Campagna Urbanizzata or Sprawl?
Images from the Florentine Conurbation

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The expansion of the city over the countryside is a well known phenomenon that has many different explanation regarding its causes and effects. The term sprawl is certainly one of the best known and more frequently used to characterise this growth of the urban environment, but it is also used to describe the landscape of this indifferentiated city. That urban expansion can be connected with several social and economic transformations that occurred in the second part of the past century and which have taken peculiar feature in some Italian regions. In Tuscany all this was studied already in 1975 and described by Giacomo Becattini with the famous expression "campagna urbanizzata" (urbanised countryside). This text reflect on if and how this progeny is still visible and important for part of our settlements and if and until what extent the urban material inherited from that peculiar "countryside" is the possible content of a city still livable. The discussion is based on the description and critical narration of the recent story and of the townscape of the flatland around Florence.

Introduction

In the first half of the seventies, when the term sprawl was not yet so widespread or well known as today, and when the phenomenon was not so evident in Italy, part of the Tuscan region was analysed by Giacomo Becattini (1975) and described with regard to urban development and urban landscape using the expression "campagna urbanizzata" (urbanised countryside).

Nowadays, the expansion of the city over the countryside, urban sprawl, is something that is common in different areas of Europe, North America etc., and is the result of different transformations of local societies and economic factors. The term 'sprawl' is a general word frequently used to describe local situations that are different in terms of landscape and settlement structure, or different because similar driving forces take on different forms in different territories according to the local history and society.

My hypothesis, in this text, is that the campagna urbanizzata has a clear influence on building strategies in Tuscany, shaping the diffused urbanisation of the plains in a form that is quite different from what happened in the same period in the better known and more studied sprawl areas of Veneto (Indovina 1990) and Lombardy (Boeri et al. 1996). So it is possible to analyse the qualitative effect of this distinctive growth model on organisation of the public spaces in the widespread settlements, as well as on the relationships between urban and rural spaces, and between old and new settlements, while enquiring if a general idea of urbanity is still present, or, if not, up to what point there was one, and what kind of problems and potentialities are visible today.

I do not claim in this text to give a complete and comprehensive answer to this question, but more simply to give an overview of some processes guiding the growth of the Florence-Prato-Pistoia conurbation and the results of these processes in terms of urban tissue. There is a twofold reason for using this area as an example. First of all, this is the area in Tuscany that for many years has absorbed the most impressive growth of the old cities: not many years ago separate poles, yes functionally connected, but divided by the countryside, and now, as in many European regions, a unique ensemble of urban centres and sub-centres. It is the area that has absorbed: the highest population growth starting from the fifties; the most dynamic economic activity (at least until ten years ago); and the most building activity inside the region. Finally, it is exactly the part of the territory studied by Becattini when defining the main features of the distinctive development model he described in the seventies as campagna urbanizzata.

Campagna urbanizzata

Part of the Italian production and industrial system of the seventies was considered a distinctive model compared with the most widespread and well-known classic Fordist model based on the factory; not only because of the predominant presence of SMEs, but mainly because of the extremely fragmented production chain, with single families or parts of families located in a wide territory dealing with a single portion of the final product. Those single production units were located in different places in the valleys, but in some way linked by a geographical and logistic proximity.

This 'process of development by disintegration' was going on against a background of general depopulation of the countryside and urban growth, in the context of a society that was under a peremptory transformation from rural to urban, and producing a new territorial setting. Production activities were located within the minute urban fabric, the production process segmented to involve single families working in their homes, while maintaining a predominance for specific manufacturing sectors. This was possible because it made use of the existent urban infrastructures and facilities, making a precise impact on the urban environment which was already visible in embryonic form in 1975:

The growth by enlargement and proliferation of light industry and its counter-image of rural depopulation occurred in the territory in the shape of growing competition between factories, settlements and agriculture for the extra urban and valley areas.

