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Campagna Abitata. Contemporary Peripheral Areas between Cities and Open Spaces¹

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The author analyzes urban sprawl in the Italian hilly areas that once were used for rural activities and he names them: *campagna abitata*. These areas are not subjected to changes while inhabitants behaviour change, no more peasant but, today, citizens: from using methods of urban origin new meanings of the rural heritage arise. The author creates images of this phenomenon that, differently from the traditional urban images, give back to the rural areas their centrality.

¹ The essay summarizes a more extensive research of the author of the settling phenomenon in the *campagna abitata*, involving various *National Interest Research Programs* undertaken with the scientific supervision of Mariolina Besio. For a more thorough of the argument cfr. Esposito (2010).

The deeply grounded mutation originates from the transformations due to the living, settling and transporting habits of single inhabitants, that spread in a non-predictable and mostly hidden fashion. This phenomenon is imposing itself in a capillary way throughout the once called “open country”, dialectically opposing the “city”. In these “grey and undefined territories” (Magnaghi, 2001 p. 15), “little interesting and hardly exploitable” (Lancerini, 2005, p.10) penetration of new inhabitants from the urban area¹ occurs: these individuals definably remain citizens, giving an area with an agricultural past a different meaning.

This trend settlement began spreading dormant in the least resisting lowland and valley bottom areas, around the major cities, and today, “as a long wave, going up the slopes (...) reached the medium and small size cities and the territories away from urban centers” (Besio, 2007, p. 65). In these areas a clearly urban originated building typology arises: renovated farm buildings into single-family houses, new small dimension buildings, extremely rarefied sprawl and other dispersive low density forms. However, rural landscape shapes do not change significantly, while inhabitants, citizens who return living in the country maintaining the rhythm of the city, and activities, going from agricultural to urban, do. The rural landscape acquires new meanings, promoting new relationships between the city and the countryside. A new way of life appears, characterized by an original identity combining endogenous rural conditions with urban exogenous forces: “a clear sign of contamination of the country on the city” (Steinberg, 2001, p. 50) and of the progressive “metropolis villaging effect” (Cacciari, 1973, p. 41).

This phenomenon occurs in various forms, with some general traits found on national and European scale: it spreads in the territories surrounding small and medium sized conurbations; it extends going up the hillside, in which traditional agriculture residues are present; it develops preferably in the vicinity of large scale infrastructures and territorial poles, localized in the valley bottoms and coastal areas. It acquires the “spontaneous” feature of the individual actions transformation processes, which often are the unpredicted effect of the town plans in force. It is a mainly residential phenomenon, that can be defined with the specific term of *campagna abitata*.

The *campagna abitata*: not rural anymore, and yet not city

How do the inhabited countryside spaces get shaped?

It is a complex and not univocally definable phenomenon, since it is not the simple transformation of the rural landscape into a productive industrialized agricultural area nor in an extremely rarefied urban tissue. It is impossible to seize the tangible and intangible aspects of the *campagna abitata* examining it through the lens of the agricultural productivity, for the reason that agriculture, in this context, does not have the traits of the industrialized capability. Those spaces

“do not represent anymore the agricultural production sites, but a diversified context created by multiple concurring activities besides agriculture itself; territories rich of settlement situations (natural landscapes, open countryside, small villages, micro industrial areas and so on) often characterized by demographic decline aspects and social-economic distress, with potentials requiring a new political development approach” (Vettoretto, 2003, p. 25).

¹ The “urban” term is here used mainly according to the definition contained in Webber (1963; 1964; 1968) and Choay (1994).

