

Italian outskirts: reflections
for a debate
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In Italy, for many years the debate on the urban outskirts has returned extremely timely involving many local realities as well as institutions and professionals, including architects, engineers, historians, sociologists, restorers, urban planners, etc. which often work in synergy to study specific urban settlements and understand the sociological dynamics underway.

Many projects have focused on the redevelopment of these peripheral areas, while other studies have turned their attention to the dynamics of aggregation and clash between the different social realities present in a particular neighbourhood, also proposing feasibility solutions for to favour the integration and the meeting among the heterogeneous cultures, in many cases connected with phenomena of international migration.

Among the heterogeneous voices that have distinguished themselves or who have had the greatest echo in the professional and academic field are certainly those of the 'starchitect', who used their reputation to promote projects or to start new studies, sometimes involving the new generations or young professionals.

According to some critics what is missing in the suburbs and in contemporary Italian cities is the political and planning foresight, capable of analysing problems and 'imposing' appropriate solutions. Among them, Luigi Mazza, who has long investigated the issue of urban redevelopment in the suburbs, emphasizing the importance of fostering the knowledge and experience of spatial planning, understood as a technical know-how capable of developing the tools and methods for configuring the space. In fact, it must determine the settlement models, the plans, the parameters and the rules of land use, defining specific individual projects. The government of the territory, therefore, must for him return to the centre of a planning process that must expressly involve the actors who share responsibility for decision-making on a city or an urban area and who must be able to identify priorities and assign the rules of an unavoidable transformation of the ground, using spatial planning¹.

1 L. Mazza, L. Servadio, *La città ai margini. 1 Periferie, la perdita del «centro»*. Leonardo Servadio intervista Luigi Mazza, in "Il Covile", n. 540, 4 settembre 2009, p. 4.

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“Giving a centre to the suburbs is essential - he said in an interview released in 2009 - both because it offers an important place for sociality and identity, and because through the peripheral centre is established the symbolic link with the historic city”².

In the debate of this last decade, architects who have taken radical positions have also distinguished themselves, advocating the destruction of entire parts of the city. This is the case of Aldo Loris Rossi, an Italian organicist architect who is a follower of the teachings of Frank Lloyd Wright, who for years was Professor of Architectural Design at the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Naples Federico II. In an interview released in July 2009, he underlined the structural obsolescence of Italian urban construction, recalling that “from 1945 to today the number of rooms in Italy has increased from about 30 million to 120 million: the building stock has quadrupled. It is true that in the post-war period we witnessed - not only in Italy - the demographic boom, but in Italy, there is an absolute over-urbanization, with at least 20 million empty spaces. It should be added that not only the architectural quality but the structural stability of many of these buildings are more than dubious.

The first anti-seismic laws date back to the beginning of the seventies: everything that was built in the period forty-five-seventy-five had no constraints that ensured structures capable to resist earthquakes. Added to this is unauthorized and, in any case, the tendency to construct in a ruffled way - I recall having personally witnessed the demolition of some buildings in Rome in which armaments had been placed by nets from beds; or other buildings in whose concrete structures there were empty bubbles or totally rusted irons. The consequences of this excessive and approximate edification are the collapses of which chronicles sometimes speak”³. For this reason, Rossi proposed to introduce a policy of incentives for the conservation of historic

2 L. Mazza, L. Servadio, *La città ai margini*. 1 *Periferie, la perdita del «centro»*. Leonardo Servadio intervista Luigi Mazza, in “*Il Covile*”, n. 540, 4 settembre 2009, p. 4.

3 A. L. Rossi, L. Servadio, *La città ai margini*. 2. «*Le periferie? Meglio rottamarle*». Leonardo Servadio intervista Aldo Loris Rossi, in “*Il Covile*”, n. 540, 4 settembre 2009, p. 4.

centres and to intervene radically, after careful studies, to demolish “everything that was built before the entry into force of the anti-seismic laws”, which, consequently, “does not offer guarantees of solidity”. So, until his death in June of this year, he advocated the blocking of the erosion processes of agricultural areas, proposing the demolition of most of the Italian suburbs, hoping for the “scrapping” of the garbage-free “architecture quality and insecurity”⁴.

