

The 'Fifth Bari,' or: a morphological approach to urban design

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Abstract

In the last two decades, urban morphology has gradually become a niche topic discussed by specialists. This fact, which implies a decreased interest in urban form, may be explained from several perspectives: the unsuccessful attempts of the Modern Movement to design the ideal city; the nostalgic reactions to this failure, based on a naïve interpretation of urban history; and the development of media-driven cities, where communication technology makes the form of urban meeting places a matter of indifference. The case study featured in this article tries to reassert the importance of morphology in urban design.

Keywords: Urban design, urban morphology, urban form, urban identity, Venice Biennale, Bari

Introduction

One of the sections of the 10th International Exhibition of Architecture at the Venice Biennale, held in 2006, was titled *Città di pietra* (City of Stone). Its intent was to evaluate the potential of traditional construction systems; for instance, the reinforced, local stone, updated with technological advances. One of its subsections, called *Progetto Sud* (A Project for the South), was expected to host urban projects targeted to the redevelopment of abandoned areas or defaced parts of cities in southern Italy. The one featured in this article,¹ which was chosen for the exhibition along with thirty-two other projects, is based on the idea of urban morphology and its extensive tradition of studies (Olivera, 2018), as well as on its ongoing renewal (Salamouni et al., 2025). It is focused on Bari, a city on the Adriatic Sea whose urban development can be split into different stages (Figure 1).

The first three stages—the Middle Ages, the 19th century, and the fascist *Ventennio* (1922-1943)—are all characterized by a precise urban morphology. By contrast, the fourth stage, which was built from the end of WWII to the beginning of the new millennium, is shapeless, chaotic, and without precise borders. In sixty years, this fourth stage became larger than the sum of the previous ones, by wiping out the manifold urban identity of the city. As a consequence, the fifth stage of Bari had to mark a trend-change by restating the importance of urban morphology in re-establishing the identity of the city. At the same time, the morphological approach was expected to recover three kinds of lost values: symbolic values at the architectural scale; social values at the urban scale; and environmental values at the landscape scale. All of these goals imply that urban morphology, by virtue of its ability to connect theory with practice (Sander, P. and Douglas Baker (2016), is still a useful tool for urban design (Maretto, 2014,).



Figure 1 – Aerial view of Bari with the identification of the five urban stages of the city: 1) First Bari (old town); 2) Second Bari or Borgo Murattiano (nineteenth century city); 3) Third Bari (part of the city mainly built during the fascist *Ventennio*); Fourth Bari (postwar city); 5) Fifth Bari (project area)

1. Hints of Bari's urban history

Bari was already an important center during the Roman era, but not much is known about its urban form in this period. Thus, by the expression 'First Bari,' scholars usually mean the medieval part of the city that developed on the northern peninsula in connection with the ancient port, located in the southeastern gulf. Morphologically speaking, this walled town was characterized by a compact urban fabric made up of terraced houses, where the only exceptions were represented by monumental buildings. These included the Basilica of Saint Nicholas and the Cathedral of Saint Sabinus, consecrated in 1197 and 1292, respectively, as well as the Norman Swabian Castle, completed in the 12th century.

At the end of the 18th century, housing conditions became intolerable because of population growth and a lack of urban space. For this reason, the municipality made the decision to expand the city southwards, behind the fortification wall, which was gradually dismantled in the following decades. The very first proposal for the enlargement of Bari dates back to 1790; however, a real urban plan was not prepared until 1812 by architect and engineer Giuseppe Gimma. It was then developed, in 1838, by other architects, such as Vincenzo Capiirri and Vincenzo Fallacara. This growing new neighborhood was called Borgo Murattiano because its foundation stone was laid in 1813 by Joachim Murat, king of Naples.ⁱⁱ Architects and engineers, who acted as urban designers throughout the 19th century, had to sort out both hygienic and real estate issues. Therefore, on the one hand, they envisioned a net of orthogonal streets in order to provide good ventilation; on the other hand, they defined a system of large urban blocks that could be introduced into the housing market. Architects, in particular, tried to address aesthetic issues by inserting into a generic urban grid some remarkable public spaces, such as squares and gardens, as well as institutional buildings devoted to administration, education, and entertainment. In the second half of the 19th century, this geometrical part of the city was more extended than the old town, and it started to be referred to as the 'Second Bari.' Nevertheless, it had precise borders: northward,

