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Productions, Spatial Patterns and Urban
Change

Edited by
Simonetta Armondi
and Stefano Di Vita

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Milan

As a main urban centre of one of the most dynamic European regions, Milan is a key location from which to study narratives of innovations and contemporary productions – old and new manufacturing, tertiary and consumptive sectors, creative and cultural economy – and investigate their influence both on spatial patterns and urban policy agenda.

Accordingly, this book explores the contentious geographies of innovation, productions and working spaces, both empirically and theoretically in a city that, since the beginning of the 2000s, has been involved in a process of urban change, with relevant spatial and socio-economic effects, within an increasingly turbulent world economy. Through this analysis, the book provides an insight into the complexity of contemporary urban phenomena beyond a traditional metropolitan lens, highlighting issues such as rescaling, urban decentralization and recentralization, extensive urban transformation and shrinkage and molecular urban regeneration.

This book is a valuable resource for academics, researchers and scholars focusing on Urban Studies such as Urban Policy, Urban Planning, Urban Geography, Urban Economy and Urban Sociology.

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Milan

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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	vii
<i>List of tables</i>	viii
<i>List of contributors</i>	ix
Introduction	1
SIMONETTA ARMONDI AND STEFANO DI VITA	
1 Which Milan? Setting the scene for reflecting urban decline, resilience, and change	7
SIMONETTA ARMONDI AND STEFANO DI VITA	
2 Urban regionalization and metropolitan resurgence: discontinuity and persistence of a spatial dialectic	36
MATTEO BOLOCAN GOLDSTEIN	
3 The attractiveness of Milan and the spatial patterns of international firms	48
ILARIA MARIOTTI	
4 Creative production and urban regeneration in Milan	60
ANTONELLA BRUZZESE	
5 Sharing economy: makerspaces, co-working spaces, hybrid workplaces, and new social practices	73
CAROLINA PACCHI	

vi *Contents*

- 6 Forms of urban change: nodes of knowledge-based networks as drivers of new metropolitan patterns in Southern Milan** 84
CORINNA MORANDI AND MARIO PARIS
- 7 Urban change and geographies of production in North East Milan** 96
SIMONETTA ARMONDI
- 8 Urban change and innovation of functions and productions in the north-western transect of the Milan urban region** 110
STEFANO DI VITA
- 9 Territorial infrastructures and new production places** 122
ANDREA ROLANDO
- 10 The last cycle of Milan urban policies and the prospects for a new urban agenda** 133
GABRIELE PASQUI
- Index* 145

6 Forms of urban change

Nodes of knowledge-based networks as drivers of new metropolitan patterns in Southern Milan

Corinna Morandi and Mario Paris

Introduction

The image of “explosion of the city” (Font, 2007) describes the sprawl process of consolidated European cities within a larger area (Soja, 2011a) and its impacts on contemporary post-metropolitan territories (Soja, 2011b; Knox, 2008). Due to this process, several functions traditionally located in city centres have moved to urban fringes. This movement relies on ambiguous dynamics, where dispersion and concentration coexist, generating original spatial figures (Pavia, 2002; Secchi, 1994; Genette, 1992). During the last ten years, this territorial paradigm has required alternative interpretative frameworks, at times radically different to those currently shared by academia (Portas, Domingues and Cabral, 2011). One approach relies on the updated conceptualization of territorial networks and nodes, both physical and immaterial, in describing territorial dynamics. Accordingly, this chapter focuses on different nodes of knowledge-based networks located in the southern area of the Milan urban region, pointing out (i) their – sometime potential – role as re-activators of metropolitan contexts and (ii) their identity based on the specific quality of urbanity they provide, while also taking into account their different scales.

