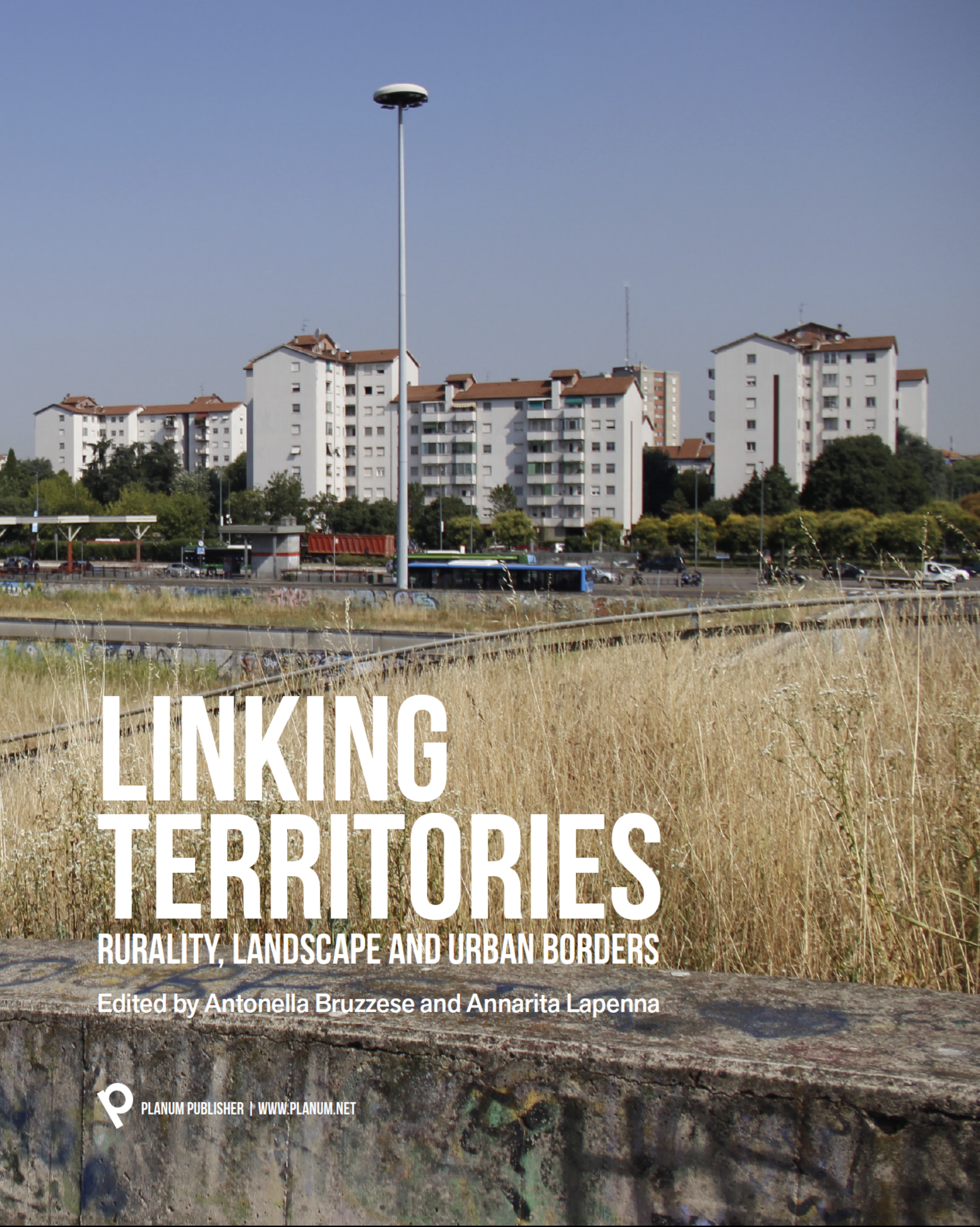




LINKING TERRITORIES

RURALITY, LANDSCAPE AND URBAN BORDERS

Edited by Antonella Bruzzese and Annarita Lapenna



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LINKING TERRITORIES: LEARNING AND EXPERIMENTING OPEN FORMS OF URBAN DESIGN