Less radical and more proactive are the ideas advocated by Mario Botta, for whom the suburbs are the urban response of Italian society to the economic boom of the fifties and post-war reconstruction, followed by the devastation of the Second World War. This experience has somehow ended today and must leave room for a future that will be “rosier”, because “over time the places are modified through their progressive stratification. The main defect of the suburban areas is that they were born to respond to emergency conditions: hence the rapid diffusion that has been seen of residential buildings in areas outside the inhabited area. Subsequently, other aspects were added to the primary functions: services of varying usefulness.

In the historical centres this complex of responses articulated to the different needs is already well established and has had time to complete: today in the suburbs it will have to respond to the needs still present. To these are added the latent needs, which have to do with the identity, the recognizability, the memory, the symbolic value of the places - which is for obvious reasons particularly strong in the historical centres. But over time even those that today are suburbs will acquire ever greater density of meanings. Architecture is called to gather history and make it active and present”⁵.

4 A. L. Rossi, L. Servadio, *La città ai margini*. 2. «Le periferie? Meglio rottamarle». Leonardo Servadio intervista Aldo Loris Rossi, in “Il Covile”, n. 540, 4 settembre 2009, pp. 4-5.

5 M. Botta, L. Servadio, *La città ai margini*. 4. Periferie? Oltre ogni limite. Leonardo Servadio intervista Mario Bottai, in “Il Covile”, n. 540, 4 settembre 2009, pp. 8-9.



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However, among the most incisive experiences promoted in terms of analysis and study by Italian architects, the one that is arousing more interest is that initiated by the architect. Renzo Piano appointed in 2013 a life senator of the Italian Republic. In fact, he established the G124 group, which takes its name from the room assigned to the Genoese architect inside Palazzo Giustiniani, where six young architects work on a yearly contract, who are remunerated with the Senate salary of Renzo Piano, from here entirely devolved to the project.

The group works on numerous topics related to specific Italian suburbs, including: energy adjustment; consolidation and restoration of public buildings; the meeting places; the function and the enhancement of the green; public transport; the participatory processes to be used with the inhabitants of the areas in which the group intervenes by experimenting with redevelopment interventions. At the end of the one-year analysis, study, and planning process, the group was dissolved and reconstituted with six new young professionals, who began to take an interest in new cities and new peripheral areas⁶.

The project, therefore, stands as the vanguard of a process of analysis and study of the Italian suburbs that stems from the conviction of Plan of the centrality of the city in European culture. For him, in fact, the polis and the city constitute “a great invention, perhaps the greatest made by man. That is the place where you learn and practice coexistence, tolerance, civilization, exchange, and growth”⁷.

To understand the project, therefore, we must refer to the profound reasons that led the Genoese architect



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6 For an in-depth analysis of the G124 group, refer to the numerous sites specifically dedicated to the figure of Renzo Piano and to this workshop project and to the monographic issue of “Periferie. Diario del rammendo delle nostre città”, head registered in the Press Register of the Court of Genoa (n.16 / 2014), distributed in free combination with the “Sole 24Ore” starting from the November 27, 2014 edition in the cities of Rome and Milan.

7 <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2016-05-27/perche-difendo-periferie-153640.shtml?uuid=ADWx1fN> (last consultation: November 2018).

to deal with the suburbs, which he defended because interpreted as “a concentrate of energy”, in which live young people full of hope and desire to change. “Almost always the term periphery is coupled with adjectives denigrated as violent, desolate, sad - said in an interview released to the journalist head” Il Sole 24Ore of 29 May 2016 - but the faces of the people of Giambellino [neighbourhood of the Milanese suburbs] is anything but sad.

It is often referred to as an affective desert, but the opposite is true: the suburbs are melting pots of energy and passion. We know that it is not just positive forces.

Urban unease is a chronic disease of the city, a suffering that in some moments becomes more acute. An evil that is generated by social unease but also by the degradation and ugliness of the places, by the disenchantment with which the suburbs were made. We must work on the dignity of the place, it is fundamental. A well-built neighbourhood is a civic gesture, a well-constructed city is a gesture of peace and tolerance [...]

