

Edited by Ferdinando Zanzottera

30 x 40 x 50 SUBURBS OF THE WORLD LINZ



Built Environment and Social Life
Gebaute Umwelt und soziales Leben

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In the preceding pages: outskirts of the city of Milan (Italy), Gratosoglio district. Photograph by Gaia Pastori (2015).

Photograph on the facing page: Panoramic view of the city of Belo Horizonte (State of Minas Gerais, Brazil),
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Rethinking the Periphery.
Conceptual Genealogy and
Interpretative Perspectives

Ferdinando Zanzottera



ISAL Photo Archive, photograph by Marta Robecchi
2020
Gratosoglio district
Milan (periphery), Italy

Configured as a relational urban condition, the periphery cannot be understood as a simple spatial or morphological category, but rather as a phenomenon defined through historical, social, and economic relations in constant transformation. From this perspective, geographical distance never automatically coincides with social or symbolic distance.

As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, the German philosopher Georg Simmel clarified that *“die räumliche Nähe und Ferne ist nur der Ausdruck der seelischen Nähe und Ferne”*, underscoring how urban space is traversed by relationships that exceed its merely physical dimension to acquire social and symbolic dimensions¹.

In line with this interpretative approach, more recent debates, particularly within the Austro-German context, have progressively abandoned a static reading of the periphery in favour of interpreting it as the outcome of dynamic processes. In this sense, the reflections of Manfred Kühn and Sabine Weck are also relevant; in one of their publications they state that *“Peripherien sind weniger als räumlicher Zustand zu verstehen, vielmehr ist Peripherisierung als sozialräumlicher Prozess zu konzeptualisieren”*².

Such an approach makes it possible to free the periphery from reductive or stigmatising definitions, restoring it to an analytical dimension capable of grasping its complexity and transformations, a complexity that can be more fully understood if analysed through the etymological process of the very term *“periphery”*. Its origin significantly unites the majority of European languages, including Czech, Croatian, Danish, Estonian, Finnish, French, (modern) Greek, English, Italian, Norwegian, Dutch, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Serbian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish, Swedish, German, and Hungarian.

The term *“periphery”*, in fact, derives from the Late Latin *peripheria* (= circumference), which in turn comes from the Greek expressions *perí* (= around) and *pherein* (= to carry). Etymologically, therefore, the term *periphery* refers to a peripheral area which, by extension, over the last two centuries has come to define the extreme and more marginal part of a city and of a territory, often in opposition to a centre. This word, however, has been widely employed by scholars, historians, geographers, architects, urban planners, and sociologists in highly heterogeneous ways, either altering the original meaning of the term or specifying the interconnections and relationships that a portion of the city maintains with its surroundings. Many researchers and scholars have also emphasised specific aspects of the periphery,

assigning it new disciplinary connotations or articulating its meaning in different ways, which in certain historical moments has become a fundamental and structuring element of much broader values.

Although a general definition may be considered 'internalised' within the different components of contemporary society, it is evident that the heterogeneous actors who have investigated the periphery, both in the past and today, have not always reached shared conclusions regarding the meaning of this part of the city, nor have they universally agreed on methodologies for reading phenomena and strategies for resolving fragilities and contradictions. Substantial differences also persist among the diverse residential dynamics and modes of appropriation of 'peripheral' spaces implemented in different geographical areas.

For multiple reasons, first and foremost historical, cultural, and sociological, the peripheries of large cities are extremely dissimilar, becoming even more differentiated when compared with the realities of smaller centres. Thus, if significant differences exist between the periphery of Milan and those of Rome or Naples, an even deeper divide seems to separate the peripheries of medium, and large, sized European cities from the metropolises and megalopolises of Japan, India, China, Brazil, and Mexico, to name just a few examples. Despite these differences, it is evident that shared elements exist among them, also determined by the dynamics of judgement and prejudice that weigh upon them.

Regardless of a city's latitude and longitude, it is clear that both cities and their peripheries require multidisciplinary historical, critical approaches in order to partially understand their nature and values, often linked to the broad phenomenon of the construction of large public housing estates, which in Milan fully developed from the early decades of the twentieth century onward.