Antonio Longo

MILAN, CITY OF FRAGMENTS AND FAILED MODERNITY

During the twentieth century, Milan grew by clearly defined portions, each of which is the result of single urban planning projects connoting the present city as a big unaccomplished work. While the fragmented image of contemporary Milan shows the traces of miscellaneous notions of city, it manifestly does not bear the hallmark of an overall modern layout (Bolocan, Bonfantini 2007). Beyond the township lines strictly meant, Milan appears as an aggregate of parts, isles, a collage-like city which has become one with the regional scale (Balducci, Curci, Fedeli, Pucci 2016).

Particularly evident in the border areas, the fragmentation of the city impacts both construction development and services, infrastructures and open land. If during the development years, public housing neighbourhoods explicitly embodied coherent urban projects by stand-alone portions, many of the later projects were growingly smaller-scale. While since the 1980s the big reuse projects of the industrial sites abandoned by the early industry has produced a change in the areas strategically located near the infrastructures (Bicocca, Rogoredo, the trade fair precinct and its new site, the areas near the Garibaldi railway station), the remains of ancient villages and farms co-existed with the big urban facilities, the gaps produced by the infrastructures and the residential settlements, thus defining a fragmented landscape in the background of the still mostly active rural land, long viewed as a sort of no-man's-land which could be modified.

On the other hand, at various times during the twentieth century, there have been projects which cleverly and modernly celebrated the city growth and looked at the urban planning culture driving the transformation of big cities worldwide. In keeping with the outlook Carlo Cattaneo framed as early as prior to the development of the modern city (Cattaneo 1844), some of those projects viewed the relation between city and territory, between the geography of rivers, waterways and countryside, as a potential development matrix of the new city.

The layout Piero Portaluppi envisaged together with Marco Semenza in 1927 (Portaluppi, Semenza 1927), the general outline of the "Piano AR" drawn up on occasion of the competition for the reconstruction of the city in 1945 (Albini 1946), the scheme of the "Piano Intercomunale Milanese" developed in 1963 under the guidance of Gian Carlo De Carlo (De Carlo 1966, Nicosia 2013), were never implemented, if not to a very small extent. Yet, they testify to the relation between existing villages and new neighbourhoods, between new infrastructures and old routes, between

water regulation and systems and city layout. First and foremost, faced with the lack of a dominant natural landscape, a characteristic which caused Milan to appear as an abstract platform, these schemes tried to represent the vision of the future city also through a uniform layout of the open land, complementary to the layout of the built city.

What in the rest of Europe influenced the future layout of big cities, in Milan remained either confined to theory or translated in a handful of architectures designed by twentieth-century key players. It is interesting to note that the genuine quality underlying these projects, no longer to be found, resided in representing Milan other than confined to its administrative boundaries, subordinate to the geographies and "connections" consistent with the objectives and the reference geographies of the layouts themselves. Since the mid Sixties, the urban planning projects developed for Milan have focused more and more on land use and have been indissolubly tied to the local administration policy alone, disconnected from a regional and systemic vision.

Apart from their different technical and political vicissitudes, the three schemes mentioned above epitomize stand-alone examples of a failed modernity. When we examine them separately, to the West along the old Olona riverbed and the Sempione route, to the North, in the area most integrated with the future conurbation of Brianza, they show two open land portions which witnessed two extremely different, interesting episodes of urban structuring and re-composition.