Unchecked enlargement in a long strip of towns and villages, which is typical of recent Tuscan urban growth, is simply the result of this competition between alternative land uses. Factories and housing have spread along the roads

or inside the settlements, along rivers or in the lower part of the hills, according to a complex and careful analysis of economies and diseconomies of agglomeration, without doubt with a substantial view to private requirements […] From another viewpoint, that competition has given rise to the formation - thanks to hundreds of thousands of "independent" settlement choices - of a sort of semi-urbanised network that grips the portion of Tuscany covered by light industrialisation. (Becattini, 1975, pp.178 – 179, own translation).

According to this opinion, the settlement organisation historically characterising that part of Tuscany (and, more in general, that part of central Italy), polycentric and not yet widespread, was a good culture medium for the development of a production model and the re-settlement of a society under deep transformation, but still maintaining some traditional features and family relationships. What I would like to underline is that the final urban environment is mainly the result of subjective decisions more than the result of planned urban development, laying firmly on the local historical heritage rather than producing a new urban pattern and organisation.

The patterns of urban growth

'Lightning-speed enlargement in a long strip of towns and villages' was the 1975 description; but how can those urban enlargements be described?

In the classic portrayal of the urban sprawl in the north of Italy, we observe the landscape of SMEs and production districts as a continuous juxtaposition of dwellings and small or medium-sized factories, sometimes with small outlets as a third component. This is something that does not exist in the area under observation, probably because the spaces needed for the 'development by disintegration' are so tiny that in the recent past they have not given rise to a specific urban landscape, but have been encompassed in the residential urban fabric. In the maps from 1954, 1988 and 2010 it is evident that, at least until 1960 and after, the matrix of settlements clearly visible in 1900 still provided the fabric onto which any expansion had been hooked, with no specific innovation or insertion of a really new episode.

Figure 1 | The buildings visible in the map of 1954 and of 2010

This is also due to the fact that the road network did not change in this period: it was certainly improved, but the only new big axis built was the motorway, while local journeys were still absorbed by historic routes. The strip of towns and villages is therefore the effect of the old villages, still identifiable by their position, welding together along historic routes. But what do we find inside this urban area, if we exclude the historic settlements? First of all, a typical form of growth along the roads with terraced houses and back gardens, a portion of the towns built until the fifties - sixties. Then, in the seventies and part of the eighties, residential dwellings in some big multi-storey blocks around the historic centres, followed in the nineties by the construction of single family (or two- to four-family) detached houses with gardens. More recently this model has evolved into new aggregations in small to medium-sized blocks of terraced or row houses.

This is certainly an extremely rough simplification, but if we accept it, we can see that, except for the period when the population growth was so strong as to require the building of big blocks of flats, the guiding forces of the urbanisation and the biggest part of the land consumption resulted from the search for a new

residence in an urban area, connected to the transformation of Italy from a rural to an industrial society in the fifties and sixties, and more recently many families' desire to improve their standards of residential living. So the traditional architecture of terraced houses has been reproduced (in some way) as the ideal model for a small one- or two-family dwelling, with gardens and with some idealised form of contact with the natural environment. Paradoxically, the search for an individual solution, differentiated from the rest of the urban tissue, which was the engine behind the growth of urbanised areas, did not produce variety, but a homogeneous chaos. The urban landscape that was at the origin of the area's aesthetic appeal is contradicted by the actual fragmentation.

Figure 2 | A sequence of terraced houses in a street of Campi Bisenzio

Today is it still visible that all this happened thanks to 'hundreds of thousands of independent settlement choices'? I think it is not because urban growth was not controlled by any form of town planning (in Tuscany town planning is certainly present), but evidently because here planners were not able to guide that growth, and proposed a complex and comprehensive idea of the city. At the same time, an attitude directed towards the day-to-day management of personal needs and the final users and builders' requirements led to an unawareness of the environmental and logistic damage that this growth model would cause, until it became evident when it reached the threshold, at this point hard to solve because of a lack of space and financial resources.

