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Planning Interpretations for Peri-urban Landscapes

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The infinite, uncontrolled, and uncontrollable growth of cities may have a short future, both in Italy and in the rest of Europe. This is not only due to prohibitions built into legislative measures, which are finally flourishing after about twenty years of scientific and technical debate on the need to halt the consumption of new agricultural land and to stem urban expansion; it is especially due to new practices for requalifying existing settlement layouts and improving the landscape. For a long time, responses and planning proposals have been lacking due to the absence of general policies capable of uniting new ethics of sustainable development with contemporary values, needs, and lifestyles, and above all with the demand for a better quality of life in our cities. New planning dynamics take their steps from peri-urban areas, ever more extensive, scattered, and unrecognizable, which have suffered these distortions the most and risk sinking into anonymity.

Italian Decree “Salva Suolo”

On 14 September 2012, the Monti government issued the long-awaited Legislative Decree “Salva Suolo”, which aims to improve agricultural areas and contain land consumption. Some months before this, the National Statistics Institute (ISTAT), in their Annual Report of 2012, unmercifully laid out the situation in Italy: since 2001, the country has registered an overall increase in urbanized land of around 1600 km², at a daily rate of about 45 hectares, with a consequent decrease in vital agricultural space.

The decree finally highlights the fact that open spaces very much need to be planned according to criteria of quality, formulated not solely with the economic/functional logic typical of traditional urban culture, but through a project to improve rural space and the landscape that is capable of formulating new perspectives for the subjects living and working in these territories. In this perspective, it is appropriate to recognize new functions and roles for peri-urban agriculture in: i) the management and conservation of the territory for the prevention of natural and anthropic decay; ii) the conservation and improvement of the landscape and the historical memory of places; iii) the supply of ecosystem services¹ to guarantee economic development, the quality of life in cities, the sustainability of transformations, and the fight against climate change. In other words, it is necessary to reconnect the urban space to the rural territory.

“Only thus can we strategically tackle the closure of waste, water, and food cycles, the requalification of ecological and landscape connectivity, the requalification of degraded suburbs, and the reduction of the ecological footprint...” (Magnaghi, 2012).

Environmental networks for overcoming city-country dualism

In the scenario outlined by the decree, open spaces become the matrix for strategically designing the requalification and recomposition of urban and peri-urban systems, and ecological networks take on the role of a true “infrastructure system” connecting the local and territorial scales. The system assumes fundamental planning worth for the treatment of peri-urban areas and, more generally, the diffuse city, in addition to holding the important function of ensuring the maintenance of biodiversity. In fact, it annuls the dichotomy between city and country. To reach these objectives, the idea of ecological networks approaches that of “green infrastructures” (European Parliament, 2012). They propose not only combating the loss of biodiversity, but also reinforcing the functionality of ecosystems to provide goods and services, mitigate the effects of climate change, and improve the quality of life of humans, opening a new vision of the landscape that combines network logic with the study of areas, where each section is inserted into a landscape continuum supported by a system of interdependencies.

It is evident that from experiences maturing on the national and European level, two approaches to environmental network planning are now being outlined (Sargolini, 2012): one of a strictly ecological type, aimed at favouring the development and potential of connections and landscapes for flora and fauna, guaranteeing the protection of the most vulnerable species and habitats; and a second that, in addition to guaranteeing the landscape of animals and plants, brings into play, requalifies, and reorganizes all intersecting urban, peri-urban, and exurban spaces, favouring contacts and osmosis among areas internal to the city and natural areas in the context, consolidated areas and developing areas, new and old centralities, ecological continuity and social frameworks. Green infrastructures, are couched in this second vision, which is open to new, more integrated perspectives in city planning themes, in which the search for new organizational matrices should occur starting right from the environmental networks and their relationship with settlement systems.