the new port, located in the northwestern gulf; eastward, the sea; westward, the Royal Road, whose orientation was tilted with respect to the orthogonal grid of the new neighborhood; and southward, the railway and the train station, which was opened in 1864 (Figure 2).

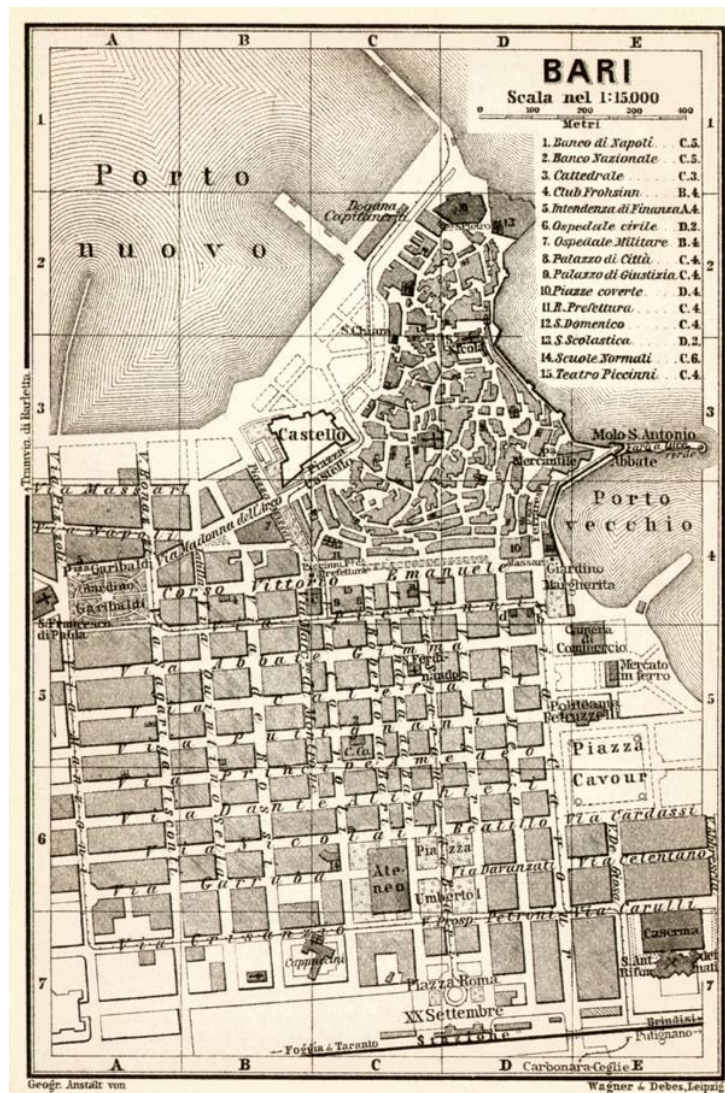


Figure 2 – The old medieval town and the Borgo Murattiano in a map of Bari printed in 1912

In the same year, a new urban plan designed in Turin by the administration of the Italian State Railway envisioned the prolongation of one of the rectilinear streets of the grid — the street in axis with the rail station — into the old town. If implemented, this design solution would have destroyed the medieval urban fabric forever (Figure 3). More wisely, the municipality decided to connect the two parts of the city through an ‘urban void,’ that is, a large boulevard called *corso principale* (now called Corso Vittorio Emanuele). Actually, the old town and the new neighborhood feature two different urban morphologies, irreconcilable but recognizable. The first one, with its winding, narrow streets, and its unplanned urban fabric, shows a picturesque character; the second, based on an orthogonal grid, instead shows a geometrical character.