LOCALIZED RE-COMPOSITION STRATEGIES ON THE EDGE OF THE CITY: BOSCOINCITTÀ AND PARCO NORD MILANO

During the Seventies two projects for the construction of urban open land got under way which set themselves apart. Namely, the construction of BoscoinCittà, which began in 1972 on the Western side of Milan, along via Novara, and the project for Parco Nord Milano, the construction of which began in the early Eighties after long-term political and technical discussions in the framework of the "Piano Intercomunale Milanese". Both projects evidence a completely different territorial re-composition quality: based on vision, management criteria, local political initiatives concerning specific portions of the territory, it has been possible extending and inspiring the layout and government of entire urban sectors.

BoscoinCittà is the result of the initiative seized by of a bunch of proactive people networking with the local division of Italia Nostra, an association committed to protecting the natural, artistic and cultural heritage. Back in the early Seventies, taking inspiration from similar European projects and for the first time in Italy, the association promoted an Urban Forestation Centre asking the Municipality to be allocated an area where, by replicating Northern European experiences, an urban forest would be created in keeping with forest-specific technical criteria. Following the agreement between the association and the Municipality of Milan, between 1972 and 1974, the foundations of the first unit of the future "BoscoinCittà" were laid along via Novara, West of the city. The first start-up action consisted in setting up an experimental, if not pioneering, urban forest system and, later, renovating an old farmhouse. Over forty years after the kick-off phase of the long construction process, today BoscoinCittà epitomizes an active hub and the design soul of the entire West Milan sector. Failing a global initial scheme, the project reconstructed a continuous system of open land defining the west boundary of the city.

Since the outset of the project, the association "Italia Nostra Ovest" – CFU, Urban Forestation Centre – responsible for managing the space, has stood out as an influential political-technical group actively promoting an enlightened example of local management (Torrani 1984).

The association founders included Piergiuseppe Torrani, administrative lawyer and subsequently promoter of AIM, Associazione Interessi Metropolitani, Sergio Pellizzoni who has been director of the forest for over 30 years and Luisa Toeschi, current President of the CFU. The project was realized following a very light and adaptive layout designed by the Landscape Architect Giulio Crespi with the technical support of the School of Minoprio, a public-privat Foundation for gardening and arboriculture (Ponti, Ponti 1974). Thanks to these special conditions, BoscoinCittà and the promoting association have grown into a benchmark player of Milan's environmental and urban planning policies. The CFU currently heads many initiatives designed to regenerate the city's open land as

well as promotes projects whose scope goes well beyond the urban boundaries, including a complex system of open land defining the West portion of the city: the original core along via Novara, some portions of Parco delle Cave (a large public park in the west side of the city, in continuity with the BoscoinCittà) and the areas near the Figino purification plant. Standing out against their resourcefulness in establishing connections, relations, networks, the ability of the park's management team ensues from targeted actions, rather than from an initial territorial layout strategy, and pursues gradual reconstruction while giving a new configuration to the open land sequence along the Olona's old riverbed and the entire territory of Western Milan (<https://www.cfu.it/>)

In many respects, the project for Parco Nord Milano is tied to the story just told. Located in a border area bereft of a clear-cut connotation, the first scheme of the "Piano Intercomunale Milanese" identified it as one of the gaps arisen in the open land and disrupting the continuity of the built-up fabric. Stretching in the border area comprised between Milan, Sesto San Giovanni, Bresso, Cinisello Balsamo and Cormano, Parco Nord Milano originated in 1975 after the newly-set up (1970) Lombardy Region designated it a Regional Park.

The initiative was announced in 1970 following a prefectural decree which declared the park space a "site of public interest" to the aim of avoiding conurbation in a portion of the city whose rapid, uncontrolled sprawl had resulted into high-density development, let alone the shortage of services and collective spaces. Initially, the decision regarded the delimitation of a perimeter including the blank portion of the urbanized fabric, an area encompassing a mix of open land such as residual rural areas, industrial sites, landfills, formal and informal manufacturing activities, urban infrastructures and, right in the middle, the neglected riverbed of the Seveso stream.