Here it may seem a contradiction of terms, but the periphery can be beautiful, so I defend it. Even some glimpses, certain courtyards, the proportions of the Giambellino buildings are beautiful. As well as the beauty of the G124 we found it also in Librino [degraded neighbourhood of the suburbs of Catania], in Rome above and below the Viaduct of Presidents, in Borgata Vittoria in Turin and we are hunting for pearls again this year in Marghera [locality of the municipality of Venice characterized by the presence of a large industrial pole].

It is a hidden harmony that must be sought and discovered. The suburbs enjoy a beauty for which they were not built: they were made without affection, almost with contempt. Yet there is a beauty that can come out of it, made of people but also of light, horizons, nature and lots of space”.

In the suburbs, therefore, the academic and professional world is reacting in a completely different way, meeting the applause or noticeably deviating from public opinion and, sometimes, from the vision of the suburbs and the informal city of those who live their lives in



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everyday life. A distance that needs, therefore, of cultural encounter and comparison, also in relation to the very meaning of the word “periphery”. This term, in fact, derives from the late Latin word “peripheria” (= circumference) which, in turn, derives from the Greek expressions “peri” (= around) and “pherein” (= bring). Etymologically, therefore, the term “periphery” identifies a perimeter area that, by extension, in the last two centuries has ended up defining the extreme and most marginal part of a city and a territory, often in contrast with a centre. This word, however, has been widely used by scholars, historians, geographers, architects, urban planners and sociologists in a very heterogeneous manner, changing the meaning of the original term or specifying interconnections and relationships that a portion of the city has with its outline. Furthermore, many researchers and scientists have emphasized specific aspects of the periphery, giving it a new disciplinary connotation or variously declining its meaning, which has become, in some historical moments, a fundamental and fundamental element of much higher values.

Although a generalist definition can be considered somatised by the different components of contemporary society, it is evident that not always the heterogeneous subjects who have studied and investigated the periphery, and still do so, have come to concordant results on the meaning of this part of the city, and even less have they universally shared the methodologies of reading phenomena and strategies to resolve their existing fragilities and contradictions. Substantial differences, moreover, remain among the heterogeneous housing dynamics and appropriation of the ‘peripheral’ spaces put in place in different geographical areas.

For many reasons, first of all, the historical, cultural and sociological ones, the outskirts of the big cities are extremely dissimilar to each other, differentiating even more when compared with the realities of the smaller centres. Therefore, if there are great differences between the Milanese suburbs and the Roman or Neapolitan suburbs, an abyss seems to divide the periphery of the medium and large Italian cities from the metropolises and international megacities.



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In spite of these diversifications, it is evident that there are unitary elements among them, determined also by the dynamics of judgment and prejudice that weigh on them.

Whatever the latitude and longitude of a city and a periphery is, it is evident that they need multidisciplinary historical-critical approaches to partially understand their entities and values, often connected with the vast phenomenon of popular residence, which in Milan took place completely in early decades of the twentieth century.

The result of a long process of sedimentation of modes of Lombard philanthropy and of the encounter-clash of urban dynamics and, in a wider sense, social - as the relationship between city and countryside, which emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century -, the theme from the outskirts of Milan, immediately interfaced with the residency of the poorer classes, becoming the object of study, in general and throughout its development, of different interpretations presented in magazines and specific monographs, throughout the twentieth century and in two first decades of the new millennium. This theme has also become the fulcrum of wide-ranging historiographical analysis, which inevitably involved different disciplinary sectors; he finally occupied often ample space in the most widespread manuals.

The theme of the urban-suburban Milan, often losing its nuances and specific meanings, was partly identified with the theme of large residential workers and low-cost housing, strongly connected to the dynamics of urban development and contemporary economic policy. It also has significant implications with the analysis of social contexts; identifies specific expressions of the concept of living; it is a knot of several specialized disciplinary components; it interests, like every other expression of architecture with strong urban implications, perceptual problems, socialization, and security.