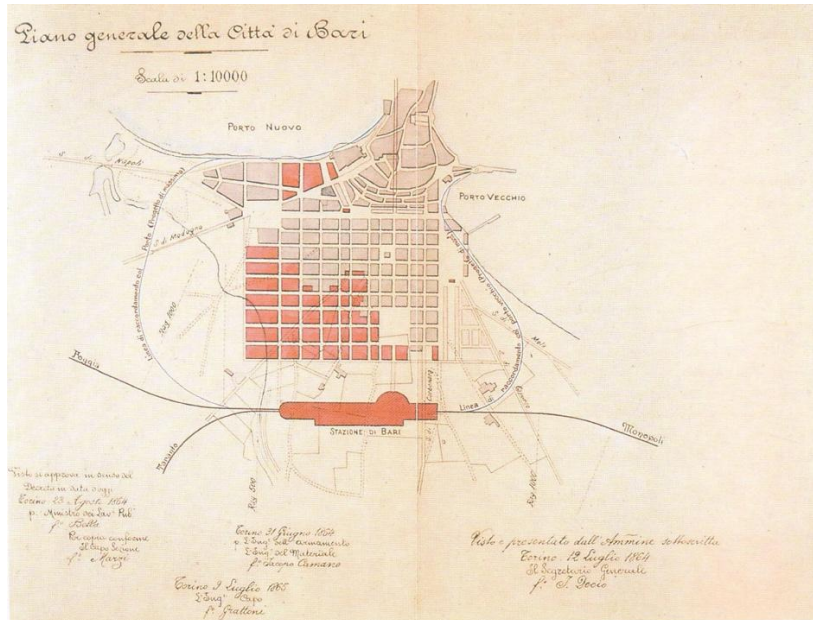


Figure 3 – Administration of Italian State Railway, *Plan of Bari with the localization of the train station*, 1864 [State Archives of Bari courtesy]

In 1905, engineer Arrigo Veccia started working on a new urban plan, which was finally approved in 1926. In a drawing from 1913 (Figure 4), he foresaw a new, comprehensive design of the coastal line, which was to be characterized by representative buildings and public gardens overlooking the sea.

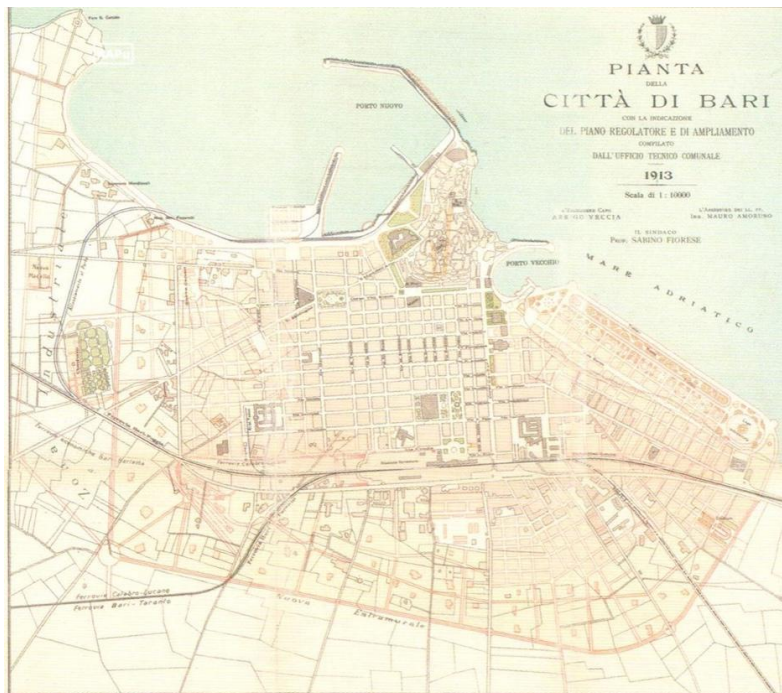


Figure 4 – Arrigo Veccia, *Plan of Bari*, 1913 [State Archives of Bari courtesy]