After the Park was established, a deadlock followed until 1983 when a consortium of towns was set up by law, trusted with the development of the park and the management of its space. Thus, the long construction process – still in place – of the largest contemporary Italian town park got under way. It is not incidental that the first action undertaken for the creation of the park was a large forest project tapping into the principle of BoscoinCittà experimented ten years earlier.

While the project was accomplished irrespective of a plan envisaged by the Municipality of Milan, a stakeholder providing financial support and a member of the consortium, the city authorities never prioritized the development of the park as part of their territorial strategy. It is significant to note that Milan's Master Plan and the official maps of the open land system do not comprise most of the Parco Nord areas as they lay outside the city's administrative boundaries, thus providing adequate urban services solely to the small portion of the park enclosed within Milan's administrative boundaries.

In the meantime, while the park extended within the boundaries, the managing body took action as a player with a great leeway. The goal to achieve a large town park to be gradually built at low costs successfully walked hand in hand with the will to requalify urban fringes, degraded areas and to regenerate abandoned industrial sites.

Today the park occupies approximately 600 hectares and is the institutional and management benchmark for the development and maintenance of a large-scale system of town parks. Over the past three decades, Parco Nord has undoubtedly epitomized one of the most significant urban regeneration projects ever achieved in an Italian suburban context, although it originated from a specific local initiative, yet relevant in the Milanese scenario.

The above project was achieved thanks to the decision to adopt a step by step approach, while paying special attention to ordinary management criteria. After a period of traditional blueprint which prevented construction from getting started owing to skyrocketing costs, under the guidance of Francesco Borella, an expert from the study centre for the "Piano Intercomunale Milanese" – the park was accomplished in batches based on an informal masterplan, an overall project, formalized against the boundaries, but highly informal against detail breakdowns. The masterplan breakdowns were gradually updated. The construction of the park was carried out on the cheap, wooded areas were created inspired to forest criteria, meadows, while walkways and bridges were installed at strategic locations. Designed according to a recognizable, modular architectural language, the bridges

provide territorial links which, as time went by, pieced the city fragments together, thus ensuring total continuity to the park's walkability.

Parco Nord, too, originates from an initiative promoted by a group of stakeholders identified and established within the boundaries of the local project: the manager and the technical, surveillance and maintenance staff, the park's board of directors, the voice of the participating towns, the Province and the Region who strategically took action in a delimited portion of the territory. Today, a group of citizens organized in associations caters to the park's life and growth aided by a multitude of citizens who live it up through free usage, urban horticulture programs ensuing from the assignment of small lots of land or sport and leisure activities performed throughout the space available.

As physical space for the protection of open land, as landscape, as institution and group of proactive stakeholders, the park has shown its ability to grow through the "step by step practice", while adapting to a form capable of permeating and re-composing a wide portion of the city. The goal has been achieved also because the project has been designed as a multi-dimensional device, founded on connections and relations vs a rigid layout, striving to reach landscapist and aesthetic goals, escaping pre-defined standards. Due to these characteristics, and along a "softer resistance line" – to put it in the words cherished by the first president Francesco Borella – the park project has effectively reached and indulged its strategic goals of growth and requalification of the Northern outskirts of Milan.

CONNECTING AND SEPARATING, COMPLEMENTARY ACTIONS AND CHOICES

The two examples illustrated above revolve around a counter-intuitive model where global vision is the outcome of a patient, long-term process undertaken to lay the tangible foundations for the transformation of the townscape, inspired by strategic goals, modified with the passing of time, and by a clever tactic. No doubt, the parks which currently dot large portions of Milan, would never be there unless the local experts, who ingeniously interpreted their role of "urban designers" by practicing both continuity and discontinuity, had striven to reach this goal. This is a counter-intuitive deed, too.

