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Local Development and “Agri - Urban” Domain: Agricultural Park as Promotion of an “Active Ruralship”

David Fanfani

Dipartimento di Architettura DIDA
Università di Firenze, V.Micheli 2, 50121, Firenze
e mail david.fanfani@unifi.it,
Tel/fax +39 055 2756482

Urban development processes, beyond the image of metropolitan polarization, tend to create an intermediate urban-rural domain that, because its spatial and socio economic complexity, calls for new inclusive and multi sectional physical planning and design approach. The tool of the agricultural park, applied in many European contexts, seems to fit with this vision. The paper, describing the cases of the agricultural park creation in the metropolitan area of Florence and in the overlapped municipality of Prato (Tuscany), addresses such a matter pointing out especially to the necessity of involvement of farmers as key actors in maintenance and stewardship of peri-urban areas. The paper fosters the idea that, without an inclusive and participative “bottom up” design approach, aimed to deliver place awareness in farmers as well as in citizens, and without a real farmers empowerment activity, feeding an “active ruralship”, the park project risks to produce a further, and not effective, “top down” binding plan.

1. Introduction

The recent settling dynamics showed a relentless urbanization process that produced the strengthening of the urban domain as the daily life environment for the majority of the western and world population (OECD 2012, ESPON 2011).

Actually recent and deepened studies point out on the fact that we not only assist to a resistance to the urban on behalf of rural areas in keeping their own social and productive features (Barberis, 2009) but -as well- to the raising of an intermediate urban-rural domain where live a not negligible amount of people (EUROSTAT 2010) previously improperly classified as urban (OECD 2007). A domain that is characterized by the strong integration of urban and rural functions and life practices and from which stems remarkable innovation potentialities (EDORA 2010).

This takes place in a “low density” settlement and of urban sprawl built environment (EEA 2006), where we witness to heavy consequences and impacts in terms of fertile land consumption, ecosystems erosion, rural development potentiality reduction and, generally, of the local development itself.

This “in between” territorial domain shows relatively new features and, therefore, not easy to deal with. That both for the physical planning and urban design disciplines –mainly focused on urban form and settlement processes study- and for the environment and agro-environment expertise, that currently are called to cope with “hybrid” matters and territorial forms strongly concerned by the anthropogenic presence and pressure.

This “third space” (Vanier, 2004; Fanfani, 2006) could be defined as a “new socio-physical formation” where single out and support new synergies between urban and rural processes and features, for an overall “founding reframing” of the settlement structure as a whole. That defining in multidisciplinary terms the new “toolkit” for the regional and urban design.

The character and origin of this space lead to overcome an “urbancentric” approach that conceive it as residual product of the town development, and to appreciate its founding value in producing urban landscape and environment, especially as resource for the production of “non-market oriented” commons and public utilities (e.g. ecosystem services) mainly delivered and managed by farmers.

Consequences of such an approach call for:

- integration of the agri-ecosystem structure of the periurban areas in defining settlement assets and development choices;
- single out and development of design and management tools fitting with the necessity to integrate settlement matters and practical needs linked to farming activities and environmental protection;
- visioning and participative processes activation, suitable not only for the citizens inclusion in decisional forums but even for the farmers claims enhancement and support in the context of decisional processes concerning settlements and local development;

The following part of the article focuses especially on the last two points, showing as, in two real contexts - referring to the regional proposal for the Agricultural Park in the metropolitan area Firenze-Prato and to the ongoing “bottom up” process for the peri-urban agricultural park of Prato- it is currently under experimentation, even if with different methods and results, an empowerment and involvement process, turned on local actors and farmers, aimed to support an innovative tool for the peri-urban “prime” farmland areas regeneration: the agricultural park.

2. The agricultural park as design integrated and participative tool: the case of the Parco della Piana Firenze-Prato.

2.1. The project institutional framework and governance

The “vision” for a wide park in the florentine metropolitan outskirts area origins more than 40 years ago in the context of the intermunicipal physical planning attempts of the plain area starting at north-west border of Florence. Around the ‘90th the process reaches a formal and operational statement with the regional act 112/90 “Florentine Metropolitan area structure scheme”(INU, 1990,1992).Despite this act the scheme is



not implemented and the project idea, including a wide central environmental park area, underpinned on a dialogic institutional planning approach, doesn't find realization.