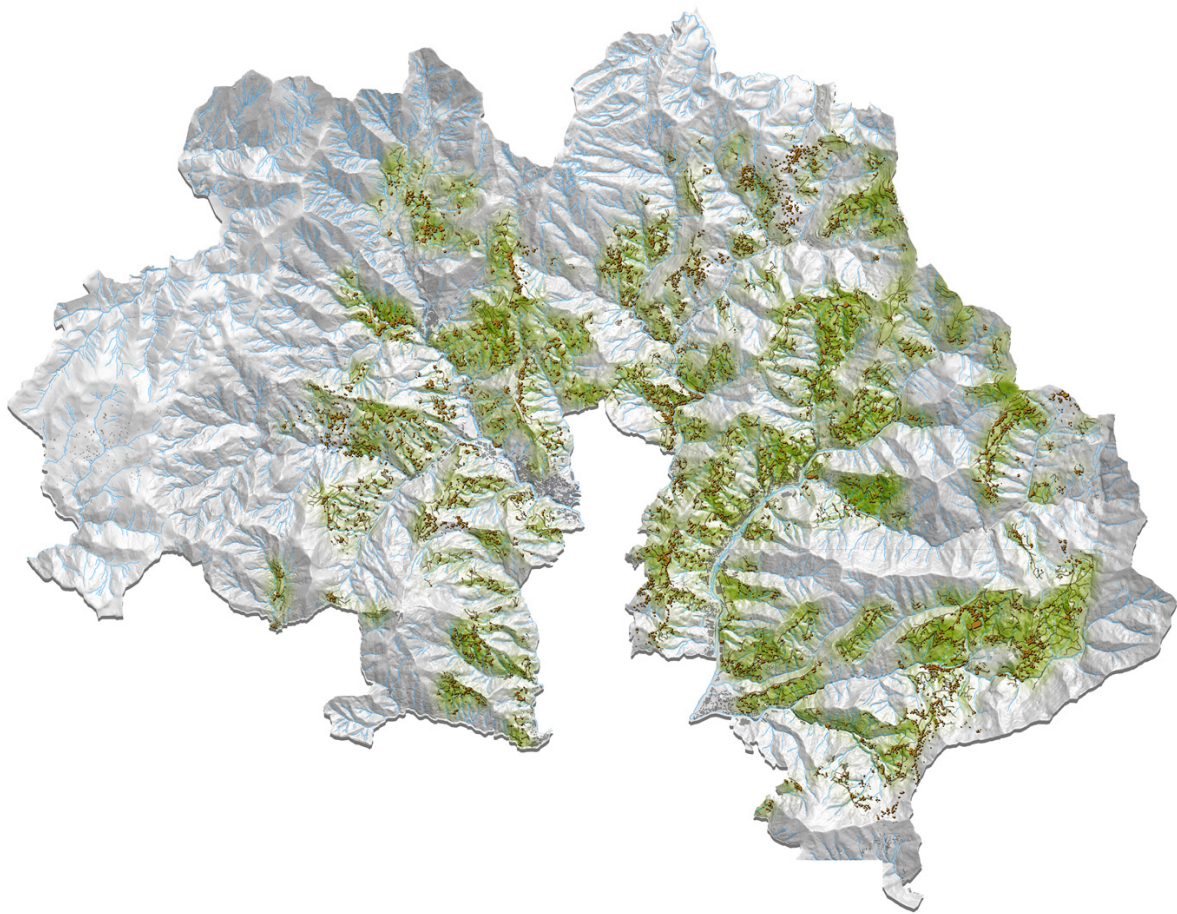


Figure 1 | The *campagna abitata* in the genoese inland

In those areas we can assist to the rising of an urban fashion habitability redesigning new the rural concept, with complex transformation processes of social practices, settlement patterns, form and content of territorial public policy. As it is not possible to fully comprehend those territories observing them through an exclusive agricultural or rural prospective, it is also not possible to define nature with exclusive reference to the major settlement dispersal forms known such as: sprawl, widespread city and peri-urban areas. It cannot be associated with the sprawl phenomenon for the lack of indiscriminate spreading effect (Ingersoll, 2004) of the buildings on the agricultural territory, “facilitated and encouraged by some infrastructural and housing policies aiming to quickly offer a house to new settlers in new and easily accessible areas” (Fregolent, 2006, p. 110). *Campagna abitata* cannot as well be considered similar to the widespread city described by Indovina, because, even if originated by different causes and motivations (as occurred in the late Seventies in the Italian north east area) it is not affected, in the rural surroundings hills, by an indistinct and undifferentiated dispersion aimed exclusively at pursuing the model of single-family house with garden.

The terms peri-urban or rural-urban do not seem to grasp the profound meaning of this phenomenon, being the latter not an exclusive form of “spatial dissemination of the city, characterized by the existence of a largely dominant non-urbanized area” (Bauer and Roux, 1976, p. 26), nor a mere phenomenon of population growth that occurs in a rural area close to the city center (Esposito, 2009; 2010).