Figure 3 | A sequence of terraced houses in a street of Campi Bisenzio

A clear example of how the growth worked is visible in the typical pattern of erosion of the rural landscape near the border of built areas (mainly before the Tuscan new planning law of 1995), with pilot interventions and following saturation. Practically what happened is that some new dwellings were built not immediately on the boundary of the settled areas, but at a certain (not exaggerated) distance, using some existing old roads and linking the new urbanisation, in some way, to the existing organisation of rural fields. After a certain amount of time the result was a compact urban body with several very small secondary nuclei at a certain distance, followed after a while by a new master plan considering completion and saturation necessary (completamento and saturazione are two words very often found in the master plans). The pilot and other dwellings were built under pressure from and following the decision of single actors. In the official planning, all this land was for new buildings (I am not describing an illegal procedure), but the sequence of growth and also the shaping of the urban space is the result of a series of completely individual decisions. So in this case planning directed the growth towards specific areas, but then failed to control the general organisation of the urban body. What was finally missing in this situation was clearly a single identifiable design and an

idea of public space as connective tissue. Public space had a specific identity in the old settlements and a random appearance in the new ones. Here it was simply the empty space in-between …
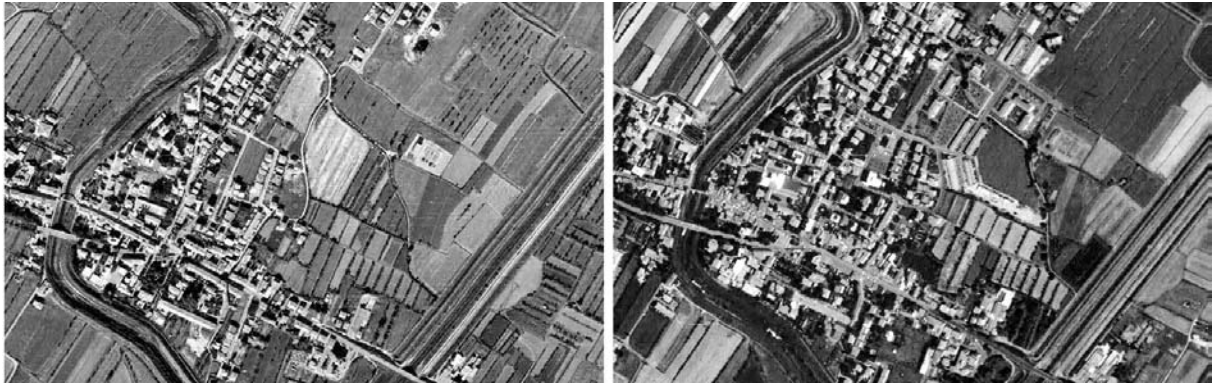

Figure 4 | Urban growth between 1978 and 1996. Along the red lines in the second image is visible the 'completion and saturation' growth logic

A second variant of this pattern of growth is the ring road as a driving force for new development. The fact that the larger part of urbanisation was supported by the old road network and that the network of public spaces was not planned, causes frequent crises in the traffic. Hence the need for new ring roads in order to free residential areas from strong traffic flows. But the bypasses quickly become new urban roads, allowing an external ring to be built (even if frequently considered not for building in some previous master plan). This is nothing new and has happened in many places, but here, again, the process was planned in terms of planning permission, but not with an eye to transforming the pattern. The bypass is simply exceeded, without changing its form. The road remains a connection, but is not transformed according to its new function as an urban axis. The development is again the result of individual drives for new residences where a road, built as a boundary, is supposed to become a link between two sides of a neighbourhood. However, since its form is not changed, it remains a meaningless space, if not a barrier.

The landscapes of urban growth (and beyond)

As far as townscape is concerned, the described pattern of urban development has a significant effect because in this pattern the public space is the leftover from all the new building areas that the independent settlement choices have scattered in the territory. On the contrary, in the areas built before the massive development, the net of streets and squares can still be seen to have a clear meaning.