During the *Ventennio*, his urban concept was implemented in the form of a monumental waterfront called *lungomare* (Montalbano, 2014). This urban addition, part of which was built on reclaimed land, is known as the ‘Third Bari.’ Its parallel orientation to the coastal line was expected to strengthen the relationship between a natural element, the sea, and a cultural artifact, the city. At first sight, such an orientation seems to imply a simple rotation of the Borgo Murattiano’s grid. A more careful analysis, though, reveals that there is no comparison between the modest 19th century buildings and the monumental ones erected in the 1930s.

In those years, people who lived in the old town were still experiencing poor hygienic conditions. Therefore, in 1931, a plan for this part of the city was drawn up by architect Concezio Petrucci (Figure 5).

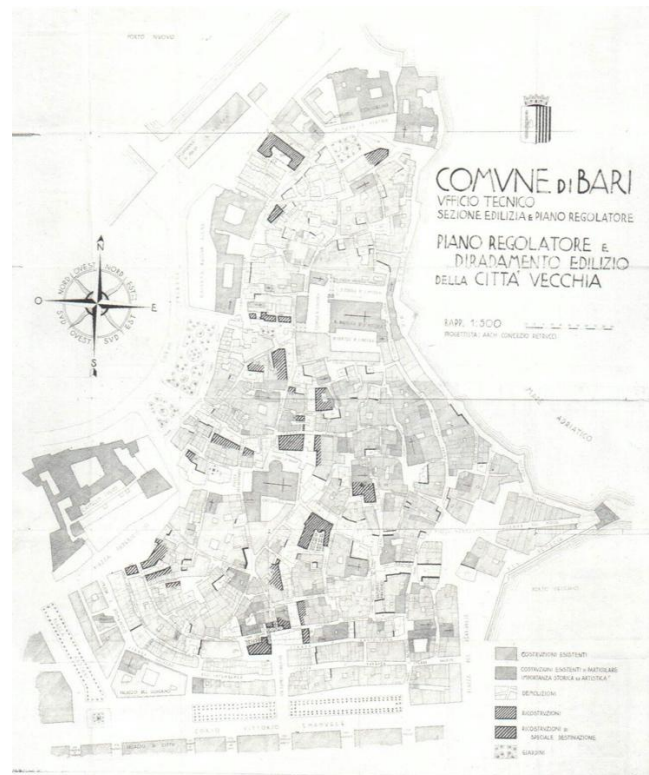


Figure 5 – Concezio Petrucci, *Plan for the old town of Bari*, 1931
[State Archives of Bari courtesy]

It was based on the concept of *diradamento*, which can be defined as an urban renewal aiming to remove the less important buildings in order to improve ventilation and to facilitate pedestrian circulation.ⁱⁱⁱ In this case, the urban designer decided to enlarge two existing streets crossing the old town — one from north to south and the other from west to east — without erasing their picturesque character.

At the beginning of the 20th century, urban sprawl was limited to some areas behind the railway. However, another era began after WWII, which was common to many Italian cities. Urban planning took command, and urban design was gradually marginalized. Issues such as infrastructure design and land use became much more important than concepts such as urban morphology and urban form. Bari, in particular, expanded rapidly in irregular and fragmented zones, according to the private interests of real estate speculators; shapeless and deprived of an aesthetic will, it lost its urban identity. In 1995, the project site (named Punta Perotti) was defaced by the partial construction of a residential tower, whose huge and unfinished skeleton in reinforced concrete threatened to destroy one of the most beautiful stretches of the coast overlooking the Adriatic Sea. In 1997, this *ecomostro* (architectural monstrosity, as it was usually called) was confiscated by the municipal administration, which had it destroyed in 2006. As a consequence, a remarkably attractive area became available for a new architectural and urban project.