In the 2007 the process restarts, and Tuscany Region promote an institutional agreement protocol with some Municipalities of the metropolitan area (Sesto Fiorentino, Campi Bisenzio, Florence) and Province of Florence, aimed to define a planning document for the creation of an agri environmental park in the periurban area between Florence and Prato. Afterwards, between 2008 and 2009, other municipalities joint to the planning agreement (Prato, Signa, Calenzano, Carmignano, Poggio a Caiano) with the Province of Prato and the park project reach out a remarkable dimension up to around 9000 hectares of environmental and farmland areas, that constitute the life basin of beyond 900.000 inhabitants.

Since 2010 up to 2012, besides, the process for the park project has been further fed thanks to an activity of study, deepening and exchange with other European periurban parks, carried on in the context of Interreg IV C project "Periurban Parks"¹.

Summing up the design strategic vision for the Park supported by Tuscany Region could be said that the project seeks to maintain the characteristics of existing (or rather, "resisting") agricultural and environmental areas in the 6800 hectares of agricultural plan and closest hilly slope, seeing these areas as a large green lung which helps surrounding urban areas to breathe. They need innovation in agricultural, environmental and compatible service activities, in order to transform themselves from areas awaiting future urbanization into an example of "urban countryside" in line with the most recent European metropolitan experiences. This will not only enhance the rich network of cultural and archeological heritage, but also the potential for alternative mobility and inter-modality with public transport. For the range of urbanized areas that will face onto the park, this represents an extraordinary possibility for new regeneration and enhancement, through a new design approach that could turns current backyards like green spaces into a new central, multifunctional agro environmental domain.

The Park is not only promoted as a structural/strategic tool and guide for the physical planning of the periurban florentine area, but is also conceived a key instrument for local development. The Park is conceived as a multi-sector and integrated tool, which defines all potential uses of the cultural, environmental and landscape related features of the park itself and of the surrounding area. Tuscany Region is developing the park within the framework of the Regional Physical Planning tool (Piano Regionale di Indirizzo Territoriale). For that reason, in the field of local development, the Regional Ministry for Town Planning promotes an active policy of integration and coordination with the policies, projects and resources of other ministries. Such an integration is pursued in the context of the Regional Development Plan.

The park creation will be then fostered by a series of pilot actions with a multiplier effect on the socio-economic and entrepreneurial assets of the region supporting ongoing existing local projects proposed on behalf of local municipalities in strong coherence with the park goals. In such a prospect, without modifying the different budget lines of the various local authorities involved, the Region co-funded some projects selected accordingly with their coherence and integration with the specific objectives and actions of the overall strategic park project².

The creation and growth of the Parco Agricolo della Piana is a regional priority, but one that requires commitment, resources and especially shared social awareness about the strategic value of the park project as a tool to promote an endogenous and sustainable innovative development process for the area, A process aimed to deliver integrated goals of locale development, heritage protection and well being for the citizens.

1 Project in which Tuscany region was leading partner and that produced remarkable effects in terms of awareness building in the involved municipalities technicians and, moreover, a pilot project for the Prato periurban farmland areas too. See [website](#) (02/13). Collaboration, exchange and capacity building within the PERIURBAN PARKS project supports and builds on the regional objectives, and the Tuscany Region is looking forward to continued activities over the next two years.

2 Accordingly with these aims Tuscany region co-funded for a 60% ratio of the total foreseen budget 17 project proposals for a total amount of 6 MI/€.

In order to achieve such an awareness Tuscany Region fostered, since the outset of the park creation process, a remarkable process of information and public participation adopting various tools, initiatives and expertises.