The home of the suburbs soon also involved issues of interior design and furnishing, which today are fundamental components of the design. It is worth mentioning, by way of example, the fact that this issue found space, with consequent great diffusion, already in the competition organized by the Humanitarian Society in the context of the 1906 Expo. It remained alive, with alternating phases, up to the precise analyses carried out. recently by professors of the Polytechnic of Milan, under the historical and compositional profiles, which have treated them starting from the second half of the

twentieth century in studies that, with different variations, have opened research still in progress, offering interesting results also in the fields of design, standardization in mass production, etc.

The theme of living in the suburbs is therefore strongly connected to that of living, which is in itself vast field, which implies relevant anthropological and philosophical components: as the contemporary thinker Silvano Petrosino specifies “man does not live in a mere environment, it does not occupy a pure space and does not simply install on a site, but always «dwells»: man exists as a man because he lives in a place”⁸. Moreover, it is known that many reflections, from philosophers such as Heidegger or more recently Derrida, Ricoeur and Cacciari, have had as their privileged theme the living and the periphery of the world and of the contemporary city.

Throughout the twentieth century, the term ‘inhabiting’ has identified a context of functions, spaces and social forms clearly distinct from a theoretical point of view of functions, forms and spaces linked to ‘work’. It has had in its lodgings the essential ‘datum’, the cornerstone of an interpretative system of the evolution of social conditions and since it recorded the passages, a phenomenon which never could be completely separated from spaces that are coherent, cultural and commercial services in particular.

In the long season that is usually identified as a specification of contemporary or modern architecture - which includes the whole of the twentieth century or that, for some scholars, begins in the second half of the nineteenth century - must be inscribed the broad debate on living also the suburbs, which declines in specific architectural themes such as, to immediately indicate the prevailing and most fruitful, the development of new types, to scale the individual building and urban scale.

The first ‘Modern Movement’, in the Athens Charter of CIAM (1933) in particular, schematized in a few functions the individual and associated activities of men and made the same functional separateness of the habitat thus conceived on the design of the city

8 S. Petrosino, *Capovolgimenti. La casa non è una tana, l'economia non è il business*, Jaca Book, Milano, 2008, p. 10

fall. Consequently, it was identified through a scale of physiological and psychological attributes that caged individual and group life in an interpretation with universalizing claims, while the urban project, or the design of the city as a whole, was elaborated on the basis of the zoning principle, that could not find adequate space in the old centres, responding to completely different settlement logic.

In Europe, numerous interventions were carried out on the basis of these principles, giving rise to a widespread experimentation of modernity, in many cases reaching a considerable theoretical deepening. In particular, the “radical architects”, such as Hannes Mayer, Ernst May and Martin Wagner, in the absolute rigor of the forms proposed the theme of the residence of the poorer classes as the possibility of redemption of the whole society, involved in a process of renovation of living and of the urban suburbs.

Italy carried out in this area a singular path, not comparable to that of the major European nations: if so, far it was considered that this happened for reasons of backwardness, currently it is proposed by several parties to try to grasp positive factors of this singularity.

On an international scale, a long reflection, from the post-war period to the present, involved the questioning of the rigidity of the first modern project, in which the Amsterdam Charter of Integrated Conservation of 1975 was a fundamental step, a document that confirmed the recovery of the value of the ancient centres and more generally of the historical city, therefore the abandonment of the most radical and utopian theses of the modern.

In the current meaning, therefore, the dwelling identifies everything related to the individual and associated life of people in contexts on several scales (from the mononuclear family to large community aggregations) related to the place, natural and artificial, in which this life takes place.

Living and working rationally understood, spatially distinct under the pressure of rationalization of activities on the territory, have sometimes overwhelmed, even in Italy and especially in the most urbanized areas, richer articulations of the traditional space of community life, founded on a symbolic order, without however completely

erasing them. The traditional space has often remained, even in the cities, the context of private life, the node, the threshold not to violate for an inner recovery. It has also continued to articulate in many cases functions of private life and common life, conceived in relation to spaces and moments, holidays or leisure, with a character that is still weak in its centre.