Southern Milan: a peculiar context within the urban region

This section highlights some specific conditions (e.g., urban patterns and morphologies, concentration and scattering of functions, land uses, presence of innovative and “traditional” activities, role of infrastructures in terms of connection and separation, as well as interscalarity) and constraints (i.e., *Parco agricolo sud* and physical barriers) of a paradigmatic field of analysis. This is the southern sector of the Milan urban region, as it results at the

end of the historical process of urban growth, also through the annexation of neighbouring municipalities. This process was both supported and accelerated by the progressive de-centralization of specialized services and innovative functions. For instance, Southern Milan hosts several research and higher-education venues, such as the Università Bocconi, Università IULM, NABA Academy, Domus Academy, IFOM,¹ and IEO² (Figure 1.7). Furthermore, this area shows evidence for the repositioning process of economic assets following the crisis, with different trends and levels of importance (De las Rivas and Paris, 2013). To explore this statement, the theoretical frame refers to territorial networks and nodes.

In the southern area of the Milan urban region, the mass urbanization has for a long time been partly prevented by the economic importance of agriculture, which has contributed to some extraordinary features of this unique environment: the water system, made by the *Navigli* with a dense and efficient network of canals for irrigation, villas and traditional farms (*cascine*). The metropolitan scale of the *Parco Agricolo Sud Milano* (Figure 1.3) has been pivotal, always performing the dual tasks of maintaining both the economic and environmental role of agriculture. The intense land transformations have occurred during phases of high pressure by the real estate market. Negotiations between major developers and local governments of small municipalities resulted in the current and peculiar character of the area. The superposition of new infrastructures on the historical territorial pattern has supported the creation of “isles” of new activities that, though compact and often gated, are close to former small urban centres that have massively “exploded”. Commercial platforms, logistics, and residential settlements served as pioneers of urbanization, in continuous economic and spatial competition with agriculture and, in few cases, with metropolitan scale facilities.

Southern Milan has been characterized by two major territorial sections. On one hand, the south-western section contains important environmental features. The canal system of the *Navigli*, which historically provided transport of goods and water for manufacturing and irrigation, now also functions as a touristic hotspot. A recent road axis (Nuova Vigevanese) runs west, parallel to the Naviglio Grande, shaping the major commercial strip of the urban region. Other main roads run south, dotted by huge mono-functional isles, with the exception being the complex node of Assago-Milanofiori (Figures 1.6 and 1.7). Recent trends show the still relevant role of agriculture, in part due to the recent growth of slow tourism, while some indicators reveal a decrease in the consolidated presence of logistics and large scale retail.

On the other hand, the south-eastern area is characterized by the most relevant infrastructures at the national scale: from the historical via Emilia,

to motorway, railway, and high-speed railway to Southern Italy. They have been drivers of industrial development, but they are also barriers for both east-west and north-south relations. This role of infrastructures is specifically evident for the Milan Porta Romana railway yard³ (Figure 1.6), formerly a powerful attractor of industries. Today, it is caught between the compact city to the north and the dense, but porous fabric to the south that is undergoing a deep process of urban change. Here, in recent decades, the process of de-industrialization and service metamorphosis involved both the main city periphery and the first ring of surrounding municipalities, with manufacturing and logistical clusters still in operation near the Milan Rogoredo railway yard. An intense and fast transformation oriented to knowledge economy emerges in the “triangle” defined by via Emilia and via Ripamonti. This area hosts a cluster of initiatives related to the Milan Smart City program, where new spaces dedicated to digital fabrication also appear. This regeneration process is currently branded by the recent Fondazione Prada art gallery and museum (Figure 1.8), performing as a knowledge-based node. Developed by a private actor – which took advantage of the opportunity to transform a private area (before used as a warehouse and temporary exhibition space) – it represents just one fragment of a larger urban change process involving the entire neighbourhood. The Fondazione Prada – that sits nearby a major former industrial site, redeveloped in the 1990s as part of a mix-used neighbourhood – is (probably) acting as a driver of urban regeneration. After its opening, several interventions have been replacing other dismissed factories with tertiary businesses and services,⁴ besides houses.

Nodes of knowledge-based network?