2.2. The participative/communicative process: toward a shared vision

The “design” of the participative and communicative process concerning the Parco della Piana project is, since the outset, very structured and constitute a pivotal element of the regional governance action. Tuscany region, since the 2007, accordingly with the regional planning act 1/2005, appoints a specific “communication guarantee” with the task to organize and promote the information and participation of the “public” concerned and stakeholders. Moreover the Guarantee activity develops with the support of a private charged partnership (Sociolab-Avventura urbana) charged for the participative process management and for information delivering. A web site is created where is possible to find out every information and documents about the park project and where is possible to express opinions and ideas (www.parcodellapiana.org). The activities promoted by the Guarantee, from 2007 up to 2009, are manifold and apply various tools of the communicative planning “toolbox”. Among these could be recalled:

- Citizens meeting held in the various municipality aimed to introduce the park vision and to get critics, suggestions and proposals on behalf of social actors;
- guided visits and walks in the park during the various seasons, aimed to build awareness about places and opportunities of the park;
- structured forum with the inhabitants, such as the “planning for real” session organized by Tuscany Region during Creativity Festival held in Florence in 2009;
- Theme discussion groups (e.g. on waste treatment plants and management, agriculture);
- Audio-visuals media and communication tools production.

Furthermore, accordingly with the higher attention paid to the physical design dimension of the park recorded after 2010, are held, between July and December 2010, two shared design laboratories adopting the “charrette” methodology. The laboratories -that see especially the involvement of experts, region, local administration officers and technicians, associations representatives and a final public debate in an open assembly- allow for an effective focus on main design themes framing the park project and that will underpin the variation of the regional physical plan³(see image 1).

3 Besides some maps of analytical nature, laboratories allowed for the definition of three peculiar themes referred to:

- features of the farmland and natural areas;
- ecological “matrix” of the areas concerned by the park project;
- slow track mobility network structure;



