18 The INA-Casa was a state intervention plan, in force between 1949 and 1963, conceived by the Ministry of Labour to promote the revival of building industry and the absorption of a large number of unemployed through the construction of public housing throughout Italy.

Figure 4. The shacks under the arches of the Felice aqueduct, 1971.

Figure 5. Marginal area between the INA-Casa Tuscolano neighbourhood and the Appia Antica Archaeological Park (Tor Fiscale section).

Figure 6. Marginal area between the railways and the Archaeological Park. Beyond the train, in the background, is the Torre del Fiscale.

Figure 7. Appia Antica Archaeological Park: a row of pine trees and the Claudian aqueduct.

Figure 8. Area close to Torricola-GRA station.

19   The train takes approximately ten minutes from Torricola to Termini Station, and thus to the centre of Rome, compared to about thirty minutes by car, under normal traffic conditions.

station, near the eponymous borough – as well as to upgrade the existing Torricola-GRA station. This scenario presents interesting development prospects for the entire urban sector and raises reflections on the potential transformation of these areas. The three cases illustrate very different situations, representing the nodes of three distinct proximity scenarios. The first case, Selinunte, invites reflections of a predominantly urban nature, as it pertains to an area closely connected to a consolidated urban fabric, also served by the metro line. The second case, Statuario, raises the issue of reconnecting fragmented parts of the city, separated by both ancient and modern infrastructures, which can be linked through innovative ways of using the in-between space. Finally, Torricola brings up questions regarding the relationship with the Roman countryside and the reuse of abandoned buildings, while also offering the potential for multiscalar connections, linking the nearby airport on one side and the city centre on the other.

From an accessibility perspective, the planned intervention will connect an entire urban sector to the city centre within a few minutes, effectively enabling the experience of its multiscalar and polycentric dimensions[19]. At the same time, with regard to the rejoining of the dispersed city fabric, the porous space between neighbourhoods and infrastructure provide significant potential for experimenting with alternative models

20 See also the series Campagna Romana: *The Countryside of Ancient Rome* by american photographer Joel Sternfeld from the late 1980s.

of urbanity that can address contemporary challenges related to climate change and environmental sustainability, land management, and social cohesion.

Through the experience of the places, gradually losing oneself in those hybrid territories in transition between the urbanised and the natural, one discovers that they are far from inactive. Here, it is more evident than ever how the traces of ancient history, modern urbanisation, and spontaneous landscapes merge into a complex picture, a visual representation of the evolution of the city. And Rome, in its three millennia of life, shows us how stratification and reuse are the only constant rule in its growth. The city is constituted in its physical features as the result of a long process of sedimentation, almost of a metabolism of spaces and artefacts that, in the succession of historical phases, even with powerful jumps and discontinuities, were inherited from the past. The various urban elements have been built, used, modified, sometimes abandoned, plundered, and then again adapted, reused, and reintegrated into the fabric of everyday urban life. A perennial art of accumulation and repurposing, in which waste is continuously re-employed in a constant redesign of the city and its landscape, reinvented through the interplay of heterogeneous materials and distant epochs. This is still visible in the palaces and churches of the historic city, in the street system and building fabric, but also in the peri-urban territory (figure 9).

The strange realm between the infrastructure and the Piranesian islands of city is not a limit, but a space. In the seemingly indistinct void, places rich in vitality emerge, the product of a renewed relationship between public use, community, proximity, and accessibility. The adaptations that inhabitants make to the territory emerge in the creative reuse of artefacts that have lost their function[20]; they emerge in the faint traces of informal pathways that, by wearing down the vegetation, identify passages – depending on the case, the quickest, easiest, or nicest – that constitute a connective network tailored to the actual needs of the inhabitants; they emerge in autonomous, self-managed, and self-financed spaces, places of economic or cultural production, which find their existence within the folds of informality; they emerge in the traces of cared-for spaces, visible in the numerous shared gardens and orchards that foster new forms of collaboration and communal life; and they emerge in the evidence of sporting activities, more or less formalised, which determine unexpected collective uses in the in-between spaces (figure 10). These are the traces of new forms of relationships and networks of horizontal subsidiarity. They are the signs that the light

Figure 9. New uses in the Aqueduct Park.

Figure 10. Informal uses in the peri-urban landscape.

forms of community leave on the territory, showing how the city still resists and its inhabitants respond autonomously to their new needs, to which the long timeframe of planning cannot provide an adequate response.

Predictably, these dynamics of reappropriation and resignification of places, which already occur spontaneously in the current context, could be amplified by the increased attractiveness resulting from the construction or renovation of local stations: these can be not only a point of departure and arrival, but can also fulfil the role of a public space that meets the collective needs of the metropolitan nomadic citizen, for whom, in the overcoming of the defined and predetermined rhythmic setting of *home-work-leisure*, public space becomes a place for voluntary activities rather than necessities. In this sense, the stations respond to the way contemporary city life unfolds across multiple dimensions (temporal, spatial, functional), possessing an inherent capacity to create intensity and congestion, they fit seamlessly and organically into the daily use and travel itinerary of communities, acting as hubs for daily activities in the fluid life of the inhabitant-consumer of the postmodern city. Valorising them as complex and functionally articulated nodes suggests high potential for success in urban regeneration interventions[21], owing to their high level of accessibility as well as their capacity to attract large numbers of people. They can become multifunctional spaces active throughout the whole day, where not only transport-related services converge but also those that address the deficiencies of the city and its fabric.