As a matter of fact, each modern and functional categories based approach (the “city” or the “countryside”, the “urban” territory or the “agricultural landscapes”) cannot seize the particular changings and the features of these “uncertain outlined areas, organically identifiable through their own rules” (Steinberg,

2001, p. 49). In order to fully comprehend this new and various phenomenon an additional interpretative effort is required, taking into account both its complexity, abandoning the common concept of “mid-city, mid-rural mutation” (Dézert, Metton and Steinberg, 1991, p. 19), and its being “third level of urbanity that already existed previously in watermark” (Steinberg, 2001, p. 51). This phenomenon, in essence, cannot be regarded as referring to a single space-matrix (the *urban* or the *rural*), but rather using simultaneously both visual perspectives.

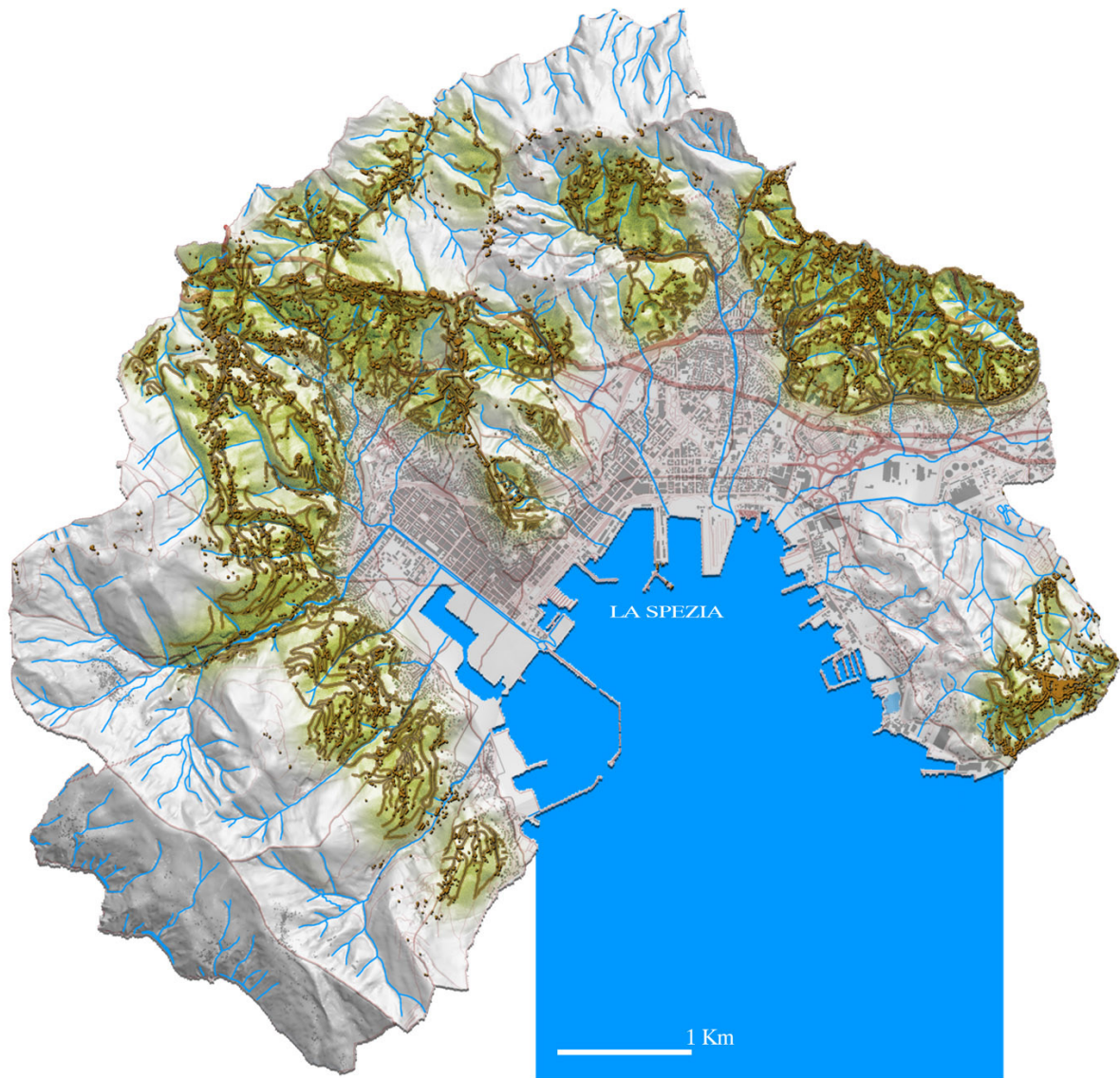


Figure 2 | The *campagna abitata* nearby La Spezia

Currently, the “countryside”, intended as a peripheral rural area, can no longer be regarded as a “reserve” for urban dynamics. In rural territories that avoided deep modifications affecting agricultural activities in the last half century, we assist to the spreading of a different kind of agriculture, showing temporary and less intensive traits, and to the rise of structures in response to urban needs. Needs for space and nature, for landscapes, and needs for cultural, architectural, wine and food traditions. The intensification of communication routes promotes rural mobility and facilitates access to urban goods and services. In the more and

more expanded metropolitan areas influenced zones, citizens settling in the countryside appear maintaining their working occupations in the cities; they import metropolitan habits and lifestyles in the former agricultural and now unproductive areas².

In these spaces, the primacy of the city as an entity promoter of civil processes fades into a form of peripheral complementarity between urban and rural behaviour which “is elusive, because descriptions are from time to time exceeded by the emerging of new figures, (...) and variable, not presenting the same forms everywhere” (Besio, 2007, p. 65). In these locations “beyond the urban” where the city, as a formal construct, is not there (although being inhabitants practices present), the “liquidity” that characterizes modern man, “continually hovering between an individual and a collective dimension, in the background of the plurality of times and of life spaces” is realized (Lanzani and Granata, 2007, p. 72).

The Ligurian *campagna abitata*: morphology and population

