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*Federico Oliva*      A program for INU

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*edited by Mariavaleria Mininni*  
*Mariavaleria Mininni*  
*Pierre Donadieu*  
*André Fleury*  
*Serge Bonnefoy*  
*Paola Branduini*  
*Francesco Coviello, Giorgio Ferraresi*

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## From a utopia to a real urban countryside

Pierre Donadieu

In western countries, to some extent rural areas have become spaces devoted to residence, leisure and tourism activities, not only in the mountains and at the seaside but also in the countryside. These spaces have entered a market that confers them a new social value founded on the high regard and function they are attributed. For a large part of society, agricultural landscapes have an even greater value in terms of the images they arouse, and the non agricultural practices they allow, than for their underlying agro-economic reality. I would name this society the landscape society, whose members share above all the pleasure, often ephemeral, of contemplating the landscape and walking in it, planning excursions to satisfy their curiosity and critical faculties. The members of this society are recruited certainly among tourists and aesthetes, lovers of beautiful landscapes, museums, monuments and parks, but also and even more widely among those who can count on 'time for themselves' to gaze at their extraordinary or ordinary world, without feelings of either resignation, or fatalism.

### The landscape utopia and the city

The idea of enclosing urban growth in a network of green spaces with little or no builtup areas originated at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was in England that the parks theoretician J.C. Loudon (1783-1843) first recommended embellishing cities with public spaces, right from the start of the 19th century, in order to create healthy cities protected against epidemics. This principle, together with some others (notably the taste,

cleanliness and safety of public spaces) was to be taken up again in Paris by préfet Haussman and Adolph Alphand. In the USA, A.J. Downing and later F.L. Olmsted laid the foundations for town planning, managing vast expanses of public green spaces, especially in Boston and Chicago, and later in New York. In Morocco, at the beginning of the 20th century, the idea of the city-park was experimented in all its grandeur in the European cities of the Protectorate under the aegis of J.C.N. Forestier and H. Prost, in particular in Rabat. The idea would be interpreted in France in the form of the city-garden, but was unable to withstand the influence of modern functionalist urbanism. Nevertheless, after the Second World War, the challenge of founding a capital like Brasilia inspired the town planner Lucio Costa, the architect Oscar Niemeyer and the landscape gardener Roberto Burle-Marx to attempt to create an urban utopia. So landscape utopias, although imaginary and unrealizable by their very nature, can still leave material, tangible traces. Like all such projects, they partly embody realities and partly mirages. In town planning, they have given rise to several aspirations: the urban pathogenic risk is opposed by the promise of hygiene brought by reparatory nature (green spaces); the need for public spaces for leisure pursuits is satisfied by the virtues of green areas opened to the general or specialist public; the longing for dreams and sensations, by the magical shapes and ambiances of the public park, etc. It is these very utopian trends that have led the landscape society to exert pressure on the urban authorities nowadays, demanding that peri-urban spaces be viewed as an

idealized urban countryside and not as the unstable, chaotic product of market demand and of the decrees of the public authorities. Indeed, this product really exists. In fact, it is quite common around small and some larger towns. In these cases the new urban fabric is intimately interwoven with the agricultural fields and greenhouses, like in the plain of Hyères in the southern French department of Var.

### The urban countryside: projects for the landscape society

The urban countryside project attributes a number of virtues to agricultural spaces created with an urban perspective. From the town stand-point they can provide the citizens with fresh products grown locally, and offer rural scenes as a background for public leisure activities at a lower cost than public parks and gardens, as well as limiting or re-organizing urban sprawl. They can also become areas for recycling part of the urban organic waste, not to mention recycling the urban air, contributing to biodiversity by multiplying the borders of myriad different plants and, finally, managing the spread of the different territories, or protecting forests in the Mediterranean regions from fire. From the agricultural standpoint, the possibility of carrying out agricultural activities within the urban core is limited by urban constraints (traffic problems, the distance from specific agricultural services, the risk of contamination of fresh products by polluted air and, perhaps, water, product decay, not to mention the danger of theft). There are also the problems of legal successions and the sale of lands when terminating agricultural activities. Farmers may therefore quit the land unless invited to remain. Instead, if the farmers'

strategies are focused on the urban markets, they may try to attract city-dwelling consumers by devoting a part of their time to the sale of agricultural products.

When this scheme is adopted, often thanks to lobbying by the associations and to the patient persuasion of the public authority land agencies, professional agricultural organizations and local and territorial communities, as soon as the agriurban utopia becomes a material reality, it allows the city inhabitants to walk in nearby countryside created especially for this purpose, to buy fresh or processed products at the farm or even pick themselves (fruit, vegetables); teachers and families can exploit the farm for educational purposes; fishermen and hunters can practice their favourite sports; nature-lovers can explore the area; aesthetes can enjoy their favourite views of nature. Lying beside the town, the countryside becomes a green urban infrastructure and landscape gardeners and engineers can devise landscape routes and roads crossing the agricultural spaces. But in these residential country areas, the urban farmers sometimes bear little resemblance to their rural counterparts: pluri-entrepreneurs, salesmen, hôteliers, owners of restaurants or organizers of guided visits, they no longer look down on the town but on the contrary welcome it as a market for the goods and services they offer. They can also provide these goods and services to the urban authorities that pay them: taking care of the upkeep of the roadsides, hedges and water courses, clearing snow from country roads, offering agricultural landscapes dedicated to leisure and tourist activities, etc. The promise, which is sometimes kept, is that of

imprinting each periurban site with a clearly recognizable urban identity, building this image by means of collaboration among the agricultural actors, the town-planners, the inhabitants of the town and consumers. From this standpoint, the town is no longer the enemy and destroyer of the countryside, but a power for conservation whereby the countryside is re-invented to the advantage (but not exclusively) of the town but where farmers, too, have a role. Failing this solution, as an alternative to 'suburbia', the public authorities can decide to devote the open spaces in towns to re-forestation and the creation of public parks.

### **Is it better to live in an urban countryside?**

In practice, this vision of the future requires a social pact to create a usable territory devoted to the habitat, agricultural employment and trade. François Ascher, sociologist and writer, pointed out in the year 2000 that information and communication technologies do not differentiate among places and situations. Traders should therefore focus their attention on the possibility of 'cohabiting', for example in the shopping centres and malls.

From this perspective, the social challenge is that of contributing to rebuild an urban link to agricultural products and landscapes, a link that no longer exists, or is contested, or has now become merely virtual, promoted by the media. This challenge does not only have implications on the creation of more space for agricultural practices but also on the quality of the agricultural products available in urban areas.