In this new vision, green infrastructures and landscape networks inevitably highlight the definition of rural

1 According to the definition of the [Millennium Ecosystem Assessment](#) (MA, 2005), there are “multiple benefits provided by ecosystems for the human species.” They can be divided in four large categories: life support (such as the food cycle, land formation, and primary production), supply (such as food production, drinking water, materials, and fuel), regulation (such climate and tide management, water purification, pollination, and infestation control), and cultural values (such as aesthetics, spirituality, education, and recreation).



space as territorial capital: a territorial resource that can generate increases in efficiency and economic productivity along with well-being for populations and the capacity for cooperation among territories. All of these considerations have important implications for policies for the development of spaces and territorial planning and programming, in that they introduce the need for new styles of governance oriented at cooperation, relationships, and solidarity among territories (Camagni, Capello, 2008). In recent urban planning reforms in some European countries, it is proposed that top-down policies (urban planning laws, directives, financial and fiscal instruments) be united with down-up policies (construction of voluntary metropolitan coalitions and shared territorial visions), operating, however, on “pertinent territories”: territories that are able, due to their size and complexity, to be compared with themes of settlement dispersion and, at the same time, to assess and stimulate agriculture and the role of farmers, the environment, and the landscape. In proposing this new approach for the planning of vast areas, we are seeing a decided return to the rules, inspired by a principle of caution regarding the consumption of territorial resources (Gibelli, 2003), and the unusual confirmation of a poly-centric urban model, in which open spaces, like constructed spaces, fully form a part of the city system.

Different applications in the national and European field have developed these planning orientations. They are usually implemented by connecting together different institutionally protected areas, residual areas in the redesigned urban fabric, and ex-agricultural and ex-industrial areas, outlining a network that becomes the structure for the reorganization of peri-urban areas and the creation of new centralities². In this vision, it is also important to consider the relationship between environmental and social networks, that is, those ascribable to the resident communities. It is from the intensity and effectiveness of this relationship that the great expectations for regeneration of peri-urban areas can be translated into operational concreteness. But on which fronts are these possible contacts developed? There are certainly two aspects that are closely interwoven:

1. the first looks at the contribution that ecosystem services (linked to the theme of bioconnectivity) can make to increase the quality of living, and therefore, firstly, to resident communities. Ecosystem functionalities become instruments from which well-being can be drawn and an economy can be generated, becoming collective services. Today the recognition and quantification—also economic—of the services, functions, and goods supplied by ecosystems represent elements of fundamental importance in acquiring a greater awareness of values and environmental services, and they become important in orienting economies, territorial government policies, and local development in areas of sprawl;
2. the second looks at recognizing the system of environmental fluxes³ as a new means of rapport with the territory that communities seem to value. In this perspective, it would be useful to develop a path of research, partially confronted by Giorgio Osti in a recent essay (Osti, 2012), directed at investigating the evident conflicts between the search for new territorial grounding on behalf of communities interested in the country (Osti, 2006), the push to fragmentation and scattering of rampant urban diffusion, and the progressive transformation of a society of places into a society of fluxes (Dematteis, 2010).

2 Some examples: the project to reconstruct the continuity of ecological networks in the plain north of Milan, in order to create a sign of recognizable nature stretching from Ticino Park to Adda Park; the activation of the ecological network in Modena’s 2009 Plan for Territorial Coordination (PTC); the experience of France’s SCOT (Schéma de Cohérence Territoriale) on the super-municipal level, which foresees “cuts in urbanized areas”, separating urbanized zones with physical and functional homogeneity, along with a dimension to guarantee its manageability and sustainability; the government of Holland adopted the National Spatial Strategy (Nota Riumte) in 2004, which connects ecological national politics to strategies of territorial development; the ECONNECT project aims to increase ecological connectivity in the Alps (of interest to Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Lichtenstein, Slovenia, and Switzerland).

3 We consider the metaphor of the “song routes” of the Australian aborigines, fascinatingly introduced by Bruce Chatwin in his excellent work.

In both aspects, important test fields are found in very extensive peri-urban areas, which, for some time have been neither country nor new city. These are areas in which the rapport between communities and the territory is reconstructed in a new relational vision that does not look solely at the condition of proximity, since a large part of functional and social contacts cross the limits of territorial contiguity. The network approach to implementing environmental infrastructures therefore brings the landscape back to the living community, avoiding social desegregation, which is always latent in systems of settlement dispersion, and favouring the construction of a common sense of landscape that remains the only deterrent to individualistic egoism.