The will to form vs non-form

In terms of size, a comparison between the project site and the parts of the city that had emerged from Antiquity immediately shows that the ‘Fifth Bari’ could not become a real, new part of the city. As a consequence, it had to be considered an urban fragment entrusted with the task of conveying possible ideas in terms of urban development and urban morphology. If the condition of a fragment is dramatic in itself, it was even more dramatic in this case since the project area was located at the margins of the postwar city, totally deprived of a clear urban form. How, then, to reconnect this fragment to the first three Baris?

Both the geographical location of the project area and the competition brief, which called for a theological center surrounding an ecumenical sanctuary, provided two possible conceptual starting points. Since it had to be built in front of the sea, the new Bari was meant to be an ideal continuation of the system of buildings erected in the 1930s. The other starting point, the new religious complex, was expected to be the destination of a sacred way which had its point of departure in the Basilica of Saint Nicola, i.e., in the heart of the old town (Figure 6). The architectural and urban project featured in this article took advantage of the aforementioned conditions, but not uncritically.

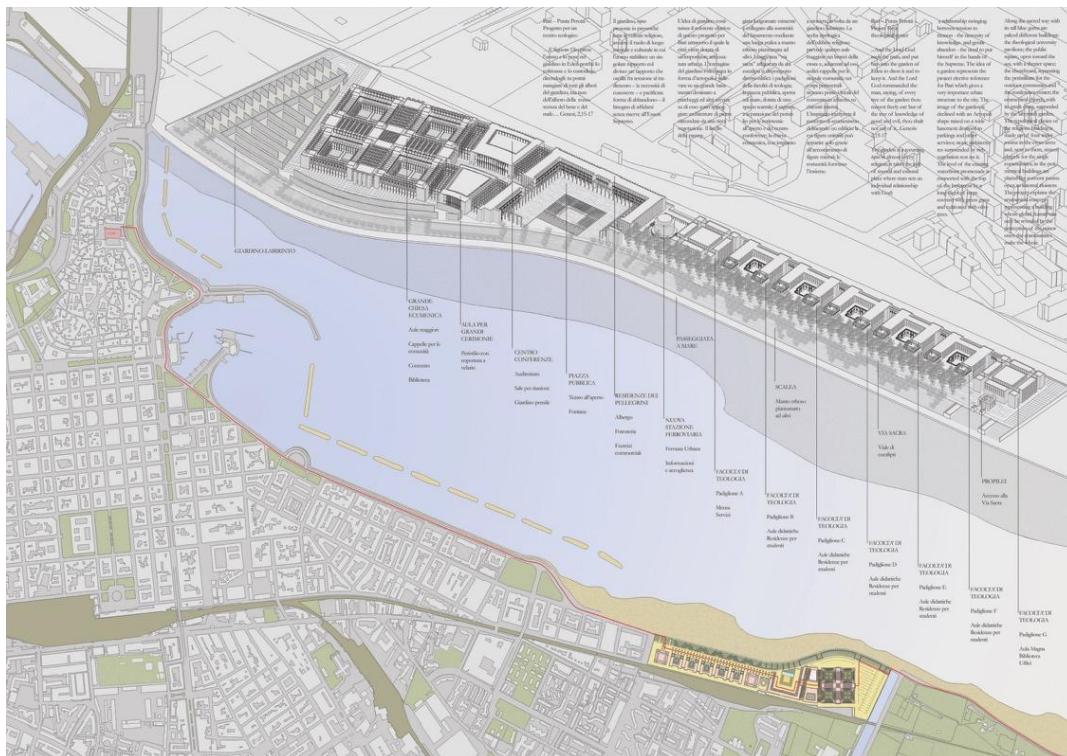


Figure 6 – Author et al., *Fifth Bari*, site plan

The new religious complex was intended to become a pilgrimage site, visited by scholars, students, and worshippers from all over the world. As a consequence, the project provided for two remarkable structures: the circular building of the new rail station, designed in addition to the existing one; and a large parking lot housed in a base whose perimeter exactly matches that of the project area. Along the coastal line, this base took the form of a stepped garden overlooking the sea and dotted with olive trees (Figure 7).

