



GIULIO GIOVANNONI

**Tuscany beyond Tuscany. Rethinking the City from the Periphery**

Florenca: Didapress (Dipartimento di Architettura Università degli Studi di Firenze), colección CTS Critical Tuscan Studies, 2017, 182 págs. Tapa blanda. Idioma: inglés. 30 € ISBN-10: 8896080932

SERAFINA AMOROSO

*Independent researcher*  
serafina.amoroso@hotmail.it

The book is framed within the *Critical Tuscan Studies series* – a cross-disciplinary series of books issued by Didapress (the publishing wing of the Architecture Department of the University of Florence) and conceived to enhance the theoretical debate on Tuscan space, history, culture, society – and aims at demystifying the idealized, canonical representations and interpretations of Tuscany and its landscape, which obliterate its inherent (cultural, social, material) complexity. Beyond its picture-perfect cityscapes, its museumized historic centres, its hilly countryside, there are several underrepresented, although populated and lively, areas of Tuscany, namely its peripheries and suburban sprawl, in which new forms of urbanity are taking shape. The book – which is the result of several years of both empirical work on Tuscan peripheries and research activities on the consequences and effects of (a normalised approach to) the symbolic and cultural weight of the ‘Tuscan myth’ on local policymaking – highlights this situation, moving beyond the false and simplistic dichotomies that have so far defined a stereotyped view of Tuscan landscape. To accomplish this purpose, the author makes use of various methodological approaches throughout the book, which benefit from thirteen years of fieldwork and the support of fertile interdisciplinary collaborations developed, in parallel, throughout the research phase (carried out within an international context: Harvard, Berkeley, Johns Hopkins University).

The first four chapters focus on a careful deconstruction of the ‘Tuscan myth’, while the final three chapters intend to clarify the actual role played by the Tuscan areas that has been neglected by dominant representations and which constitute its most living environment.

Challenging a consolidated collective imaginary, according to which Tuscany is synonymous with the harmonious synthesis of man-made and natural environments (read here both utopian historic centres and idealized countryside), which can be considered the refined outcome of an everlasting Renaissance culture, the first chapter, “Rethinking Tuscan Landscape History”, uses a historiographical approach to demonstrate the core hypothesis of the work, that is to say that the origins of spatial polarization, which, in Tuscany, goes hand in hand with spatial injustice and symbolic violence, can be traced back to the ideology of the nineteenth-century landed gentry and to the anti-urban attitude of Fascism (both carrying out the same approach by different means). The ‘monadology’ (or semiotics of ‘monads’) of the Tuscan landscape, to which the author refers to define a landscape aesthetics based on the fragmentary nature of rural landscape as a set of self-sufficient entities, is nothing other than a cultural, social, political construct and invention, an expression and idealized representation of the power and hegemony exercised by ruling classes, which aimed at maintaining the status quo of a semi-feudal system based on the exploitation and subalternity of peasants and *mezzadri*, whose living conditions were everything but idyllic. As a historically-oriented anthropological investigation might demonstrate, the divide between city and countryside has actually always been blurred, which is all the more reason to question and revise the dualistic contraposition between an idealized Tuscan landscape (made up of hilly countryside and historic centres), on the one hand, and a neglected Tuscan territory (made up of urbanized countryside, peripheries and industrial areas), on the other. The fact that the latter is the territory in which most of Tuscans currently live calls for turning the evaluation criteria, adopted so far, the other way round: suburban areas in the post-war period emerged as landscapes of social emancipation and peripheries have actually become the ‘centres’. The traditional territorial hierarchy has been inverted, paving the way for a paradigm shift: the polycentric territorial pattern, in which city centres were still attractors of urbanity, has been replaced by a pattern of dispersed centrality, in which they are just nodes of a wider system.

The second chapter, “Utopia and Dystopia in Tuscan Spatial Narratives”, analyses the several narratives (in literature, art, cinema, etc.) that have contributed to perpetuate the (ideological and political) dichotomous way of looking at Tuscan territory (the utopian hilly environment, worthy of being preserved, and the dystopian plain, a second-rate territory, in which any developmental need can be fulfilled). The utopian/dystopian narratives have so far affected town-planning choices, consequently strengthening spatial inequalities and biases and the hyperreal (and unaffordable) dimension of utopian Tuscany.

In the third chapter, “Fantasy Restoration and Identity Building in Tuscany”, the author identifies a line of historical continuity with regard to the main objectives pursued by certain political (and architectural) choices in Tuscany from 1820 to the present day: a systematic approach based on ‘fantasy restoration’ – an expression used to define a type of architectural restoration aimed at constructing an idealized and stereotypical image of landscape and monuments in Tuscany (and in its main city centers, such as Florence, Arezzo, Siena), almost ‘reinventing’ its past – firstly promoted during the Risorgimento, to enhance a national (and regional) identity, and, then, furthered by touristic and racial policies during Fascism, continues today, disguised as landscape protection policies.

In the fourth chapter, “Politics of Landscape Purification”, the author, building on Lefebvre’s spatial triad model, analyses and explains how landscape purification in Tuscany, carried out at a bureaucratic and political level, has led to social purification. In the last forty years, after many farmhouses have been bought and refurbished by Swiss and British citizens, Tuscan countryside has become a perfect product for tourist consumption, which does not fit with everyday life. Similarly, historic touristic centers have become disneyfied simulacra of reality.

The fifth chapter, “From Polycentrism to the ‘Dispersed Centrality’”, stresses the inadequacy of the (cultural and) interpretative models that have been used so far to understand the changes that contemporary urban systems, both in Tuscany and in Italy, have undergone, offering new keys for interpreting the relationships between cities, suburbs, countryside and what the author defines as the passage from polycentrism to dispersed centrality. This entails a deep reflection on the potentialities of the in-between landscapes, halfway between urban and rural, which characterize most of contemporary urbanized areas.

The sixth chapter, “The Social Life of Tuscan Peripheries: A Photographic Survey”, articulated in three sections, contains a photographic survey on the life of Tuscan periphery, which discloses its vitality, cultural richness and diversity, with a special focus on public housing neighbourhoods, on the social life of shopping malls and the so-called non-places. Far from being spaces of degradation and conflict, they have assumed a very important function at a social and urban level, becoming the main venues where people meet and gather.

The seventh chapter, “The Social Life Florence Gas Stations”, gives special attention to one of these (non-)places: the gas station, which, specifically in Italy, thanks to the marriage of food and gasoline, has become a place of social interaction. Through an on-field study conducted by the author in two gas stations in the periphery of Florence, these alleged non-places has proven to be, on the contrary, important places of sociability, thus drawing attention to other neglected spaces in contemporary human settlements whose role needs to be further investigated, being periphery a great laboratory for experimenting with new urban forms.

Indeed, in the final chapter, “Rethinking the City from the Periphery”, the author emphasises the fact that the meaning of the study included in this book extends well beyond Tuscany and beyond the center/periphery dialectic, because it defines a method that can be applied in other context and is based on the complex interplay of cultural, material and social production of space. Deconstructing the ‘utopian/dystopian lenses’ we generally use to filter and interpret reality, and which in Tuscany better than elsewhere are inextricably linked to historic and hegemonic spatial narratives, we are invited to change our perception and conceptualization of contemporary cities and consequently our approach to design and planning: this is one of the greatest merits of the book, the others being its style quality and the clarity of its rigorous structure supported by an interesting and appropriate iconographic apparatus.

[https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs\\_zarch/zarch.2020144524](https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_zarch/zarch.2020144524)