Over the last three decades, Western countries have experienced relevant changes related to socio-economic trends, technological innovation, and transformation within governance approaches. In several European cities, a metropolitan de-localization of activities (such as specialized retail, entertainment and cultural facilities, public and private services, innovative and elitist manufacturing) has characterized the urban cores. This transformation has relied not only on public investments in new infrastructures, but also on strategies of private stakeholders, which share the opportunities represented by both the demand generated by dense urban systems and the metropolitan attraction of external users. In some cases, the result reveals an overlay of different and interacting phenomena: the *technoburb* of Fishman (1987), the *edge city* of Garreau (1992) or the *metapolis* of Ascher (1995), adapted to local constraints and contemporary trends. Within this original European context, some different elements, more than

others, affect the spatial characteristics of a site and the everyday life of its inhabitants. Amongst others, the “territorial nodes” arise as figures useful to frame the interaction between digital and material networks (Morandi, Rolando and Di Vita, 2016) and the role of different flows (of people, goods, and information) as a catalyst for current metropolitan transformations. Therefore, this concept describes the result of the “spontaneous” process of clumping different uses in some specific fragments of the metropolitan tissue, which can be considered “places of centrality” (De las Rivas and Paris, 2014).

Territorial nodes are aggregations of functions located at those crossroads in which infrastructures connect different flows (Portas, Domingues and Cabral, 2011). They are spaces where the modal exchange takes place, and concepts of “proximity” and “distance” rely on connections to networks more than on geometrical positions. The variety of possible combinations is heterogeneous, both in terms of functions and networks/nodes, and their location. Thus, the concept of “node” is unstable (Amin and Thrift, 2002).

Unlike in consolidated urban hierarchies, current nodes don’t show specific diagrams of spatial connection and their role is malleable. They assume the role of interchange and transmission hubs (Castells, 1989). The more flows and spokes converge on them, the larger and deeper their territorial influence. Therefore, the geography of the accessibility to physical infrastructures and digital flows is a key element to differentiate nodes and their territorial relevance. Also when they are not public, they can become a sort of local commons, which take on a role of provider of shared spaces for their specific contexts. At the same time, they contribute to “polarization” processes of metropolitan spaces, influencing existing territorialities. An attempt to define and design roles, features and potentialities of contemporary metropolitan hotspots is proposed through the conceptualization of Urban Digital Nodes within the context of the “smart region” between Milan and Turin (Morandi, Rolando and Di Vita, 2016).

More than fragments: drivers of urban/regional change

According to the described conceptual framework, a new layer of places/nodes with different identities integrates – and sometime conflicts – with existing cities and consolidated urban patterns. Spaces that exist as something more than enclosures can be found in a rich set of different situations where, sometimes, they assume the role of centralities at different scales. The hypothesis is that they could act as drivers of innovation in relation to different conditions and localizations of metropolitan patterns, involving existing contexts as well as introducing new functions, actors, opportunities – along with new risks – within consolidated fabrics.

In Southern Milan, several examples convey the rich complexity of nodes' systems through their different scales (from local/neighbourhood to metropolitan/regional one), aggregation degrees, development stages and different kinds of networks attracted by or connected to these spaces.

Assago/Milanofiori north district

This cluster of different activities is located in between two municipalities (Assago and Rozzano), 15 km from the city centre, but just next to the administrative border of Milan (Figure 1.6). The cluster, formerly developed around a major road link, has been recently connected to the public transport network by means of the extension of an underground line. Assago/Milanofiori maintains a peculiar identity and holds a specific role at the edge of Southern Milan, primarily due to the size of the aggregation, the richness and complexity of the involved activities and their level of integration as well as the amount of liveliness, the multimodal accessibility, the attractiveness of the public space, and the quality of the urban, landscape, and architectural design. The settlement process started in the mid-seventies when a great amount of the agricultural area (150 hectares) were transformed to host a business district. The municipality of Milan had decided not to provide zones for tertiary function in the general town plan (*Piano Regolatore Generale*), which created a bubble of investors searching for cheap headquarters in well-connected locations and equipped with parking spaces. Taking advantage of its accessibility, due to a crossroad of two important infrastructures of private mobility (i.e., the urban trace of the motorway A7 Milan-Genoa and the A50, ring road of the city), the district grew in different phases, progressively including offices, a congress hall, a 500 bed hotel, sport facilities, and a shopping mall of 12.000 sqm GLA. A large concert hall was built, and later the “*Teatro della luna*” and the shopping mall doubled in size. A new retail park is located in the northern part of the sector, together with offices and housing blocks, several activities such as the UCI multiplex, the Virgin gym, the Hotel, a food court, and several services integrating the existing facilities. Some elements seem to represent a step forward in the realization of a new, multifunctional pole, not just for the Rozzano municipality, nor for the city of Milan, but within the broader regional context (Morandi and Paris, 2013).