The French experience: the case of Rennes

France, the principal agricultural power in the European Union, has in recent years been confronting the problem of the disappearance of rural territories, in particular in areas surrounding the main urban centres. According to official data from trade associations and the Ministry of Agriculture, from 2006 to 2010 the country lost 82,000 hectares of arable land per year with a decrease of 20% in the SAU (Agricultural surface area) since 1960. The causes of this change are due to growing urbanization (almost 80% of the French population lives in urban and suburban areas) and the decline in income from agricultural activities.

It is only since late 1990 that the French government has begun to worry about this phenomenon and to begin to discuss politics related to the practically uncontrolled expansion that started 50 years ago, in order to confront the consequences of the influx of rural populations into urban areas. This is the meaning of the law known as SRU (Loi Solidarité et Renouvellement Urbain), enacted in 2000, whose main objective was to stop the uncontrolled consumption of land and to promote a new model of urban growth compatible with the needs of sustainable development. It was entrusted with a new model of urban planning, useful for constructing a strategic vision on the inter-community scale—the only one capable of providing guidelines for more harmonious development of urban areas and combating sprawl—through the SCoT (Schéma de cohérence territoriale) and its instrument for reference on the local scale, the PLU (Plans locaux d'urbanisme). Implementation of this law, concentrated in large part on the political willingness of local administrations to share a strategic design of the territory, showed few results. Because of this, in 2010, the process outlined by the SRU was made more efficient with the “Grenelle 2” law, through which the central government is committed to halving the rate of artificialization of agricultural lands by 2020. Other measures in the same period have been advanced from the fiscal policy⁴ point of view. “Grenelle 2” assigns environmental objectives to SCoT that are restrictive in terms of land consumption, urban density, and biodiversity conservation. It also introduces the concept of Trame verte e bleue (TVB) in urban planning (SCoT and PLU) to halt the loss of biodiversity and re-establish ecological continuity between natural and urban environments. Many cities are experimenting with this new legislation in a climate of cautious optimism towards improving the quality of urban areas and the fight against land consumption; one of these cities is Rennes.

The tenth largest French city in terms of population (around 460,000 inhabitants in 2009), Rennes is experiencing a phase of strong demographic (third in growth nationally) and economic dynamism, with a consequent demand for new housing. The National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) predicts a population growth of around 100,000 inhabitants by 2030, and SCoT has planned for the construction of around 4500 new houses per year in order to respond to these demands. The choices that have been made in this planning instrument, in agreement with the overall design of rebalancing an urban area that has undergone development starting from the 1970s, revolve within the idea of ville archipel. This model, which consists of the city of Rennes and a dozen of small centres distributed around it, aims to contribute to the preservation and improvement of biodiversity, keep suburban sprawl under control, maintain the alternation between city and country, increase the quality of life in the urban area, and reinforce the excellent local resources such as the zootechnical sector. As well, the protection of agricultural

⁴ The Financial Law of 2010 states that starting in 2012 communities will establish in their PLUs a minimum inhabitant density, beneath which a tax is applicable when a building permit is issued.



terrain has prompted the activation of policies to: limit the land destined for urbanization and favour urban densification (with the aim of constructing twice as much in half as much space); stimulate the spread of agro-environment measures (organic agriculture, controlled breeding, etc.); integrate such measures with recreational facilities and actions to re-establish ecological connectivity. To obtain these results, SCoT has promoted the definition of a development model centred on the following principles: *trame verte e bleue* (Figure 1), for the conservation and overall equilibrium of the territory; and *ville des proximités* (Figure 2), to allow inhabitants to benefit from both the metropolitan functions of a large city (universities, businesses, large cultural structures, etc.) and the functions of a small city (natural environment, proximity to services, social relationships, etc.).