Figure 5 | The public space is frequently just the the empty space in-between

The relationship between this idea of public space and the residential architecture is visible in many neighbourhoods of detached houses. This typology of building with a private garden is clearly connected with the idea that the public space is for connection and cars and not for the local community. In terms of the quality of personal living, what is considered important ends at the garden fence, while outside what is relevant is car accessibility and little more. Obviously the positive side of the coin here is the quality of the masonry of the residential buildings, but those areas have an unavoidable mood of agoraphobia and a strong monofunctionality. What remains different here, compared with some sprawl areas of northern Italy is that, until very recently, the townscape was still shaped by independent settlement choices, connected by economic drives, but embedded in this model of strongly fragmented family production. It is only very recently that things have probably started to change, profoundly and quickly.

Image 6 | A self-built public space at the edge of a ring-road which has become an urban street

Something that has changed the described situation, but just in the contemporary period, is the insertion in this townscape of new elements, never experienced before, with no relationship with the existing tissue. The shopping facilities, big supermarkets and shopping malls just recently built are organised inside huge plots that are visibly not related in terms of dimension with the existing minute organisation of the residential settlements. The buildings are shaped in a very simplified and rigid way, always in the middle of big parking areas. While connected to the rest of the territorial structure by road junctions, they are always juxtaposed with the remaining elements of the campagna urbanizzata, never dialoguing with this specific form of settlement. There is a strongly visible rigidity along the contact lines between those areas and the rest of the city, where we find barriers instead of interfaces, even in the cases when green areas try to mediate the transition. The distance between the fine grain of the landscape of the urbanised countryside and the shopping advertising machine is too big; it is never mediated by any attention to the architectural and functional design.

Figure 7 Urban growth at the edge of the historic settlement of Campi Bisenzio. It is clearly visible the development through several saturation phases and the difficult relationship between the small spaces of the historic settlement and the new big buildings for shopping and loisir. From left to right: 1978, 1996, 2007

Paradoxically, something similar can also be said of the remaining spaces of agricultural land. Fields were and still are a reservoir of building land, in a general economic framework where agriculture is not significant any more and urban rents are a strong force behind the building industry, even in absence of a real market (in some recent cases new production buildings have remained empty for years, but construction did not stop, at least until very recently, because of the financial crisis). The weakness of agriculture has given over fields to the expansion of buildings and what remains is greatly fragmented. The interface between countryside and town is normally the back of the last expansion of residential areas or the border of some

mall; therefore, not an interface, but a banal fringe of the urban area. That interface could have been the guarantee of a correct relationship between the natural and built environment and a margin that implies the end of the erosion of the countryside, but the relationships have been broken up. As it is not managed, the interface is just the last portion of the series of independent settlement choices that will be overthrown at the first opportunity.

Figure 8 | The chaotic landscape of a shopping mall area. Some fragment of rural land surrounded by new residential buildings

Conclusion. Is the campagna urbanizzata still a good place to live?

The plain between Florence and Prato, the area of campagna urbanizzata which is the subject of my description, is not certainly an unplanned area. Everything that happened here from the fifties - sixties to date in terms of urban growth was part of a master plan, sometimes as a possibility of future land use, sometimes even with some support from public policies (EU funding for example). The extremely fast and pervasive urban growth is clearly visible, but today the main features of the territory described in '75 by Becattini can still be seen. These traces constitute an urban fabric useful for a possible re-design of these towns, as they are not yet an undifferentiated magma of unrelated buildings, roads, factories, malls, etc.. In this direction, we need to work around the weaknesses and potentialities of this territory.

The weaknesses have been described in the previous paragraphs of the text:

- the little coherence in the overall pattern of the city;
- the unmanaged relationship between built-up and green areas, and green urban areas and agricultural land;
- the ring roads transformed into urban roads, but without any changes, or transformation from traffic lane to urban street;
- the growth of many neighbourhoods thanks to the juxtaposition of independent choices rather than a comprehensive urban design;
- the lack of formal and functional relationships between fine-grain residential tissues and big, monofunctional shopping compounds.