This is, for example, the solution often adopted in modern Italian neighbourhoods, highlighted by some designers and professionals of the twenties, including Enrico Griffini and, in more complete terms, Giuseppe Samonà. It is in this context that we need to consider studies on how to live in the poorer classes that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century, in which there are also instances of educational and moralizing concern.

Erroneous would be a reading of these instances, of which there are fundamental testimonies in the debates on the public housing of the City Council of Milan since 1861, which does not depend not only on an economic-political contextualization but also on ethical intentions.

For example, in an attempt to understand the phenomenon of the “inns” and the habitation of the more disadvantaged classes made by Lodovico Corio in 1885⁹ or the reasons that led the entrepreneur Benigno Crespi to found an industrial village, on the Adda, awareness that every man must be able to find and build his own balance of relationship between himself and the other, regardless of the social condition to which he belongs.

It was the conviction of many that it did not favour the improvement of the condition of life of the weaker classes and the “solution” of the housing problem, even if peripheral and separated from the centre of the city, would have had as a consequence the social conflict. To some, it was also clear that the place par excellence of experience and human growth was the home, without which it would be difficult to start a process of development of the person until the awareness of their dignity.

9 Cooperativa Case ed Alloggi, untitled, in “Ho una casa mia”, 1910, n. 1, p. 1.

The house, in essence, for many personalities of the Milanese culture and politics in the decades of transition between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was the place where the inhabitant could fully express himself: it was not only a function of shelter, but it was the context of formation of the person in the family.

This was the commitment, underlying a vast sector of factors of the late nineteenth century, which pushed entrepreneurs, administrators and lay and Catholic cooperatives to hypothesize that the only possibility, to avoid the class conflict, was constituted by a generalized improvement of the condition of the poorest and the opportunity to offer everyone to become, over time, the owners of the house in which they lived.

These are solid convictions already found in the Milanese culture of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, even more evident in the first decades of the twentieth century. In fact, with the passing of time, the conviction was strengthened that the owner's condition of the worker favoured moral and material improvement, as documented by the advertising messages of the cooperatives that arose at the turn of the century.

Among all the positions, perhaps the most emblematic is that of the Milanese Cooperativa Case e Alloggi that, in 1910, published its own magazine with the emblematic title "Ho una casa mia". On the first issue you can read: "Insinuating between you, this sheet wants to fight prejudice and wants to help you in the sacrifice; he wants to teach you that your home is a source of happiness and not a new source of seriousness and annoyance; it is a beginning of health of mind and body, and not a new heap of work; it is poetry of mind and heart, it is the taste of simplicity not unmatched by art; it is goodness (the best) to parsimony and denial of greed; he is the enemy of sloth not unmoved by the economy of our strength; it is the completion of that tranquillity that is proper to hearts swollen with affection, with brains saturated with family morality. Boredom, the sovereign in the lodgings of the big cities, stops at the threshold of the houses where the landlord is the tenant - here the glare of the sun's rays, the vision of the green, the air that everywhere penetrates and purifies, removes the unconscious uniformity of the monotony of which even the most beautiful houses are covered, where the light is dimmed and made uniform by the gloom, as happens in those lodgings, and in our city there are many, too many, which can be considered as many subdivisions of a gigantic shelf"¹⁰.

10 Cooperativa Case ed Alloggi, untitled, in "Ho una casa mia", 1910, n. 1, p. 1.

In the articulation of the theme of public housing in the Italian popular, and Milanese in particular, it was also focused that the declination of domestic housing was connected to an attribution of priority to the residual quality of the ancient nucleuses of the city. Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there was, in fact, a general process of downsizing the housing destination of population centres, through the redevelopment of the urban image and the expulsion of the weaker residential classes, giving rise to a phenomenon that manifests itself with different specificities even today.

Being interested in current affairs, on the urban outskirts of the world and on the different ways of living them, also through the magnifying glass and interpretation of the camera, means having at heart the destiny of the contemporary city and of the man who lives there.