The result of a long process of sedimentation of Lombard philanthropic traditions and of the encounter, and clash, of urban and, more broadly, social dynamics, such as the relationship between city and countryside that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, the theme of the Milanese periphery immediately became intertwined with the residential conditions of the less affluent classes. Throughout its development, it became the object of diverse interpretations presented in specialised journals and monographs during the twentieth century and the first two decades of the new millennium. The theme also became the focus of



Photograph by Ferdinando Zanzottera
2005
San Siro district
Milan (periphery), Italy



Photograph by Ferdinando Zanzottera
2005
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wide-ranging historiographical analyses that inevitably involved different disciplinary fields and frequently occupied a prominent place in widely used manuals.

The theme of the Milanese urban periphery, often at the expense of its specific nuances and meanings, has partially been identified with the theme of large working-class residential districts and low-cost housing, strongly connected to the dynamics of urban development and contemporary economic policy. It also presents significant implications for analyses of social contexts; it identifies specific expressions of the concept of dwelling; it constitutes a node among several specialised disciplinary components; and it concerns, like any other architectural expression with strong urban implications, issues of perception, socialisation, and security.

The dwelling of the periphery soon also involved questions of interior architecture and furnishings, today fundamental components of design. It is worth noting, by way of example, that this issue already found space in the competition organised by the Società Umanitaria within the framework of the 1906 Expo. It remained a subject of interest, albeit with alternating phases, up to the recent detailed analyses carried out by scholars at the Politecnico di Milano, from both historical and compositional perspectives. From the second half of the twentieth century onward, these studies, with different emphases, opened research trajectories that are still ongoing today, offering significant outcomes also in the fields of design, standardisation in serial production, and related areas.

The theme of living in the periphery is therefore strongly connected to that of dwelling, which is itself a vast field involving significant anthropological and philosophical components. As the contemporary thinker Silvano Petrosino notes, “l'uomo non vive in un mero ambiente, non occupa un puro spazio e non si installa semplicemente in un sito, ma sempre «abita»: l'uomo esiste come uomo in quanto abita un luogo”³. Indeed, it is well known that many reflections by philosophers such as Heidegger, and more recently Derrida, Ricoeur, and Cacciari, have had dwelling and the periphery of the world and of the contemporary city as their privileged themes.

Throughout the twentieth century, the term *'dwelling'* identified a context of functions, spaces, and social forms theoretically distinct from functions, forms, and spaces related to *'work'*. Housing constituted its essential datum, the pivot of an interpretative system of evolving social

conditions and the register of their transformations, although this phenomenon could never be entirely detached from coherent spaces, particularly cultural and commercial ones.

Within the long season commonly identified as characteristic of contemporary or modern architecture, which encompasses the entire twentieth century or, according to some scholars, begins in the second half of the nineteenth century, the broad debate on dwelling in the periphery must also be included, articulated through specific architectural themes, such as, to point on the most prevalent and fruitful one, the development of new typologies, both at the scale of the individual building and at the urban scale.

The early *Modern Movement*, particularly in the CIAM Athens Charter (1933), schematised human individual and collective activities into a limited number of functions, projecting this functional separation, proper to the conceived habitat, onto the design of the city itself. Consequently, the city was identified through a series of physiological and psychological attributes that confined individual and group life within an interpretation claiming universal validity, while urban design, understood as the design of the city as a whole, was elaborated on the basis of zoning principles, which could not find adequate application in historic centres shaped by entirely different settlement logics.

Numerous interventions based on these principles were realised across Europe, giving rise to widespread experimentation with modernity and, in many cases, achieving considerable theoretical depth. In particular, the so-called “*radical architects*”, such as Hannes Meyer, Ernst May, and Martin Wagner, proposed, within the absolute rigour of form, the theme of housing for the less affluent classes as a means of redeeming society as a whole, which was involved in a process of renewal of dwelling and urban peripheries.

Italy followed a distinctive path in this field, not comparable to that of the major European nations. Whereas this divergence was long attributed to backwardness, more recent interpretations tend to identify positive factors underlying this singular trajectory.

At the international scale, a long reflection, from the post-war period to the present, has led to questioning the rigidity of early modern planning. A fundamental European milestone in this process was the Amsterdam Charter of 1975 (or European Charter of the Architectural Heritage), which introduced the concept of *Integrated Conservation* and affirmed the re-





Photograph by Ferdinando Zanzottera
2005
San Siro district
Milan (periphery), Italy

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evaluation of historic centres and, more broadly, of the historic city, thereby abandoning the most radical and utopian theses of modernism.