To the list we can also add an unsatisfactory general quality of architectural design, which is visible in part of the residential buildings (mainly in the condominiums of the seventies and eighties), and in practically all the recent malls, but which is even more visible in the low quality of the design of public and green spaces (with some interesting exceptions). This last weakness is important in the formation of the common picture of a neighbourhood and is the engine of a widespread demand for the improvement of the urban environment. A demand that can be a starting point for a collective project of urban upgrading, even within the described typical behaviour of independent settlement choices. In fact, what was missing in the past was a leading role taken on by urban planning during the reshaping of the countryside into the new widespread town. The

attempt to control all the aspects of the city's development failed, firstly during the most impressive period of growth, and later when the citizens were trying to improve their quality of life by building single family homes or row houses. The failure is probably connected to the tendency towards a comprehensive and rational planning that did not consider volition and independent settlement choices as part of the planning game and that in some cases was blind to environmental and congestion problems until a critical threshold was passed.

Nevertheless, some weaknesses can be transformed into strengths if we are willing to accept that the thousands of individual plans, or better, plans developed by small local communities, may become collective options in the transformation of public space. Until a recent past, planners tried to insert some public facilities in towns that were growing as a sum of individual enterprises, while now, in a period of public funding shortages, they just tend to patch up the most critical situations. But the growth pattern of the campagna urbanizzata has allowed a certain degree of polyfunctionality and polycentricity to be maintained, based on the historic settlements. The polyfunctionality prevents the formation of dormitories; the polycentricity guarantees the concentration of a critical mass of people and things in some spots, and this is the basic element of a city effect that avoids the formation of a general undifferentiated sprawl. Restructuring of the minute public spaces (produced by the campagna urbanizzata growth model) into a continuous network is a good opportunity to maintain and improve the quality of life, but this has to be done while following and orientating individual wishes and ensuring the continuity of public spaces, if we want this network to become the guiding principle of the urban tissue. Obviously, good quality urban design and a collective path of transformation are a prerequisite.

Figure 9 | Public green spaces just recently arranged in the vacant spaces left by the building. Self-made in the picture on the left, designed by the administration in the right picture

Good design is also a very important topic for the residential blocks of the seventies and eighties. These buildings are frequently part of the picture of a dowdy periphery (even beyond the real situation), but it is not impossible to imagine a different future through a partial improvement project that touches, for example, the façades and the technical systems (some examples can already be seen in Le Piagge neighbourhood). A further network that has to be preserved and in many cases reconstituted is the network of rural and natural areas. The interface between town and countryside has to be planned consciously, to prevent the borders being nibbled away and make them clearly visible.

The big shopping malls are the last and most critical elements that have been inserted in the area. They are too big and their shape too rigid to fit into this fine-grain frame. They need big areas, but the biggest sticking point is that they propose a vision of undifferentiated space instead of specific milieus. In this case too, some of the features of the campagna urbanizzata can help mediate the negative impact of these objects (but we need first to accept the idea that, from now on, there is no more room for these new satellites to land in this territory). Indeed, the network of public space (heritage of the past, but sometimes a necessary

project for the future, as written above) can be used to link the empty spaces around the malls to the urban tissue. The problem of reinserting these areas in the city is first of all a problem of their size, as said, but we can imagine a form of hybridisation of the larger mesh of those empty spaces (and up to a certain point also of the buildings) through the insertion of small elements such as parking in the form of parks, green roofs, social kitchen-gardens, temporary gardens, etc.. This hybridisation could try to break up the big blocks, in the attempt to make them compatible with the existing polycentric network of settlements.

To conclude, I can underline that in the campagna urbanizzata the dialogue between the milieu and the local society was never completely cut off. But while waiting for the public administration to come up with bureaucratic (if not design) proposals for city management, what was missing was a guiding, collectively shared idea of public space. What we need now, as in some of the illegal and informal settlements, are 'actions to constitute public spaces' (Zanfi 2008, p.184), to transform the 'hundreds of thousands of "independent" [...] choices' into the starting point for local collective projects, fostering the implicit potentialities of existing practices for a good townscape and accepting the sometimes unpredictable results of a very local and incremental logic for the redevelopment of the urban environment.

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