

# Hypothesis for the Italian contemporary landscape renewal

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## Abstract

Over the last century the Italian urban and suburban landscape has undergone a profound transformation. Through this brief essay we try to trace the reasons of this transformation in order to suggest possible redevelopment strategies. It is necessary, in essence, to rediscover today the lost balance between city and countryside typical of the traditional landscape. But to do this it is necessary to recognize the “essential character” of the territories.

*Keywords:* contemporary landscape, contemporary city, urban strategy.

The dynamics of formation of the contemporary Italian urban and suburban landscape are now well known. It started with the industrial revolution of the late nineteenth century which introduced factories, infrastructures and working-class agglomerations in the immediately outside contexts of the consolidated margin of the main cities; then, the capitalist expansion of the twentieth century, with the intensification of building growth throughout the country in the years following the two world wars and those of the industrial economic boom. Lastly, the digital revolution of the new millennium led to the displacement of the workforce to foreign countries and the consequent abandonment of factories and the de-naturalization of the countryside. This sequence of events - here briefly summarized - have definitively transformed the “image” of the landscape and the traditional city, which despite having reached the threshold of the nineteenth century more or less unchanged, it has changed between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

With the industrial and post-industrial transformation phenomena, premodern cities - which controlled until then their own “limit” in their growth process and clearly identified the physical difference between what was urban (as inside the *limen*) and what instead was suburban (*sublimen*) - they endured a substantial change. Assuming a widespread and chaotic form, as in Italo Calvino's *Pentesilea*, the urban margins have given the urban agglomerations the appearance of a “diluted soup”: a “lentiginous pigment” where it is no longer possible to understand if the city is “only periphery of itself” or if it has, instead, a centre in every place “(Calvino, 1972). The result is ambiguous peripheral and extra-urban spaces, devoid of identity references and aggregations, completely indifferent to the environment and to the historical-cultural landscape that welcomes them.

Actually, the problem of dimensional growth and the variation of the city limits represents only part of the problem which has characterized the “Great Transformation” (Turri, 2000) of the contemporary landscape. What has most influenced the modification of the appearance of the modern landscape compared to the pre-industrial period is above all the lack of relationship that the “new” has established with the “essential character” (Taine, 1893) of traditional contexts. A character that made it possible to recognize, in the ancient city, the differences and specificities of the places, especially in terms of the particular relationship that architecture and construction - both monumental and popular - established with the elements of the natural environment. Specificities that have been established over a rather long period of time, thanks to the shared respect for experiences and rules handed down by tradition and capable of establishing a “constructive order” that is recognized in the dimensions, types, hierarchies, materials and principles good building. An order transgressed only by the discreet and sporadic construction of new works of art - mostly architectural and non-building facts - which, in the spirit of tradition, have “transgressed” and renewed, by modifying them, the essential characters and general references for the new construction cycles.

With the advent of industrial production - supported by the dictates and advocations of the Modern Movement - the predominantly horizontal development of the new settlement models has little or nothing retained of the “dense and resonant expressiveness” (Frampton, 1984) of the old historical center. A radical transformation denounced several times by Pier Paolo Pasolini investigations *Scritti Corsari*. “New” construction elements have generated an “other” environment that has caused, in the words of Pier Luigi Cervellati, a “loss of identity” and an “urban malaise” (Cervellati, 2000), still perceptible in many Italian cities. Indifferent to the historical settlement structures, to the places and to the landscape, towards which they were placed in clear violation even when the rules of the constitution were completely evident, the new buildings have been modelled following ambiguous and contradictory forms that are the result of a relationship between “progressivism” and “consumerism” (Gregotti, 1991).

The task of the architecture and urban planning of our time is to intervene to correct this profound imbalance. The contemporary project must plan new reorganization processes that make it possible to recover and maintain - but also to renew - the “essential character” of the Italian landscape, recognizing its historical roots and peculiar geographical identities. A project capable of establishing a new “measure”, necessary for the definition of a renewed sense of unity between city, environment and landscape and, at the same time, capable of not giving up completely the charm of fragmentation and crisis; a charm recognized and substantiated by the pluralist and autarchic spirit that characterizes the post-industrial world.

Is it possible to restore this lost balance? If so, through what actions? In such a fragmented space as the postmodern landscape it is certainly not easy to identify the cure. However, it is possible to define and pursue some strategies, possibly punctual and localized, which bring the relationship between Man, History and Nature back to the centre of planning (and political) attention. A relationship that is fundamentally based on a renewed principle of resilience, which makes it possible to welcome transformations by overcoming “the ineffective action of resistance to metamorphosis” (Carta, 2020).

A first strategy could be represented, for example, by the opportunity to plan environmental redevelopment interventions, which make it possible to overcome the atopy of the contemporary in favour of a more structural relationship, in ecological and aesthetic-perceptive terms, with the

elements of natural morphology of the territory such as rivers, woods, quarries, etc. Interventions imposed both by climate change, with its increasingly intense and destructive natural phenomena which require new forms of soil porosity necessary to limit the damage deriving from landslides, floods, droughts, fires, etc.; and from the urgency to re-establish a renewed aesthetic-perceptive relationship with the landscape and nature. In these last two elements it is in fact necessary to find, as Rosario Assunto said, the “qualifying attribute of cities” (Assunto, 1994); an attribute that would allow the two regions of space - the urban and the extra-urban - to rise above their simple spatiality through a reciprocal and vital interrelation that finds synthesis in a new and harmonious “landscape epiphany”. As a second strategy it is necessary to propose the increase of the catalytic elements of the city space, through the foundation of new urban centralities - squares, open spaces, parks, gardens, etc. - capable of providing services and aggregative equipment for the community, scarce or completely non-existent in the contemporary and widespread city. Places that, in addition to bringing infrastructural and technological networks, and relational functions useful to the inhabitants of the centre and periphery, are evocative, in filigree, of the characters, qualities and invariants that make up the historical and traditional identity of the territory; qualities already present in ancient urban contexts, but almost always non-existent in the suburbs. Operations that re-signify the disintegrated elements of the territory - possibly through the reading of historical maps that help to clearly understand the potential of urban and suburban space - without, however, resorting to the revival of symmetrical securities and ancient archetypes.