The place is a node where flows of consumers and goods converge, and where people produce and share information due to the concentration of services and leisure activities offered, related mainly with shopping, sport, and culture. The last expansion phase, from 2006 up to the present, reveals an interesting change in the developers' strategy, which involved different branded architectural firms in the development of a new masterplan. This

attempt, aimed at coordinating the interventions and creating a specific identity for this place also represents a different approach to the implementation of retail platforms in the outskirts of Milan, some of them caught in a process of shrinkage and lack of perspective of economic success, despite new openings of very large and over-branded shopping centres. Integrating functions in a node quite accessible from both the city and the region in a varied pattern of metropolitan landscapes could contribute to the process of polycentric reorganization at the regional scale, through the improvement of the physical and social relationships within the southern sector of the city. This character relies on the quality of the design of some of its transitional/public spaces (i.e., the public square, some public service, etc.) that became a sort of shared space for the inhabitants.⁵ The connection with public transport and, finally, the increasing urban/metropolitan urbanity (i.e., alternative, but integrated with the traditional urbanity of central spaces) have also played central roles in this transformation.

Fondazione Prada

The Milan venue of the Fondazione Prada (Figure 1.8) is a 28.340 sqm compound of ten buildings, close to the Porta Romana railway and Lodi TIBB subway stations, comprised of an art gallery devoted to showing the Prada contemporary art collection and to organize temporary exhibitions. It hosts a theatre, bar, offices, and a library located in a former distillery. Opened in 2015 (architectural design by OMA), the spatial distribution of this campus is marked by a shared ground floor open to the visitors. This urban element, together with a new skyscraper along with a gold painted tower, have become a landmark for the neighbourhood and, more in general, for this sector of the city.

The setting up of Fondazione Prada follows one of the current trends for luxury stakeholders who integrate art and design in their fields of action to diversify their investments and, at the same time, to promote their brand. These operations create local hubs of stakeholders and communities' networks related to the contemporary art market, cosmopolitan luxury customers (e.g., tourists, business travellers, and wealthy people). Yet, these constructs also attract those who have come to be referred to as part of the larger "creative class".⁶ At the same time, within these kinds of initiatives, international stakeholders and developers often involve local contexts and identity as key elements of their commercial, but also cultural proposal, using these qualities to promote their products and brands on global markets (Paris and Fang, 2017). In this specific case, the Fondazione represents the materialization of an open structure where artists, architects, and designers exchange knowledge, but also share time and space, in a location well

connected and close to the city centre, but often neglected by important art events and mainstream exhibitions. The gallery works together with several renting spaces where new designers and creatives can display their products and/or organize events. Together with the library, the education program tries to explore new ways for sharing knowledge and communicating art, also for children. Bringing different recipients together and introducing a set of events (performances, permanent and temporary exhibitions, annual festivals, and special happenings for specific recurrences like design week or fashion week) the Fondazione Prada became a new cultural venue for Milan and for a much larger context

In addition, Prada serves as a node of immaterial networks, such as for similar institutions which are developing as tools to drive investments in cultural activities, also as an opportunity for fiscal advantages, but with and simultaneously taking on a significant role as urban developers, such as the new Fondazione Feltrinelli headquarters in Milan.⁷