In its current meaning, therefore, the concept of dwelling encompasses all aspects related to individual and collective life across multiple scales (from the nuclear family to large community aggregations) in relation to the natural and artificial places in which such life unfolds.

The rationalistic separation of dwelling and working, spatially distinguished under the pressure of logics of rationalisation applied to territorial organisation, has at times overridden, even in Italy and especially in highly urbanised areas, richer articulations of traditional communal living space founded on symbolic orders, without, however, entirely erasing them. Traditional space has often remained, even within cities, the context of private life, the node and threshold not to be violated for inner recovery. It has also continued, in many cases, to articulate functions of private and communal life connected to spaces and moments, festive or recreational, bearing, albeit weakly, the character of a centre.

This approach was frequently adopted in modern Italian neighbourhoods, as highlighted by designers and professionals of the 1920s, among them Enrico Griffini and, in a more fully articulated manner, Giuseppe Samonà. It is within this perspective that studies on the dwelling practices of the less affluent classes carried out in the second half of the nineteenth century must be considered, revealing also educational and moralising concerns.

Any interpretation of these issues, documented in fundamental debates on public housing within the Municipal Council of Milan from 1861 onward, that neglects not only economic-political contextualisation but also their ethical motivations would be erroneous.

For example, in Lodovico Corio's attempt to understand the phenomenon of "*locande*" and the dwelling conditions of the most disadvantaged classes in 1885⁴, as well as in the reasons that led entrepreneur Benigno Crespi to found an industrial village along the Adda River, there is an awareness that every individual must be able to find and construct a balanced relationship between self and others, regardless of social condition.

Many believed that failing to promote improvements in the living conditions of the weakest classes and to address the housing problem, even if such solutions were peripheral and separated from the city centre, would inevitably lead to social conflict. Some also clearly

understood that the house represented the privileged place of human experience and growth, without which it would be difficult to initiate a process of personal development culminating in awareness of one's own dignity.

For numerous figures in Milanese cultural and political life during the transitional decades between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the house was essentially the place in which inhabitants could fully express themselves: it was not merely a shelter, but a formative environment within the family.

This conviction, shared by a broad sector of late nineteenth-century society, led entrepreneurs, administrators, and secular and Catholic cooperatives to hypothesise that the only way to avoid class conflict was through a general improvement of the social conditions of the poorest and by offering everyone the opportunity, over time, to become owners of the homes they inhabited.

These convictions were already solidly rooted in Milanese culture in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and became even more evident in the early decades of the twentieth century. Over time, the belief consolidated that home ownership fostered both moral and material improvement among workers, as documented by the advertising messages of cooperatives established around the turn of the century.

Perhaps the most emblematic position among these was that of the Milanese *Cooperativa Case ed Alloggi*, which in 1910 published its own journal with the telling title "*Ho una casa mia*" ("I Have a Home of My Own"). In its first issue, one reads: "Insinuandosi tra voi, questo foglio vuol combattere il pregiudizio e vuol aiutarvi nel sacrificio; vuole insegnarvi che la casa propria è una sorgente di felicità e non una nuova fonte di gravezza e di noie; è un inizio di sanità di mente e di corpo, e non un nuovo cumulo di lavoro; è poesia d'animo e di cuore, è il gusto della semplicità non scompagnata da arte; è l'avviamento alla parsimonia ed è negazione dell'avarizia; è il nemico dell'accidia non scompagnato dall'economia della nostra forza; è il completamento di quella tranquillità che è propria di cuori gonfi d'affetto, di cervelli saturi di moralità familiare. La noia, la sovrana negli alloggi delle grandi città, si ferma alla soglia delle casette in cui il padrone di casa è l'inquilino - qui lo sfolgorio dei raggi solari, la visione del verde, l'aria che ovunque penetra e purifica, toglie l'uniformità increscevole, della monotonia della quale anche le più belle case si rivestono, dove la luce



ISAL Photo Archive, photograph by Federica Resconi
2016

Public housing building in the Lorenteggio district, on which an anonymous person has posted a sign reading "Against loneliness, neighbourhood solidarity! Do not shut yourself away at home"
Milan (periphery), Italy



ISAL Photo Archive, photograph by Federica Resconi
2016

Public housing building in the Lorenteggio district. On the doors, closed to prevent new occupations after a forced eviction, an anonymous hand has written “Enough empty houses”, “Homes for all”, and “No racket” Milan (periphery), Italy

è attenuata e resa uniforme dalla penombra, così come avviene in quegli alloggi, e nella nostra città sono molti, son troppi, che possono considerarsi come tante suddivisioni di un gigantesco scaffale”⁵.

