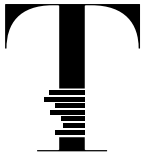
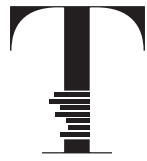


OLIVIA GORI

Metropolitan Park of the piana fiorentina

A journey through space, time, velocity







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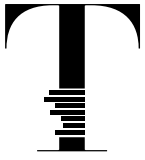


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The Periphery at the Center: an Implicit Handbook for the Suburban Project

Olivia Gori's thesis deals with the design of the peripheries in an original and brilliant way. It is like an implicit design handbook to improve the quality of life in the suburbs. Some of its design moves have a more general validity and can also be applied to other suburban contexts. I will focus on three aspects that are particularly relevant to me: 1) recognising the inversion of the centre/periphery hierarchy, 2) considering the so-called 'non-places' of the peripheries as interesting design opportunities, 3) adopting a sensory approach to urban/landscape design.

The periphery is the centre: reversal of the hierarchy in the contemporary metropolis.

The design explorations carried out in thesis apply to a large suburban void surrounded by a crown of cities and towns: Florence, Sesto Fiorentino, Calenzano, Campi Bisenzio, to name but the most important. From the point of view of those who live in any of these centers, this great void is certainly peripheral. However, as these urban centers have now welded together to form a single conurbation, this space has ended up in a central and barycentric position. The dimensions of the Florence Metropolitan Park designed by Olivia are very similar to those of the Central Park in New York. However, its characteristics could not be more different. While Central Park is surrounded by the houses that overlook it and by the large urban blocks of the urban grid of Manhattan, the Florence metropolitan park is surrounded on all sides by large mobility infrastructures (two motorways, a suburban thoroughfare, and a railway). This makes it comparable to a huge infrastructure ring which serves cities surrounding it. To the edges of this central void are the main shopping centers and some of the most important public facilities of the Florence area: the big Shopping Centre 'I Gigli', the Osmannoro shopping District, the Ipercoop in Sesto Fiorentino, various autogrills, the airport, the School of the Carabinieri Corp, the Case Passerini landfill, the University Campus of Sesto Fiorentino, various sports facilities.

The reversal of the hierarchical relationship between centre and periphery, which we have synthesized here as the phrase the periphery is the centre, corresponds in fact to a leap of scale in which the original polycentric system composed of separate and distinct urban nuclei merges into an urban organism of a higher level. Aristotle used the term synecism to indicate this merging process. Apart from its different scale and size, what is happening today in the center of the Florence plain is a process similar to that occurred in many cities of the past. A case geographically close to us is that of the city of Siena, formed around the Eighth century by the fusion of the linear settlement of Camollia and the villages of Castel Montone (now San Martino) and Castelvechio (the area of the cathedral also called Città). The city's particular inverted Y shape is the result of this merging. However, it took several centuries for the open space between the three original villages to become a real urban centre. Piazza del Campo was part of this system of open spaces. Besides being barycentric to the current historic center of Siena, this square has long been and probably still is the real political, social, and symbolic center of the city.

Olivia superimposes New York's Central Park on the large central void of the Florence area. The meaning of this simple graphic overlapping is that the center is right there: the periphery has become the center. Obviously, this is a centre in progress, not yet completed. Just as in Siena it took centuries for the urban voids between the villages from which the city originated to become its real civic centre, so it is likely that it will take several decades for the central vacuum of the Florence plain to turn into a complete metropolitan core. But in part it's already so.

The trends that are taking place in the Florence plain are common to many other metropolitan areas in Italy and in the world. They can be read in the inversion of the figure/ground relationship between open spaces and built-up spaces. Whereas in the past urban centers were perceived as figures and the countryside as a background, today the opposite is true. The recognition of this inversion opens the door to interesting design explorations and to the reconceptualization of the consolidated ideas of 'city' and of 'center'. The centre can be thought of as a large, well-equipped void, a green space that hosts - inside or on its perimeter - important metropolitan facilities. By the way, the idea of the city centre as a great void understood both as a natural environment and as a space hosting collective services and facilities is not new in the history of the city. One of the most significant examples is certainly the Boston Commons. Although originally used as a large pasture area, it consolidated in the mid-1800s as a large urban park that is thought by its inhabitants as the real city centre. It is overlooked by the Massachusetts State House, the home of the Massachusetts Parliament, and some of the city's most important churches and facilities. Situations similar to the one that we have in Florence today exist in many other places. A specular case, although smaller in size, exists only 50 km east of Florence, in the Upper Valdarno, between Montevarchi, San Giovanni Valdarno and Terranuova Bracciolini. Some of the most important facilities, such as the hospital and a large shopping centre, are either outside the cities or on their outer edges, close to a central green void. Although this void has not yet symbolically become the centre of this conurbation, it is already so from the functional point of view.