The “smart triangle” and Open Dot in the Porta Romana-Vettabbia district

A program of digital infrastructure has been recently fostered by the local government within a partnership of mixed actors,⁸ funded by the EU Horizon 2020 program.⁹ The Sharing Cities Project aims at developing “demonstration districts in ‘lighthouse’ cities like Lisbon, London and Milan which will implement replicable urban digital solutions and collaborative models. The Royal Borough of Greenwich in London, Porta Romana-Vettabbia in Milan (Figure 1.8), and downtown Lisbon will retrofit buildings, introduce shared electric mobility services, and install energy management systems, smart lamp posts and an urban sharing platform through engaging with citizens”.¹⁰

The Milan district has been selected due to the presence of both decline and dynamic conditions and for the opportunity to connect the fringe between urban and agricultural land.¹¹ Different layers are forecasted to implement the project, dealing with technological and social innovation. The presence of several associations in the third sector field is also considered an important asset for the project, together with the reuse of semi-abandoned sites, such as former *cascine*. Another action is the Smart City Lab for the realization of a start-up incubator in via Ripamonti. The City Lab is a new typology of facility supported by the state and the local government to foster digital innovation in new manufacturing. Therefore, the interest for the inclusion of the “smart triangle” among the knowledge-based nodes, depends on its intermediate scale, in between the city and the region.

Just outside the smart triangle, but close to the Porta Romana district, Open Dot is a small size makerspace and FabLab; a node of an important international knowledge-based network. It was founded in 2014 as a spin-off of Dot Dot Dot, a multidisciplinary architecture, design, and prototypes production firm. Also in this case, the activity is located inside an aggregate of former industrial buildings, under transformation first through the action of artisans and currently increasingly oriented to host “creative workers”. Open Dot presents itself as an exchange and meeting point, dedicated to experimentation, innovation and research. The set of activities developed in Open Dot is a paradigm of digital fabrication places, addressed towards education at quite different levels: the neighbourhood schools on one side and, on the other side, a node of the international network of the Fab Academy, the online training activity directly run by the MIT founder group of the makers’ movement (Anderson, 2012; Gershenfeld, 2007).

A molecular pattern of different forms of centralities

It is possible to take Southern Milan as a testing ground due to its specific situation, where nodes, the urban realm and a remaining rural landscape maintain their own identities. This chapter collects a sample of those nodes in which the relation with physical (i.e., public and private transport, logistic, open spaces) and immaterial networks (i.e., information and data, communities of interests, and/or people), and the presence of knowledge-based functions (i.e., specialized services, culture, education, creative productions, etc.) represent a territorial asset, which increases the attractiveness, for users and customers, of those spaces and the competitive advantages for investors and stakeholders, but also for public actors (Porter, 1989). Due to their complexity, these nodes are also spaces of production and consumption of goods, services, information, and experiences and, according to their specific offer, represent a materialization of the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 2011).

As pointed out by Pancholi, Yigitcanalar and Guaralda (2015), these spaces provide examples showing the result of the inter-action of global knowledge-based networks and local realities (Asheim, 2007; Inkinen, 2015). Often, they become a driver for innovative forms of consumption, co-produced by firms and customers (Pi-Feng and Chung-Shing, 2012) influencing the living practices of users and, therefore, the spaces in which they take place. By that way, they involve opportunities and risks of segregation (of spaces), exclusions (of users), and over-specialization of functions related with the physical, socio-economic, and symbolic role of nodes within the urban context. In this sense, the specific condition of Southern

Milan represents a catalyst and not only a context for the development of these knowledge based nodes.