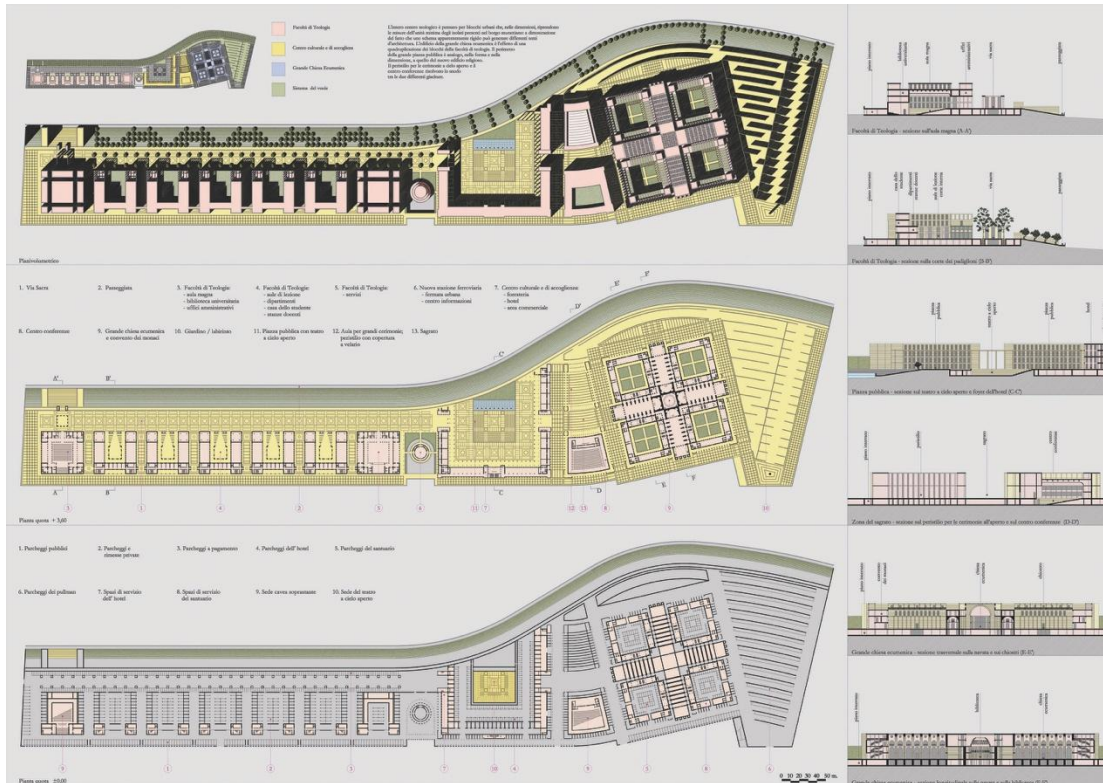


Figure 7 – Author et al., *Fifth Bari*, From top to bottom: mass plan, first floor plan, ground floor plan

The top of the base, which was intended for pedestrian circulation only, was to be paved with local stones arranged according to a geometric pattern: a design choice that was meant to identify and characterize the level of the processional path. This last feature was marked by five architectural/urban elements, which from northwest to southeast, may be described as follows: the gate, conceived as a sacred enclosure open to the sky; the rectilinear boulevard, lined with high eucalyptus trees and located in front of the seven academic buildings (five of which were U-shaped); the large piazza, with an outdoor theater and a water feature in the middle, which was surrounded by hotels and hostels; the curvilinear *piazzetta* (small piazza) between the hall for ceremonies and the conference hall; and, finally, the large ecumenical sanctuary, which was the point of arrival of the sacred way. Its unique plan — a Greek cross inscribed in a square — made it the most evocative element of the project. Behind it, a labyrinth-like garden acted as a demarcation between the newly designed urban fragment and the ‘non-city,’ that is, the city without a specific urban form.