When developing projects for contemporary territories, we often resort to the image of continuity and connection as the inevitable response to fragmentation, the juxtaposition of parts. If abandonment, isolation from the circles of consumption and of the trade of the heritage bequeathed by the past, disruption of flows and relations, separation and exclusion are problems, reconnecting, linking, including are solutions which can help improve the efficiency of single parts, recirculate resources, otherwise wasted, and extend rights. Connecting is also about responding to risk factors in multiple, open ways because it is common knowledge that an interconnected system is usually more efficient and durable.

On the other hand, ecological sciences, especially environmental ecology against its most recent developments, also warn us against associating a necessarily positive prejudice with the concept of connecting. This perspective makes sense if, based on a conception mostly based on the relation between systems, we can consider the characteristics typical of single parts against a holistic outlook. Which connections can we talk about then and how do they function if, without excluding them, we consider not only the infrastructures, whatever they be (transport systems, technology, green and open land systems) as the bond among fragmented elements?

When we consider fragmentation as an evolutionary component which typifies dynamic, multi-dimensional contemporary territories, and we grant that connection or separation are nothing but complementary actions of reorganization and re-composition spaced in time (Gabellini 2010), we realize that the interpretation possibilities beneath phenomena are manifold, while the spaces and responsibility of urban design and planning wide-ranging.

On the other hand, we must not forget that dividing, separating, delimiting, differentiating, identifying, protecting are just a few of the numberless actions which cohabit in any project about space and territory. Beyond that, they underlie the modern urban planning heritage in as much as the search for a uniform, functional layout of cities where continuity has always been a prerogative of the infrastructural system (Mancuso 1978). Delimiting a defined portion through a law setting a boundary

or assigning a portion of land to a group of citizens, as it has been the case with Parco Nord and BoscoinCittà, is a deed which heralds the creation, within the boundaries identified, of new specific conditions, maybe able to impact the surrounding environment as well. In understanding the principles of re-composition applying to the contemporary city, we must keep an eye on connections and infrastructures – what lays between the elements and is identified as a stand-alone, often add-on, connecting portion. Likewise, we must stay focused on the relational ability of the single elements that come across as ecologies sharing a relation which, metaphors aside, are the single – often fragmented – portions of the city with stories and characteristics of their own. Although ensuing from specific fragmentation processes, each of those parts is formed by an aggregate of places inhabited and catered for by active, mindful local individuals. Continuity conditions and the relations among portions of city and territory may occur thanks to infrastructures and factors able to foster bonds and ties (a new road, a public transport system, a new park) and, first and foremost, driven by local initiatives thanks to which those parts can interface with the nearby parts, while gradually laying solid continuity and connection conditions.

Most certainly planning and urban design can interpret and connect with these phenomena to hold back the problems, if any, arising from separation or to promote and inspire local initiatives fit to foster connections and widespread benefits.

FINDING DIRECTIONS

Inspired by Milan's example and applying to wider-ranging topics, the above considerations help us frame the scope and significance of an educational experience and research by design like the one the 2015 Urban Planning Design and Planning Doctorate workshop run provided. Although short, it stood out as a descriptive and design exercise which allowed the PhD students to plunge in a real context, Milan West, as part of the park system which intersects the central core of the city of Milan, undoubtedly ridden with problems and fragmented, with players actively committed to building and running public spaces and parks through a different approach. By observing the context, it was possible contextualizing and outlining the current connections, recognizing elements of separation or connection, the specificity and quality of the various parts to draw a picture of complex relations. It emerged that connecting, linking are actions and inclinations typical of projects targeting the city and the territory vs layout objectives, characteristics of a relational, ecological environment. The search for continuity, connections, relations comes across as a tendency to establish links and relations between objects, phenomena, situations scattered in space and time even within discontinuous and sometimes unstable, changing spaces. As urban designers we can thus look at our many-sided designs and projects, our interpretative speculations and narrations as guides helping us find directions within this complex, multi-dimensional space which, in turn, represents the critical construction and recognition of design contexts.

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