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Federico Oliva A program for INU

edited by Mariavaleria Mininni
Mariavaleria Mininni
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Serge Bonnefoy
Paola Branduini
Francesco Coviello, Giorgio Ferraresi

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Not city nor yet countryside. A third territory for a landscape society

Mariavaleria Mininni

The present article, as well as the dossier it introduces, is focused on periurban agricultural land. It describes most of the pictures produced by the contemporary city and its sprawling edges, but also those due to a growing tendency to settle in the countryside. The countryside has always been characterized by slow growth processes and low settlement density, but it is now being affected by new social and economic practices that are transforming rural culture into a hybrid urban-rural form. Among these pictures evolving from different processes of rarefaction and densification of the urban space, both centrifugal and decentralized, the aim in the present work is to make an in-depth examination of the space containing them, often ignored in contemporary urbanist culture because it has not been educated to recognize these aspects. This space is not referable as suburban, an imperfect city produced by its spatial contiguity to the true city, nor can it be regarded as a re-urbanization phenomenon because it is not generated by a sudden hypertrophy of rural settlements sprawling into the countryside and extending into adjacent urban tentacles. Even the different forms of agriculture produced by these periurban spaces have their own, innovative character. Unlike those of rural agriculture, which is indifferent to city models, they have drawn creative economic and social models deriving from the ongoing transformation of the rural world but above all from their proximity to the city,

inspired by the citizens' desire to return to nature and to occupy their leisure hours in pleasurable natural pursuits.

From some standpoints, it might be possible to describe this as a new form of suburb, a pluralist suburb, not only urban, built out from the city, but also rural, moving in from the countryside, and thus building a 'third territory' halfway between the urban and the rural. This research is an open invitation to town planners to pay a greater attention to this in between agricultural space, awarding it a greater autonomy.

From the suburb to the periurb

While the term suburb implies the notion of a defective city, of an imperfection of its fundamental prerogative as the central core, the term periurb aims to restore the idea of the city, attributed an inexhaustible role of organization of the territory which can establish ever new, interdependent and complementary relations. The study of the periurban space can thus be proposed as a new strategy for viewing urban sprawl, reconsidering the urban phenomenon and its context that features above all cultivated space, inviting a new way of seeing the combination of the picture and the background, as forms arising from a matrix, without needing to classify them *a priori* as either countryside or city. A new generation of landscape sprawl seems to be apparent in some socio-territorial instances, that demonstrate the decline of pure environments, the compact city and deep rural countryside. These instances are closely linked to the periurban territories. They stem from the erosion of the sprawled city and productive urbanization, and occupy those spaces that in the first generation of the sprawl were indeterminate,

grey areas of doubt. Like a third world, the periurban territories are now being subjected to deep study, part of a closer reflection that landscape culture has long proposed as a true thinktank on the contemporary city. As a result, an alternative view of town planning is emerging, not confined to inverting the priorities, from full to empty, but making a critical reading of the context.

For a sustainability ethic

Ever since cities first came into existence, the landscape society has built idealized forms of nature like parks and gardens inside the city, to satisfy the need for picturesque countryside and forests. In recent times, this tendency has been compounded by the pursuit of an urban model of ecological sustainability to contrast the degradation of the environmental resources. The issue of the sustainable city, revised in the light of a landscape focus, could offer a less anguishing view of the future than the environmentalist focus obsessed by the risk of catastrophic global changes. This revised view could recover the poetry of nature that a more sophisticated ecological school, nearer to citizens' needs, has been exploring for some time. A new idea of nature, less exclusive and wild, is emerging, inspired by an aesthetic view that is less opposed to science and has lost its sharp angles, endeavouring to re-appropriate some of the wider ecological issues without resorting to the much overused terms 'sustainability' and 'environment'. This culture refers to ecology by mediating its principles within a framework of more domestic terms such as the garden and landscape, reverting to ancient practices under the heading

of caring, of needing to pay closer, more careful attention and accepting responsibility for what lies around us.

The garden is a microcosm where the grandiose theories about cities are no longer in vogue, resorting to the ductile, deformable *maquette* of vegetable matter, massed trees, meadows, avenues, to capture the horizon. This third landscape is a more radical concept than the urban countryside, as Gilles Clément has explained, where all the waste spaces are directly linked to the organization of the territory, of what is left of the territory after use, or before another use, including the remains of what remains at the borders of a decoupage, resulting from the application of town planning techniques.

From periurban land to proximity

Even the bordering environments of the urban countryside are more complex and not simply an expanded form of the city. The definition of urbanitas as an expansion of the classical *civitas* seems appropriate, that defines a city effect in the urbanized territorial forms where the links are more ephemeral, the identification is more symbolic or generic but the functional connections are more stringent. Thus, the periurban space is an elaboration of the spatial category of proximity, reverting to the idea of a periphery of less spatially determined contexts and aiming above all to achieve an ideal of intercultural proximity between the city and the countryside. To transform agricultural spaces into urban countryside, it is necessary to propose institutional proximity formulas starting from the concept of subsidiarity and incorporating the themes of recognition and belonging. Proximity in terms of nearby

services refers to a supporting network proposing a range of facilities and methods for responding to changing, ever diversifying needs by weaving a new web of social services and transport between spaces that have become contiguous. Spatial proximity refers to the need to set up new town planning techniques that can reconcile and draw together distant realities, residences and services, homes and roads, but also orchards and offices. Social proximity because citizens living in a society where the means of transport are ever more efficient may not feel condemned to choose the previous urban models that were once considered the only way to build a city. In town planning, there has for some time now been research into 'management town planning', concerned with making a capillary study of the life-styles and habits of a plurality of individuals, focusing more on the alternatives than on the needs. Landscape plans, landscape maps, country parks and city agricultural plots are all tools set up in the framework of the new methods for planning spaces starting from the inhabitants, by forging non banal identity relationships, activating policies combining the four concepts underlying a landscape design: intercommunity, enhancement of natural and cultural assets, spatial design of the landscape and local development supported by animators, who facilitate integration between rural and urban development policies. The above-described proximity is not, after all, far distant from the idea of empathy as an exercise in drawing near to the other. It proposes the image of a movement towards the other, in layman's terms the superlative of the relative

term neighbour, and assumes the plausibility of this viewpoint. Empathy is the opposite of arrogance, says Cassano, when drawing near there may be a need to draw back so as to be able to talk and listen better, to stand on the border where the relationship with the other is most direct, least subject to deformation. By considering periurbanity, friches, and ecotones we have attempted to cross this border, to imagine it not as a divide but as a synapse, not a limit but an expansion of the horizon where our gaze can focus on a wider area and our previous convictions can be expanded.