The problem of the city and the contemporary suburbs, therefore, recall the criticism of the renunciation of the prophetic value of architecture already enucleated by Walter Gropius in 1919 in his famous volume *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* and the poetic-literary vision expressed by Italo Calvino in the book *Invisible Cities*. In fact, the author concludes the story by writing: “Already the Great Kan was leafing through his atlas maps of the city that threaten in nightmares and curses: Enoch, Babylon, Yahoo, Butua, Brave New World.

He says: “Everything is useless if the last landing can only be the infernal city, and it is there at the bottom that, in an ever-closer spiral, it sucks the current.

And Polo: - The hell of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the hell that we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to avoid suffering for it. The first is easy for many: to accept hell and become part of it to the point of not seeing it anymore. The second is risky and requires continuous attention and learning: seeking and knowing how to recognize who and what, in the midst of hell, is not hell, and make it last, and give it space”¹¹.

11 I. Calvino, *Le città invisibili*, Einaudi, Torino, 1977, p. 164. The translation of Italo Calvino's text, as well as the translation of all the other citations presented in this essay, was performed by Riccardo Federico Saggese.

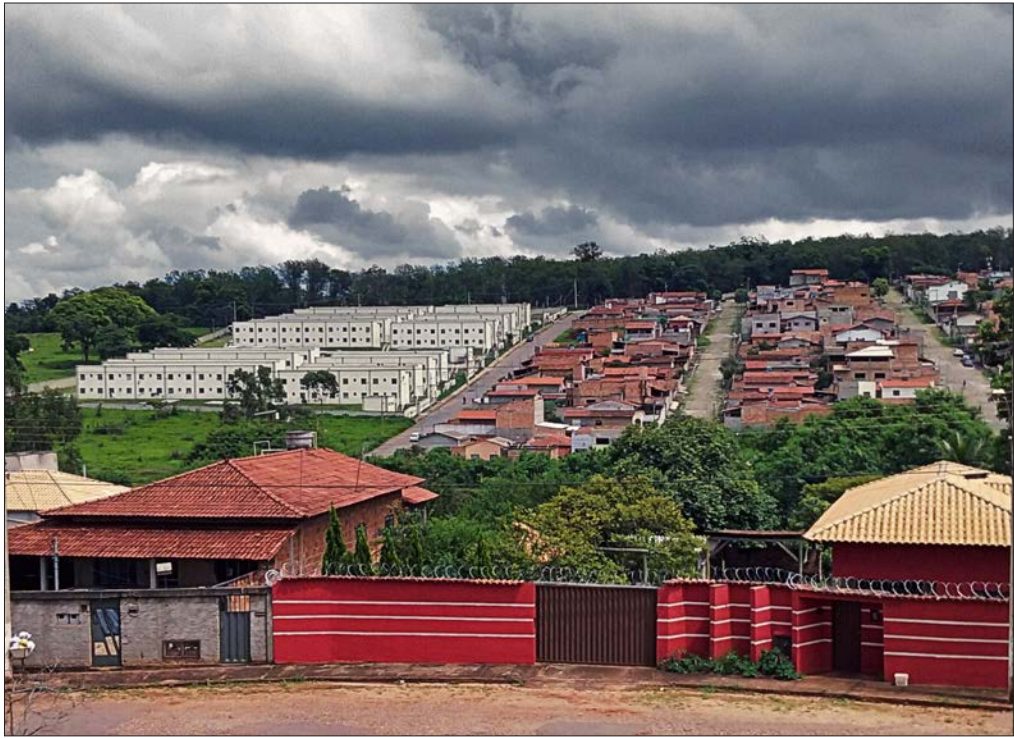
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MINOR CITIES



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Os temas de pesquisa de interesse são aqueles que envolvem a recuperação e o restauro de edificações antigas e modernas, dando atenção ao contexto ambiental, urbano e territorial, á arquitetura como momento complexo de síntese das artes, á conservação e aos problemas da restauração. As numerosas publicações de sua autoria se relacionam a âmbitos diferentes da historia da arquitetura, da arte e da cidade. Nos últimos anos suas pesquisas se orientam á proteção, tutela e recuperação dos bens históricos e ambientais e a busca da relação existente entre matéria, arquitetura e arte.

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