Within the articulation of Italian public housing, and particularly that of Milan, it has also been emphasised that the conception of domestic dwelling was connected to a prioritisation of the residual quality of ancient urban cores. Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a general process of reduction of residential functions in city centres took place, through urban image requalification and the expulsion of weaker residential classes, initiating a phenomenon that continues to manifest today in different forms.

To engage today with the urban peripheries of the world and with the different ways of inhabiting them, also through the interpretative magnifying lens of photography, means to care deeply about the destiny of the contemporary city itself and of the human beings who dwell within it.

Within this framework, the contemporary Austrian context and the urban *region* of Linz, shaped by profound social, demographic, and territorial transformations, offer today offer a privileged observatory for critically reinterpreting the concept of the periphery, no longer as a marginal space but as a strategic place of mediation between urban memory, economic transformation, and new forms of dwelling and metropolitan identity. Renewed interest in inclusive dynamics, sustainability, and the reuse of built heritage is pushing Austrian cities to increasingly question the future of urban peripheries and of the European city itself, challenging established hierarchies and opening up new readings of the urban landscape⁶.

NOTE

¹ Cf. G. Simmel, *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben*, in: G. Simmel (ed.), *Die Großstadt. Vorträge und Aufsätze zur Städteausstellung*, Petermann, Dresden, 1903.

² M. Kühn, S. Weck, *Peripherisierung - ein Erklärungsansatz zur Entstehung von Peripherien*, in: M. Bernt, H. Liebmann (eds.), *Peripherisierung, Stigmatisierung, Abhängigkeit?*, Springer VS, Wiesbaden, 2013, p. 24.

³ S. Petrosino, *Capovolgimenti. La casa non è una tana, l'economia non è il business*, Jaca Book, Milan, 2008,





ISAL Photo Archive, photograph by Federica Resconi
2016

Public housing building in the Lorenteggio district, on whose wall a sign has been posted reading: "Occupy and resist. Help your neighbour!"
Milan (periphery), Italy

ISAL Photo Archive, photograph by Marta Robecchi
2020
Gratosoglio district
Milan (periphery), Italy

p. 10. The quotation may be translated as follows: "Human beings do not live in a mere environment, do not occupy a neutral space, and do not simply settle themselves in a site, but always «dwell»: human beings exist as such insofar as they dwell in a place" (translation by Antonella De Mauro).

⁴ Cf. L. Corio, *Abissi plebei*, Stabilimento G. Civelli, Milan, 1885.

⁵ *Cooperativa Case ed Alloggi*, Untitled, in "*Ho una casa mia*", 1910, no. 1, p. 1. The quotation may be translated as follows: "By making its way among you, this paper seeks to combat prejudice and to support you in your sacrifices; it aims to teach you that owning a home is a source of happiness and not a new cause of burden and trouble; it represents the beginning of mental and physical well-being, and not a further accumulation of labour; it is poetry of the spirit and of the heart, it is a taste for simplicity that is not divorced from art; it is an introduction to thrift and a denial of avarice; it stands as the enemy of sloth, while remaining aligned with a careful economy of our strength; it completes that tranquillity which belongs to hearts filled with affection and minds imbued with family morality. Boredom, sovereign in the dwellings of large cities, comes to a halt at the threshold of the small houses in which the homeowner is also the tenant - here, the radiance of sunlight, the sight of greenery, and the air that penetrates everywhere and purifies remove the unpleasant uniformity of monotony, with which even the most beautiful houses are clothed, where light is dimmed and rendered uniform by penumbra, as occurs in those dwellings, of which in our city there are many, far too many, that can be considered as mere subdivisions of a gigantic shelf" (translation by Antonella De Mauro).

⁶ This text reproduces, revised and expanded, the essay by the same author entitled "*Periferia: definizione di un tema e spunti di riflessione*", published in: Ferdinando Zanzottera (ed.), *30x40x50 SUBURBS OF THE WORLD - MINOR CITIES*. Cesano Maderno: ambiente costruito e vita sociale, Istituto per la Storia dell'Arte Lombarda, 2018, pp. 11-19.

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