Suburban 'non-places' as design opportunities

Dominant descriptions of the suburbs in the political and urban debate represent them in a negative, not to say dystopian, way. Such representations are the consequence of an urban-centric gaze that is largely ideological. In fact, adopting a dystopian gaze towards the suburbs and a utopian gaze towards city centers, cultural and political conditions are created so that the former remain forgotten and the latter continue to be the main receptors of resources and attentions.

In fact the suburbs are the receptacle of what Augé calls 'anthropological non-places': airports, car parks, petrol stations, shopping centers, autogrills, landfills, to name but a few. According to Augé, these spaces, mostly linked to mobility, are condemned to be the scenarios of a consumerist and alienated life. Neither social life, nor any identification and belonging would be possible in such spaces. My opinion is indeed the opposite of that of Augé: I believe in fact that shopping centers, multiplexes, petrol stations and car parks are in many cases the only social facilities that exist in the suburbs and are not

without social life at all. For this reason I have been teaching the course “Rethinking Non-Places: from Spaces of Alienation to Places for Public Life” for several years. Years of empirical work in the suburbs confirm my impression. Augé’s gaze, which is shared by most urban planners and policy-makers in Tuscany and in the world, is once again ideological. This is demonstrated by the fact that whenever a multiplex or a new shopping centre is planned for the suburbs, journalistic and political discussions are held. “The multiplex closes the cinemas in the centre”, “the shopping centre closes smaller retailers”, “the city centre empties itself”: these are the typical phrases that can be read in newspapers. The viewpoint is, once again, urban-centric.

There is no concern that densely populated areas that are poor in public and commercial facilities will finally improve their equipment. Instead, the point of view and the interests of a small urban elite continue to be promoted. An elite able to pay the high rent that the use of luxury apartments in historical city centers inevitably entails. But these city centers are becoming more and more touristic and disneyfied. In fact, the majority of the population lives today in the suburbs and has a great need of this equipment. The worst side of this way of looking at the periphery and its social spaces is that it prevents a real planning and regulatory capacity. If well designed and regulated, Augé’s non-places can become real places for social and collective life.

An empirical and sensory approach to the knowledge of suburban areas

Dystopian representations of peripheries depend on a lack of empirical knowledge. Very often, urban analyses have little impact on urban plans. Such analyses ‘dissect’ the real world through specialist readings that fail to return the most direct and immediate aspects of the places they investigate. Henri Lefebvre complained about the limits of specialist knowledge and about the difficulty of achieving a synthesis of such knowledge. The facts confirm the correctness of his position. To break this deadlock, specialist (and fragmentary) analytical approaches should be replaced by an empirical and sensory holistic approach. Such kind of reading is conducted by Olivia Gori who, after travelling far and wide this great suburban void, highlights its potential and charm with great skills.

The analytical apparatus of the thesis is structured around three main axes: space, time and velocity. Space is the place of visual, sound and olfactory sensory analysis. The idea that this large suburban void is a ‘non-place’ surrounded by mobility infrastructures - an idea that dominates collective metropolitan imaginary - liquefies in front of the visualscape, the soundscape and the smellscape depicted by Olivia. These readings allow us to delineate a ‘new suburban aesthetic’, an aesthetic featured by categories such as dream, surreality, loss, abandonment, alienation, sublime. The analysis of time is linked to that of speed, the perception of time being linked to the speed of flows crossing space. In an area featured by very different times/speeds, from the fast ones of the motorway and the airport to the slow ones of water and walking,

this analytical tool allows to give back very well the different experiential situations. Time, space and velocity are also the keywords describing the three architectural meta-projects developed in this thesis. The Case Passerini landfill is rethought as panoramic point from which to observe the different layers of settlement that time and man's work deposited in the Florence plain. The Peretola airport is thought as an attraction for adults and children, who can enjoy the charm of the continuous flow of aircraft from a "speed platform", a sort of observatory outside the airport itself. Finally, the motorway is flanked by a "space tower", a landmark that allows a visual interface between the Florence metropolitan park designed by Olivia and the motorway.

In conclusion, Olivia Gori's project has the merit of acknowledging the irreversible transformations that have taken place in the metropolitan area of Florence and of effectively drawing their implications in conceptual, analytic and design terms. All that rendered through intellectually stimulating texts and an outstanding graphic work.

Giulio Giovannoni

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