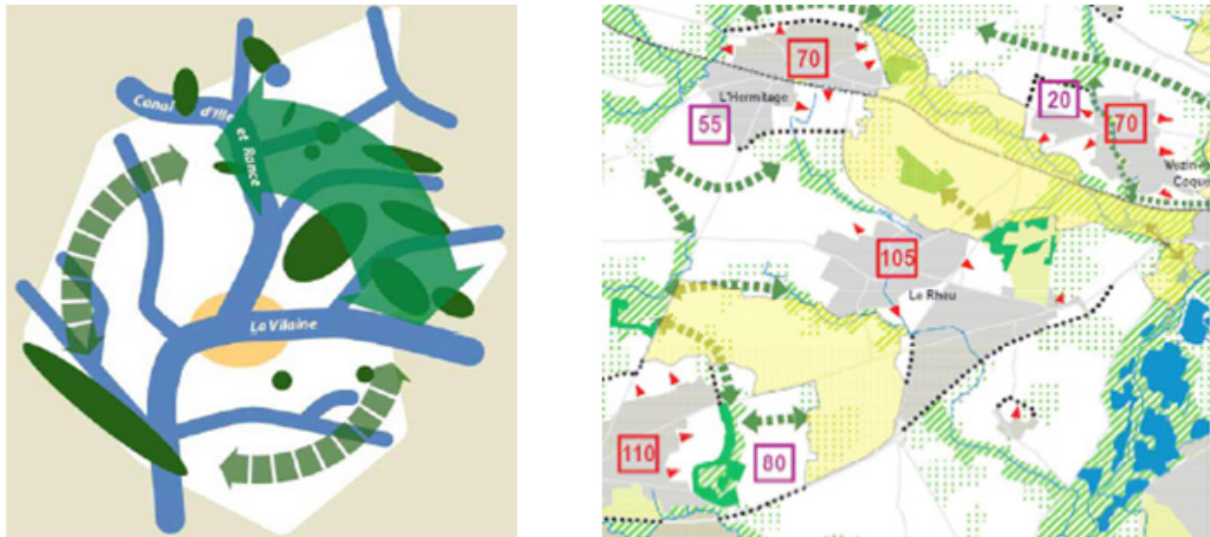


Figure 1 | The large ecological armour of the SCoT *trame verte et bleue*

Within this development model, the landscape project present in the SCoT serves as a matrix to control urban expansion, to avoid continuous urbanization of the territory, and to favour the protection of agricultural/natural spaces. Such a project, through the implementation of the *trame verte et bleue*, ensures ecological continuity between agricultural and urban areas; through the *camps urbains*, it avoids the artificialization of quality open spaces near urban areas and reinforces the landscape quality of areas subject to the greatest settlement pressure; through *écrins verts*, it avoids continued urbanization of the constructed spaces.

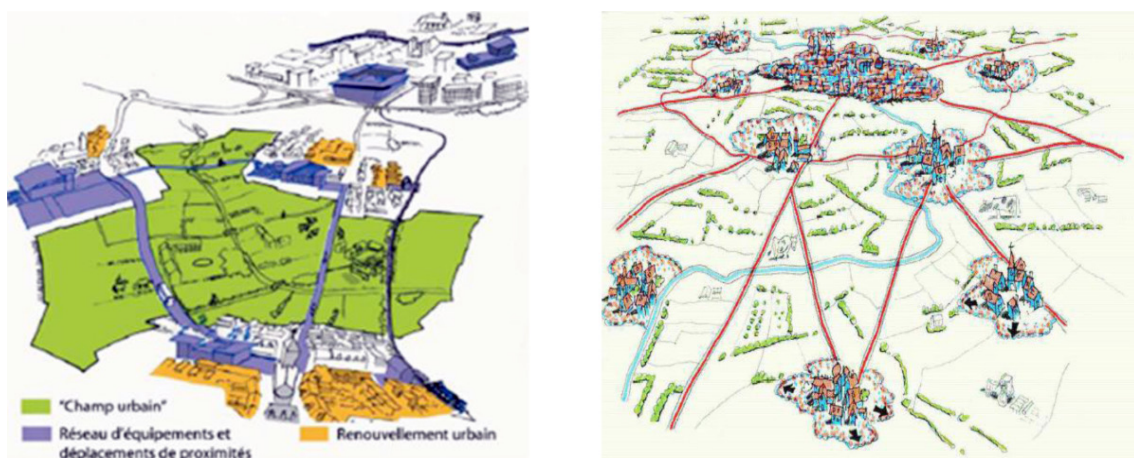


Figure 2 | Principles of the *ville des proximités* within the urban area of Rennes

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