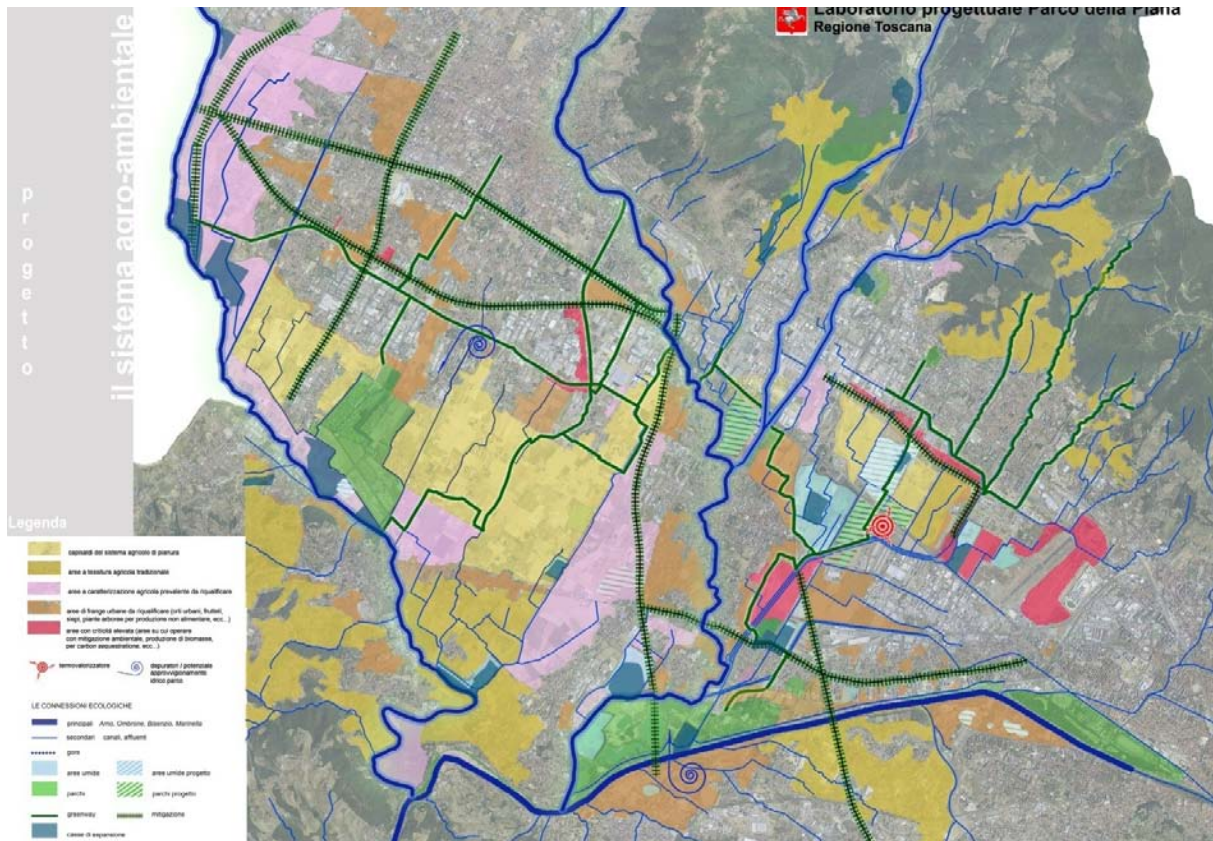


Figure 1 | The Parco della Piana Project scenario: The agri-environmental system (source [Tuscany Region](#))

The participation activities promoted and structured on behalf of Tuscany region show some positive effects in terms of progressive relevance and awareness building, in the public agenda, of the value of periurban areas for a liveable, attractive and vibrant urban environment and landscape. That especially proposing an “active” and founding role of these areas, opposed to the traditional appreciation of them as waste and residual lands to use, at the best, for environmental compensation⁴.

It is worth noting, nevertheless, that in the process just described, the farmers involvement and empowerment remains still weak. That especially considering the prospect for a necessary future joint construction with them of shared agri- environmental projects, addressing the management and stewardship of periurban agricultural areas, leveraging on the contestual knowledge, skills and active role of farmers themselves. Such a matter is not only imputable to presumed lacks of the participative process, but it is mainly due to the difficulties in involving the agricultural actors that, especially in periurban areas, has yet assumed as expected or usual a profile of no relevance. To this feeling correspond, on behalf of farmers, what that one could define as scarce awareness of their own social and economic role and a consequential sense of mistrust in the possibility to bring and represent their problems in the public policies agenda (Van der Ploegh, 2004).

4 Such a role is clear, for instance, in the context of the debate -that because the “economy” of the paper I can’t account here-related to the to the claimed coexistence, in the same variation act of the regional physical plan, of the park project and of the hypothesis concerning the adjustment –for safety reasons- of the airport of Florence. That is a matter that, at the moment, alongside with some problems advanced by some concerned municipalities, has stopped the administrative course of the regional plan variation and of the park itself.

3. The agricultural park as bottom-up process of social mobilization: the experience of periurban area of Prato

Starting from a research/project activity related to a wider national research program on agricultural parks led by University of Florence, since 2007, a first “coalition” of local actor was established with the feature of an informal forum, with the aim to promote a bottom-up design process for the creation of the periurban agricultural park of Prato. Related to his main mission aims of the forum were:

- promotion among citizens of a awareness of the importance of periurban agricultural areas in the outskirts of Prato;
- involvement of farmers, with environmental and cultural associations, in a participative design process, aimed to promote the agricultural park as an integrated physical planning, as well as local development and protection tool;
- according with these goals: realization of cultural initiatives and promotion of projects aimed to enhance multifunctional periurban agriculture related to landscape/environment regeneration and creation of new economic proximity schemes (i.e. food miles schemes, recreation and rural hospitality facilities, etc).

The interaction with university, public administrations and private stakeholders, promoted by the forum, allowed for the proposition of a physical scenario expressing the park vision, helpful both for the public envisioning activities and to enhance a first insertion of the park idea in the strategic vision for the new planning tool of Prato municipality (see images 2,3).