The *campagna abitata*, defined as current urban sprawl in rural hills territories, is a simple grammar settlement, characterized by the repetition of similar materials producing homogeneity and/or homologation, with syntactic short step (short sentences, localized sites), with a fragmented and discontinuous use of space, developed through points and halos rather than by diffusion of structured meshes. It is a territory “where several significant advantages came focusing: a relatively short distance from an urban center, the presence of a lower land revenue, the widespread availability of open spaces, the possibility of developing building types related to housing practices different from the most closely urban ones, the opportunity to reuse an already existing, although weak, infrastructural grid. In addition, (these spaces are) also the place of environmental amenities, of landscape resources, of the low density” (Lombardini, 2005, p. 315).



Figure 3 | The *campagna abitata* nearby Savona

2 On the appearance of new settlement figures in rural areas, cfr. mainly Mendras (1984), CRÉDOC (1988), Kayser (1990; 1996; 1998), Brun (1992), Carron (1993), Hervieu (1993) and Neveu (1993) for France; Merlo (1991; 2003; 2006) and Barberis (2009) for Italy.

In Liguria, this dispersive phenomenon shows at present some peculiar elements. The first follows directly from the morphology of the areas where the urban sprawl is realized: the hill settlement imposes a series of strongly binding constraints in relation to the structure of the settlement, from shapes and disposition of building types to the network accessibility, to relationships between building and proper land lots, etc. This form of settlement is forced to follow the existing metric of the former agrarian territory, as it derives from a long stochastic process that has allowed man to move and live according to fixed courses tending to the “minimum effort”, the same ones that are now re-interpreted by new urban inhabitants. The tracing on pre-existing forms is the rule and prevails on the overwrite: pre-existing morphological and typological rural assets are not deleted, but integrated and in good part, reused (figures 1, 2, 3 and 4).

A second characteristic concerns the establishment of a strong complementarity between the residential and the productive agricultural component. If the first takes the form of single-family home partially or totally isolated from the context, the productive component takes different shapes, ranging from the real manufacturing company (although rare) to the widespread forms of part-time farming not strictly complying with the rules and timing of agricultural production, but depending only on the will and the availability of individuals who settled in these peripheral areas.