By now, it should be clear how this design proposal for the ‘Fifth Bari’ tried to establish a relationship with the first three Baris. To begin with, the ‘Fifth Bari’ conceptually reconnected with the old town through the liturgical orientation of the proposed ecumenical sanctuary, which is the same as the church of Saint Nicola, while rejecting its picturesque character. Furthermore, it evoked the geometrical urban fabric of the Borgo Murattiano, yet it rejected its undifferentiated character. Finally, it repurposed the waterfront of the 1930s, but it rejected its monumental character. All of these design choices, which aimed to give back to Bari its urban identity, were based on a critical interpretation of its urban history. In turn, this interpretation made it possible for the morphological approach that was also expected to foster the formation of different values. At the urban scale, which connects the architectural scale with the landscape scale, the proposed two-level fragment of the city totally separated the pedestrian circulation at the upper floor from the motorized traffic at the ground floor. By providing safe places for people to meet, the project generated a social value. At the architectural scale, the Greek cross of the ecumenical sanctuary indicated four cardinal points, as if to evoke the

idea that people from all over the world were welcomed. In so doing, the project generated a symbolic value, which is not the only one.^{iv} At the landscape scale, both the presence of the stepped garden along the coastal line and the labyrinth-like garden at the rear of the ecumenical sanctuary softened the passage from the realm of untamed nature, represented by the sea, to the cultural realm of the city, represented by architecture. Where the weather is often hot, as in a city like Bari, the many green surfaces and shaded places generate an environmental value.

Conclusions

The project featured in this article does not claim to have found the ideal configuration for a specific area of Bari. Rather, it calls attention to the issue of urban form as a crucial one for urban design to address. The chosen approach, based on the concept of urban morphology, implies a critical interpretation of urban history, from which the project borrows concepts rather than stylistic solutions. This choice explains the ‘laconic’ architectural character of the buildings conceived for the ‘Fifth Bari’ that, in a real situation, might be built by different architects. These architects would be given the chance to express their personal poetics as long as they did not overturn the masterplan and its symbolic, social, and environmental values. All of these values imply that the city is a physical entity whose meeting places can be named: streets, squares, boulevards, gardens, and so forth. If these places have a name, they can also be designed according to their specific contexts. No communication technology can substitute for the natural and spontaneous desire of people to meet in person in these places. Urban design can give shape to this desire by creating recognizable urban forms and, in this creative action, the idea of urban morphology remains crucial.

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ⁱ The design team was the following: Nicola Delledonne (team leader), Barbara Stasi, Valentina Pagano, Federico Piccardo. Consultant: Elisa Nosengo (landscape architect). Collaborators: Adalgisa Boetto, Silvia Bussu, Luciano Mazzone, Gilda Morellini, Francesca Puddu, Paola Zacchetti.

ⁱⁱ The Italian word *borgo* is usually translated as ‘suburb’; in this case, though, the word ‘neighborhood’ seems to be more suitable (Maiorano, 2018).

ⁱⁱⁱ The concept of *diradamento* was theorized by architect, engineer and urban planner Gustavo Giovannoni (Zucconi 2014).

^{iv} The theological center is based on three different aspects of ecumenism in a modern society; it is endowed with symbolic values that focus on social justice, education, and hospitality. To begin with, the plan of the sanctuary was meant to evoke the archetypal form of a civil hospital (reminiscent of the project made in 1456 by Filarete for Milan) in order to convey the message that the care of the body is as essential as the cultivation of the soul. Furthermore, the very center of this building, which was marked by a circular library, stressed the importance of culture for the peaceful relationship among different people. Finally, the piazza and the U-shaped buildings, opened towards the sea and deprived of a monumental façade, had to welcome people coming from the Balkans, where the war in the 1990s caused a migration process that was still ongoing in the following decade.