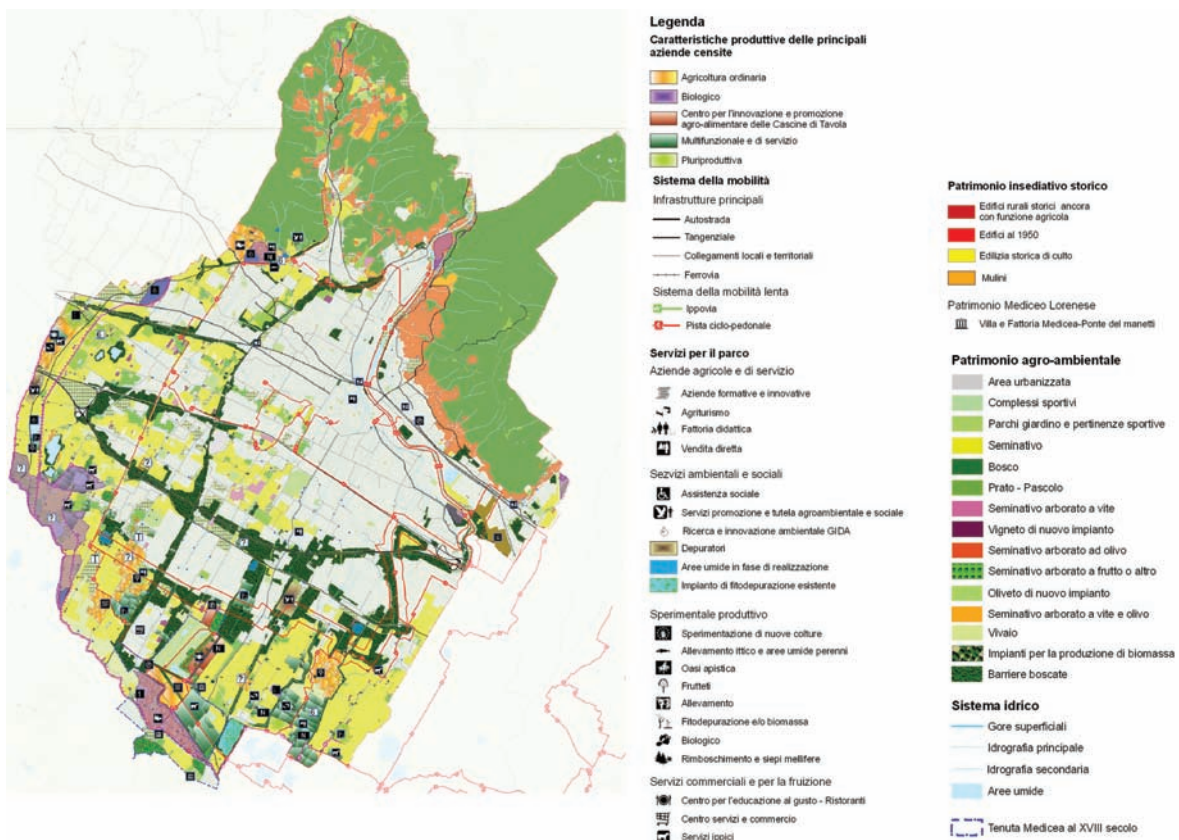


Figure 2 | First scenario studies for the agricultural park of Prato (source Mengo, Calvelli 2009)



Figure 3 | Municipality of Prato, Structure plan, The scenario for the agricultural park (source: Prato Municipality)

After a first phase of “awareness building” and promotion for the park vision activities, led during around three years, the forum was established in 2010 under a formal way, with the creation of Association of social promotion -the Parco Agricolo di Prato Association- with a managing council of founder members including representatives of 15 associations that fostered the forum activities during the first phase. It’s worth noting that the Park Association is paired and supported, as provided by its statute, by two consultation bodies that are pivotal in defining initiatives and shared projects with stakeholders: the “Scientific/technical committee” and the “Committee of agricultural and foods operators”.

After its formal constitution the Park Association enhanced its operational activity, especially collaborating with Tuscany Region and Prato Province in promoting initiatives aimed to support the wider provincial and regional project -- especially- related to the Parco della Piana Project (see previous paragraph)- and in triggering off and fostering operating integrated projects related to farming activities. In this last field, is worth recall an ongoing initiative for the creation of a local wheat short food supply chain for flour and bread production under quality growing rules (i.e. adoption of agrarian rotation, chemical products use reduction) and wheat traditional transformation method accordingly with local tradition. That scheme involve at the moment many farmers and craftsmen of the local food sector and, after the first successful pilot phase, it is now directed toward a phase of enlargement and full development.