Figure 4 | The *campagna abitata* nearby Rapallo



The third element concerns the spatial contiguity and the strong bonds connecting the suburbs of the *campagna abitata* with the main Genoese urban center or with a network of small-medium sized urban polarities, all located along the regional coastal arch³. This spatial “form” is the visible result implying needs and actions not easily represented and undertaken by not easily detectable individuals. The appearance of the dispersive phenomenon in rural Ligurian areas derives from a complex desire, from the aspiration of a living condition other than urban, so much that it is reductive to think that the propelling engine at the origin of what has been defined as a real rural counter-exodus⁴ was only “the desire to move in a house with a garden, in a peaceful and quiet environment” (Goffette-Nagot, 1996, p. 366).

In the light of the most recent social surveys it emerges that the inhabitant of these spaces is not a “rural user” that makes no effort to empathize with the surrounding environment. The settling habits occurring in these Ligurian hill areas are only partially interpretable as XXI century neo-ruralism, as the “third residential landscape” (Clément, 2005) in addition to the productive and tourist countryside, in which the bi-residential desire of modern man is satisfied. The desire to “live in the country” without abandoning the urban lifestyle and consumption habits is something else than the user’s neo-rural dream of owning a house in the country. The topics that traditionally justify and explain the movements of returning to the countryside (the search for a direct relationship with nature, the need for identity and territorial belonging, the desire of community ties) cannot, therefore, be used to describe tout court the original way of life of the urban sprawl inhabitant in rural areas. The attempt to sketch its profile, using demographic statistics and sociological surveys, leads to different conclusions other than that the citizen who moves to the rural area preserves all its previous urban characteristics, “loving a completely invented countryside” (Merlo, 2006, p. 206).

Some recent social studies (CREDOC, 2000; Perriet-Cornet, 2001; Bigot & Hautchuel, 2002) have shown that the populations of these specific areas have peculiar socio-demographic features: the average family size is higher than the European average, there is a low percentage of single residents together with a very high percentage of families with five members or more, associated with a high percentage of young couples with children (ISTAT 2005a; 2005b).

Therefore these inhabitants, concerning their lifestyles and in their relationship with rural space, are clearly distinguishable from both citizens and urban rural residents. House types, household equipment, sociality, perception of the living environment, relationships with rural actors, views and aspirations of life “are socio-demographic characteristics that define them as a population apart, no longer exclusively urban nor yet completely rural” (Bigot & Hautchuel, 2002, p.123)⁵.

Conclusion: urbanely living the countryside

In conclusion, there are two aspects that characterize specifically the suburban areas of the *campagna abitata*. The first is the substantial stability of rural forms invested by urban sprawl in the context of a deep transformation of the inhabitants “no longer farmers, but citizens escaped from the city” (Besio, 2007, p. 66). This phenomenon, in fact, develops in areas characterized by the presence of a rich heritage of housing and agricultural artifacts, still partially intact, and natural environment resources, often used (or dissipated) without taking into account the dynamics that govern their balances. This way, the new settlement processes in these hilly and no longer agricultural areas combine with the dynamics of the natural environment and give rise to new images of landscapes, still unstable in the shape and in the mental representation.

The second aspect concerns the complexity of the phenomenon, a complexity that cannot be dealt with through the use of functional categories of classical urbanism. As previously shown, in fact, these areas are not configured according to the typical urban forms nor fall into the traditional agricultural production are-

3 Other features are entirely comparable to those that can be found in other dispersed settlement environments: low density, prevalence of open spaces on the constructed ones, the presence of places with a strong environmental connotation such as such as parks and natural areas, corridors or mosaics of high landscape value.

4 Cfr. Kayser (1990; 1996), Goffette-Nagot (1996) and Hervieu & Viard (2005) for the french case; Merlo (2003; 2006; 2009) for the Italian case.

5 These data also emerge from the multipurpose family survey conducted by ISTAT (2003; 2005a; 2005b; 2007).

as case law. These two aspects pose serious problems in the classic planning process, still centred on the clear distinction of the territories into homogeneous functional areas. The unpredictable living and complexity conditions can be dealt with only by considering the structure and the phenomenon evolutionary process and linking the natural factors with instances of the inhabitants, main characters of the transformations of these spaces. The necessary perspective to fully understand and represent the *campagna abitata* must interpret the need of countryside as an alternation and interpenetration between rural and urban ways of life that satisfies a sophisticated demand of urbanely living the countryside.

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