The node transversely catalyses different populations attracted by functional concentration or the need to move; these, in the fragmented metropolis, would have had no other opportunity for exchange. By choice or chance, these catalysts are experienced over different time periods by different urban subjects in their daily experience of the city: by the inhabitants of the neighbouring areas, as a matter of proximity; by commuters who find on their way to and from work time-saving opportunities for daily activities; by employees in the new activities and services necessary for the functioning of the node itself; by tourists, for whom these points, if appropriately integrated with services related to mobility and hospitality, can become new gateways to the city, from which they can start to discover and experience it at different speeds; by contemporary *flâneurs*, who wander aimlessly in the indistinct crowd; by the members of the multiple metropolitan tribes, who can find in these places a space of self-representation and rootedness, because they recognise in them a sense of belonging built together with others around participation in a specific collective act.

21 Richard Burdett, "Infrastrutture, spazio pubblico ed edilizia di alta qualità nei processi di rigenerazione urbana a Londra", *Techne* 10 (2015): 19-23.

Therefore, a high concentration of people and activities. And when we talk about urban regeneration, the question of density is an essential aspect. It goes beyond the simple proportion between people and space. The concentration of different functions, whether attractive at the urban or local scale, and the convergence of a critical mass of people at one point inevitably generates a sort of intensity. By intercepting and fostering the development of these dynamics, that state of pleasant congestion is generated, the very essence of the contemporary condition[22], which characterises the city. Infrastructural nodes and their adjacent territories are therefore places potentially marked by a strong urbanity that, thanks to the diversification of the services offered and the different types of population they attract, trigger dynamics proper to the consolidated city, representing privileged fields for imagining figures of collective space in which to develop new urban rituals. They play a role substantially comparable to that of the street or the square, understood as catalysts of density, before the reversal of the concepts of empty and full produced by the modern movement's city.

Through the sharing of collective acts, light communities are defined from the outset by the relationship between space and the form of sociality that develops in it. Identities are formed in a dynamic evolutionary process, which is based on the stratification of relationships established in and with the place, generating a sense of belonging and rootedness; they are formed through identification with the space itself, to which, in the making of the action, a sort of personality is attributed, a specific character that makes it exceptional, different from others, and therefore distinguishable in the global territory. Commoning practices are therefore both the prerequisite and the result of such appropriation[23]. Contemporary public spaces must then be suitable places for the representation of this fragmentation of social ties, of changing relationships, and flexibility. A contemporary public space must be a multiple public space, in which the population that activates it projects into it - even if only temporarily - a collective and partial sense, thus re-signifying it each time. It must be a public space capable of modifying, evolving and accommodating change over time in order to still be attractive and, potentially, chosen by instantaneous, ever-changing communities acting in urban space.

A necessary watermark

The Roman case examined here, including a vast kaleidoscope of peri-urban situations, represents an exceptional testing ground. While some conditions are shared with other urban conglomerates, Rome exhibits characteristics of exceptionalism, such as its relationship with history and archaeological remains, its connection with the landscape and with a nature that is never completely wild. Notably, it is distinguished by its metabolic capacity, where both natural and artificial waste are reused and reinterpreted in a continuous process of redesign. Preserving these qualities in such spatial contexts is essential to maintaining them as field of experimentation from which alternative forms of urbanity can emerge. In a programmatic vision, it is evident that the project in these places involves, on the one hand, interventions into networks (environmental, infrastructural, technological, social) which propose new forms of aggregation and new physical, symbolic and utilitarian values, ensuring the connection with the metropolitan dimension, and on the other hand, acting specifically on the nodes, like acupuncture, the success of whose reactivation is quite certain thanks to their high collective accessibility and capacity to attract. And between these two dimensions lies that intermediate space on which it is necessary to gamble.

The suspended space, generated by the progressive fragmentation of the territory, is the space within which the relationship between the parts can be rearticulated. In its chaotic and imperfect nature and in the informality of some of its processes, a potential model of urban progress emerges, based on the possibility

22 Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

23 Stavros Stavrides, "Open Space Appropriations and the Potentialities of a 'City of Thresholds'", in *Terrain Vague,* Patrick Barron and Manuela Mariani, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 48-61.