The Assago/Milanofiori node (Figure 1.6) rose up as a “banal” operation aimed at maximizing real estate revenues related to the colonization of a well-located rural area. Within this transformation, the relevance of the role played by the private actors unfolds the weakness of public actors and the lack of a strategy for the localization of retail poles led by a supra-local body. This is a “consumption-based” (Pavitt, 1984) node, marked by the attractive power of functions and users and the high accessibility due to mobility infrastructures. Knowledge here refers to the consumption experience and to data produced and shared – offline and online – by the customers and other actors involved. Therefore, recent insertions of new public/shared spaces, the arrival of public transport and the density of involved functions provide the development with spontaneous uses of the physical space by its inhabitants. Moreover, it represents a peculiar form of centrality, a “different place” within a humdrum urban/rural space and contributing to the configuration of the current multipolar pattern of the Milan urban region.

The Fondazione Prada (Figure 1.8) venue is a pioneering intervention, where a “lucid” – and wealthy – actor developed an outstanding project, demonstrating that the involvement of an archistar, the attractiveness of contemporary art, and brilliant branding are enough to generate attention for previously anonymous locations within an urban region, also thanks to immaterial networks for a global audience. The marketing campaign based on creativeness and soft power seems to point out a potential future development of the area that must be sustained through an original offer of spaces and activities. Otherwise, all this narrative risks becomes merely an empty mystification and a tool for the exploitation of private capital without any creation of urban value or generation of fertile exchanges between the city and this “isle”.

The area of the “smart triangle”, in the Porta Romana-Vettabbia district (Figure 1.8) collects a set of transformations and represents an incremental process based on pilot experiences. This case study points out the relevance of the sharing approach as a link between different projects and aspects of these interventions. Within this sort of living lab, developers should produce original knowledge and the system relies on bottom-up actions as well as social and technologic innovations. In this case, the public actor deserves a strong protagonist role, due to its position as a key financial and strategic player. In parallel, the experience of Open Dot represents a different, if not alternative, example of grafting new forms of production on a solid and diffuse knowledge base related to design and manufacturing.

Conclusions

The excursus on Southern Milan shows that the consolidated, but updated, figure of networks and nodes remains a fertile operative tool, able to explain some current territorial patterns, although influenced by ongoing processes. Therefore, nodes show an evolution that combines current socio-economic trends and a change in conditions that influenced their formation (reduction of public investments in infrastructures, restrictions for soil-consumption, interest of private actors for more urban locations, growing relevance of knowledge economy and immaterial networks). These transformations play a role within the future metropolitan scenario of Milan. If they act as catalyst, they should produce a spill-over effect, creating a network of places and territories. At the same time, if they maintain their current identity as enclaves disconnected from the contexts where they are located, the risk is that networks, instead of connecting, become a sort of border or limit for their multifaceted flows.

Notes

- 1 IFOM is a cancer research institute partner of cutting-edge scientific organizations located in India and Singapore.
- 2 The European Institute of Oncology (*IEO*) is a centre for excellence in cancer prevention, early diagnosis and effective treatment.
- 3 This greyfield is one of the larger development areas included in the 2012 Milan urban plan.
- 4 For instance, tertiary functions (as headquarter of Bottega Veneta, and the Italian venues of LVMH, Motorola and The McGraw-Hill), leisure (as the glamour club Plastic Palace) and mixed-use containers (as the co-working and makerspace Talent Garden Calabiana, or the fashion event space Fabbrica Orobica 15).
- 5 Within the new masterplan, among other tertiary functions there are two housing projects and this hybrid compound represent an innovative experiment for the Milanese context, normally marked, out of the urban dense tissues, by the presence of mono-functional retail aggregates and some superplaces (Morandi and Paris, 2015) but where the inhabitants are only temporary and the housing function is excluded.
- 6 See Chapter 4.
- 7 See Chapter 8.
- 8 Partnership: public and private companies in the field of sustainable energy provision and mobility, Politecnico di Milano, Legambiente
- 9 *Horizon 2020*, call 'Smart Cities and Communities solutions integrating energy, transport, ICT sectors through lighthouse projects'
- 10 www.sharingcities.eu/
- 11 In the same sector, another project has just been approved and granted by the European Commission: "Open Agri" involves a partnership of actors, some of them active in the field of research and education, led by the Milan Municipality.

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