Despite its relevant activities and the reliability acquired by the association to the public institution and local stakeholders, the activity and the Park project realization are strongly hampered by the difficulty to carry on such an activities with a structure that is basically voluntary led and by the related problem of a structure that get weak financial means and a low institutional profile especially in bargaining with public powers.

4. The agricultural park as local development policy: mobilization local society, social capital and “territorial added value” production

How previously mentioned the agri-urban domain poses matter of peculiar interest and originality in the physical planning and territory design fields. Moreover these areas allow for a new vision and strategy addressing new “proximity economies” (Davezies, 2007) fitting with energy supply transition scenarios and with more equitable and sustainable models of local development and physical settlements assets (Newman et. al, 2009).

Such matters find an coherent theoretical and operational reference framework of interpretative and design character in the bioregional model and in the urban bioregion concept (Thayer, 2003;Magnaghi, 2010). At

the same time the conflicts that generate in this new domain, conceived as a new form of public space, call for the employment of social inclusive practices in the field of planning, suitable for the construction of new forms of agreements and contracts for the protection, regeneration and stewardship of the periurban farmland areas (CESE 2004, Terres en Villes 2005). Practices especially focused on the farmers willingness (Donadieu, 2004).

The two cases briefly described are placed in the problematic context just recalled and allow to deepen, in the Italian social and institutional framework, some of the matters raised that are pivotal for the development of an effective planning and design policy.

In the first case, the Parco Agricolo della Piana, starting from the initiative promoted by Tuscany Region govern, in coordination with other municipalities, is developed a participative and communicative process aimed to single out the keys features either of the park project as well as of the build heritage to protect and enhance tanks to the park. Despite that, under the inclusiveness point of view, the process described shows still some limits, above all considering the lack of background knowledge about the farmers and farming matters and problems.

About the second case, referring to the envisioning and participative process for the Agricultural park of Prato, the bottom-up approach is informal, and pays peculiar attention, since the outset, at the involvement of the agricultural sector stakeholders. That in close interaction with many associations sensitive to the agro environmental matters and to their relation with the urban environment. That second approach seems to be promising, nevertheless it put strongly in evidence, despite the empowerment activities carried out by the forum for the park (then became association) , the difficulty to submit to the public agenda the demands for an integrated planning policy for the periurban areas, as well as, the importance, especially in prospect, of farmland protection and care.

Despite the remarkable limits of both the experiences, they clearly point out some aspects to take in account in dealing with planning and design commitments for the periurban areas. Such aspects highlight that:

-the capability in producing new cognitive frames, place awareness and knowledge as possible result of the participated planning and design processes, results essential in pursuing a shared periurban park project that, otherwise, would take the profile of a simple top-down and mandatory tool, of doubtful effectiveness and utility;

- against the scarce attention and under representation of the demands stemming from the agricultural sector in the public agenda, it seems relevant the adoption of a “radical planning” approach (Friedmann, 1987) aimed to enhance the awareness and the “voice” capabilities (Hirshmann, 1982) on behalf of the farmers, especially with respect to public actors;

- relating to the two previous point, it seems pivotal the presence of a “third” and organized subject, between public and private sphere, “agent” and livener of a shared design process, suitable for the empowerment process management, but, at the same time, equipped enough in disposal of expertise for feeding the participated agri-urban park scenario design activities and to “bridge the gap” between public and private actor, expert and ordinary knowledge.

The adoption of such elements, seems to be not negligible in steering the agricultural park profile, not as a further “command and control” administrative entity, but, first of all, as a tool of territorial governance for the “grass root” promotion of an effective heritage enhancement policy (Virassamy, 2002), based on not tradable and transferable territorial values. That with the aim to pursue an endogenous development path for the generation of a veritable “territorial added value” (Dematteis, 2001), and to hamper “exogenous” development proposals and projects that simply “quarry” values from places and local society (Gallino, 2010) and, in doing so, weaken environmental and socio economic resilience of the territorial system as well⁵.

5 Under this point of view could be interesting compare the jus recalled project for the multifunctional Parco Agricolo della Piana Florence-Prato and the quoted adjustment project of the Florence City airport, placed just in the west outskirt of Florence and, at least in one of the solutions forecasted , encompassing part of the agri - environmental area of the future park.



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