of experimentation. Availability of space, a relative reduction of control, good accessibility, existing infrastructures, an undeniable capacity to condense flows are reasons why these suspended places can easily be reintegrated into the peri-urban fabric, becoming new centralities capable of giving meaning to entire urban sectors. Starting from the traces, the signs, the meanings that are layered on the territory like in a palimpsest[24], one can perceive the specific local character of the place that reinterprets and starts from what exists, creating connection opportunities between infrastructure, landscape and urban fabric, recomposing disjointed areas, integrating environmental and infrastructural themes into the conception of a landscape pluralism[25]. In these privileged territories, a sustainable process of urban restructuring can thus be activated, aimed at combating land consumption while preserving continuous environmental corridors identified as part of the city's ecological infrastructure[26], redefining the relationships between the city and the landscape by establishing a network of alternative routes that traverse the entire urban area within high-quality environmental contexts, restoring public spaces and collective services to monofunctional city islands, and creating opportunities for economic and social growth. Once reintegrated into the urban imaginary, they will be able to accommodate exceptional activities and functions of supra-local appeal, but strongly rooted in the unique features of the territory in which they reside, which are reinterpreted and reactualised, to define future development perspectives and specific local attractiveness[27]. The urban project takes on the value of a territorial project when it manages to trigger a widespread transformation process of places, guiding the choices of the different subjects, public and private, involved in the spatial transformation towards a shared idea of the future, sustainable over time.

The first step simply consists of making these places accessible. Minimal opening interventions, which make possible a slow way of perceiving the landscape, means transitioning them from a condition of *invisibility* to one of *possibility* and promoting the triggering of the slower, but - as we have seen - usual processes of re-appropriation. Traversing a territory means getting to know it, in order to introduce it into the psychogeographic construction of one's mental map. In this way, one can rediscover all the elements belonging to the original geographic fabric, the topography, the persistence of the tracks, the water lines, the different vegetation structures, elements that contribute to defining the shape of the territory. Minimal interventions, of subtraction rather than addition, strengthen the invariants of places, recognisable elements as much as urban facts[28], more than urban facts, which confirm the primordial permanence of the landscape, with respect to which the city becomes indeterminate, indecipherable, transitory[29].

In the *terrains vague*[30] between infrastructure and city, distances to be made interesting through a new capacity of the gaze[31], urban life finds a significant field of experimentation. These spaces encourage the definition of a provisional sense, ready to renew itself again and made to renew itself again. At the urban scale, they constitute a sort of soft infrastructure, a network that spreads throughout the city's filigree, providing an alternative narrative of the urban elements, where social, cultural, and economic processes are intertwined with biological and physical ones in an urban and human ecosystem[32]. These are spaces in which the city can absorb its need for change and for satisfying new unpredetermined needs. As *friche* in nature are characterised by intense evolutionary dynamism[33], these are spaces that can be understood as urban reserves for experimentation, not to be sutured to the built environment, but to be reconnected, equipped with infrastructure while remaining open to change.

Thinking of the city as a living and metabolic system means recognizing the presence of active and vital processes that testify to the resilience of urban systems, where the landscape, city, and infrastructure constitute the connective and structuring web in which new rules and agreements between the natural and the artificial are

24 André Corboz, "Il territorio come palinsesto", *Casabella* 516 (1985): 22-27.

25 Pierluigi Nicolin, "Paesaggi e infrastrutture", *Lotus International* 139 (2009): 16-23.

26 Matthew Gandy, *Natura Urbana*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2022).

27 The projects developed in the design studio, proposed – for example – solutions related to hospitality and to the relationship with the history of the agricultural territory; to the protection of the landscape, understood in productive rather than conservative terms; to sports activities (swimming pools, sports centres, outdoor trails, etc.) to be integrated into territorial environmental networks and used as elements of mitigation and adaptation to climate change.

28 Aldo Rossi, *L'architettura della città* (Padova: Marsilio, 1966).

29 Purini, "Memorie verdi".

30 Ignasi de Solà-Morales, "Terrain vague", in *Anyplace,* Cynthia C. Davidson, ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 118-23.

31 Manuel de Solà-Morales, "Territori privi di modello", in *Il centro altrove,* Raffaella Neri, ed. (Milano: Electa, 1995), 254-7.

32 Jari Niemelä, "Is There a Need for a Theory of Urban Ecology?", *Urban Ecosystems* 3 (1999): 57-65.

33 Gilles Clément, *Il giardino in movimento* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2011).

determined. To enhance urban quality, the urban project must adopt an adaptive and transcalar practice[34], producing incomplete models and positively accepting – indeed, prefiguring – change, indeterminacy, and negotiation. To definitive and completed projects, which reflect the image of a stable society based on strictly regulated rhythms, it is necessary to propose a weak and diffuse modernity[35], consisting of open and unresolved systems, better corresponding to a fluid and undefined contemporary society, located in a continuous state of imperfection and crisis.

Figure Sources

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Figure 4. Fondo Storico Roberto Sardelli, Biblioteca Raffaello, Istituzione Sistema Biblioteche e Centri Culturali di Roma Capitale.

Figures 5-6. Photographs by the author.

Figures 7-10. Photographs by Luca Montuori.

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34 Charles Waldheim, "A reference manifesto", in *The landscape urbanism reader,* Charles Waldheim, ed. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006), 13-19.

35 Andrea Branzi, *Modernità debole e diffusa* (Milano: Skira, 2006).