Finally, as a third strategy, it is perhaps appropriate to establish a policy of maintenance recovery both of abandoned suburban areas and of historicized urban contexts; a recovery capable of favouring, in both cases, the re-population of housing and the re-opening of craftsmanship activities; essentially, it is necessary to improve environmental renewal and maintenance processes that are capable of preserving territorial diversity, without mummifying the image of the landscape and of the city.

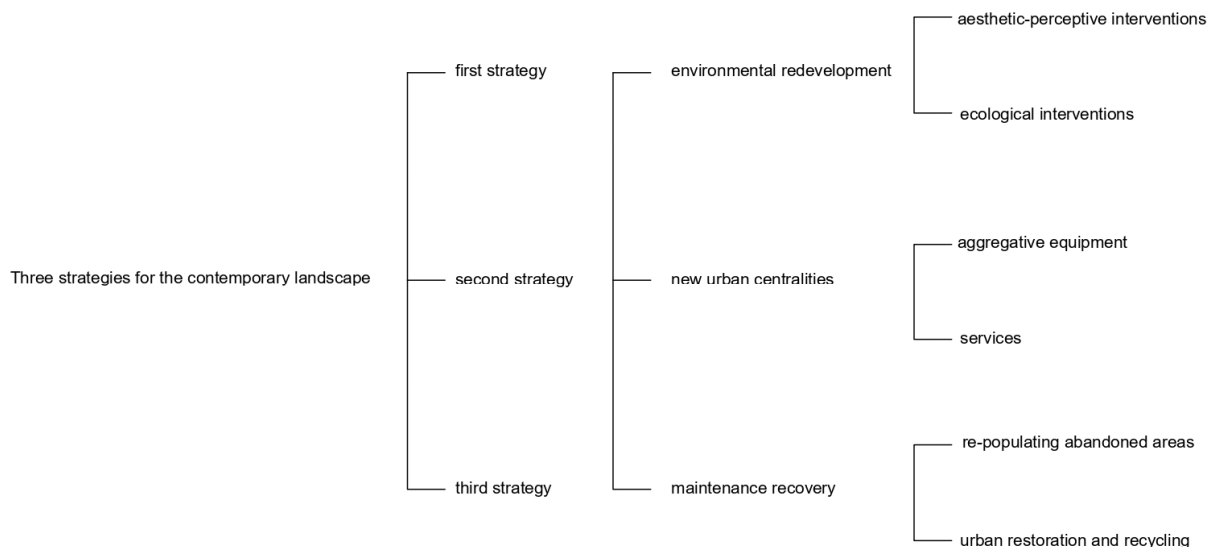


Fig.1. Graphic scheme by the author

Accepting the physiological dynamics of “urban recycling”, building new architectures and infrastructures - possibly in substitution and without further occupation of the land - in compliance with the material, typological and morphological features of traditional contexts. Unquestionably “authorial” architectures, but at the same time capable of expressing new figurative objectives, respecting history, the landscape and a desirable consolidated “technical environment”. An environment capable of programming and sharing construction techniques in the name of a material-technological uniformity functional to a renewed market structure.

In short, the time has come to condemn perpetual contemporary experimentalism - both architectural and constructive - to encourage the deepening and critical maturation of technical construction solutions, linked at the same time to the memory of local cultures and the use of new international technologies.

As a corollary of these three strategies, it may also be appropriate to re-evaluate, from a purely conceptual point of view, the “Italian way” to architecture that characterized the best design research of the fifties and sixties. A way that testifies to the very high sensitivity achieved by some Italian designers - Albini, Gardella, Gellner, Muratori, Ridolfi, Rogers, and a few others - towards the peculiar conditions of the places, the collective memory and the traditional features of the landscape. A too soon forgotten legacy, from which it is probably necessary to start again in order to better grasp the message inherent in some project experiences emblematic of the principle of “acclimatization” and of “revision in continuity” (Portoghesi, 1960) sought in the hybrid contamination between the elements of tradition and the construction methods of modern language. Principles and interventions that have made it possible to build architectures “impregnated” (Zermani, 1988) with etymos, with family figurative structures taken up and recognized by collective memory and updated to the present. Experiences to be recovered - it must be reiterated - not so much from the point of view of the use of grammar and syntax of forms as, rather, from the point of view of the design attitude towards the “functional” use of “memory”. Through memory it is still possible today to reconnect broken threads and retrace interrupted paths, in the name of a necessary dialectic tendentiously aimed at the recomposition of a new order.

On the basis of the examples coming from this recent tradition, and through coordinated urban and landscape restoration actions that take into account the different needs expressed in the variety of the contemporary city, it is perhaps possible to find the solution - or at least, one of the solutions - to ensure that the periphery conforms to the historic centre and the countryside, and not vice versa as has happened up until now. But to do this, we certainly cannot rely solely on the restrictive strategies of street furniture and the aesthetic reorganization of the complex of signs - architectural and natural - that characterize contemporary landscapes. Rather, a large-scale project that knows how to re-contextualize the pre-existences and places of abandonment is necessary; a new network of meanings capable of combining, in a vital way, the opposite principles of rootedness to the local and ambition to the global (Clementi, 2000): an ambiguous condition, the latter, intimately consubstantial with the territories of contemporaneity (Bonesio, 2007).

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