

The case for new rural centralities in agricultural enclaves: three scenarios for Muggiano (Milan, Italy).

Jean-Baptiste GEISSLER

Politecnico di Milano

DASU - Dipartimento di Architettura e Studi Urbani

jeanbaptiste.geissler@polimi.it

Priscillia JORGE

Politecnico di Milano

DASU - Dipartimento di Architettura e Studi Urbani

priscilla.jorge@polimi.it

Luca MINOLA

Politecnico di Milano

DASU - Dipartimento di Architettura e Studi Urbani

luca.minola@polimi.it

Mohammed Amine SAIDI

Ecole Spéciale d'Architecture

sma.adc@gmail.com

Luca TRICARICO

Politecnico di Milano

DASU - Dipartimento di Architettura e Studi Urbani

luca.tricarico@polimi.it

Giovanni VECCHIO

Politecnico di Milano

DASU - Dipartimento di Architettura e Studi Urbani

giovanni.vecchio@polimi.it

Abstract

Agricultural enclaves represent for cities both a challenge, they have to deal with connectivity and development issues, and an opportunity, they can be considered as resources for achieving major policy objectives such as better environmental protection or increased local food production.

Among European metropolises, Milan's case is quite original since it presents unique institutional arrangements and chiefly its agricultural park (Parco Agricolo Sud Milano – PASM).

The territory of Muggiano is part of the PASM, at the fringe of the municipal territory, cut out from both the rest of the city and the rest of the park, it is undergoing a slow decline both in its agricultural and urban functions.

Yet, field exploration revealed a more complex territory than expected, carrying a strong latent potential and presenting different challenges than expected.

In a prospective effort, we elaborated 3 scenarios for the development of Muggiano: from a fully agricultural production one to another extreme one, focusing on residential uses.

Our exploration led us to concluding that the “rural centrality” scenario, investing fully on agriculture but not only for its productive function, and spatially balancing the development along a “backbone”, was the best option Muggiano could go for.

Keywords: Rural Areas, Local Development, Strategic Planning

“Architects and urbanists frequently look with envy to the foodies for their huge cultural accomplishment. They have not only created a new American cuisine of amazing quality, but they have had an impact on the supermarket, where decent produce and tasty, nutritious products are much less of a rarity than they used to be.”(Solomon, 2003:15-16)

1 | Agricultural enclaves in metropolitan settings: bridging or not bridging

Due to growing urbanisation and suburbanisation, many agricultural spaces became islands in the middle of the progressing city. The natural evolution of such enclaves is quite uniform: a more or less rapid decline of agricultural activities, due to accessibility difficulties, reduction of available land for farming and the emergence of alternative - more profitable - activities for people and spaces. In a second step, land price and productivity pressures often wipe out the former agricultural nature of the area, to the profit of logistic sites or residential areas.

In the last two decades, however, cities have increasingly become aware that these territories were latent potentialities rather than mere leftovers. Located in urban and peri-urban contexts, they often are composed by a patchwork of green spaces: parks, wild areas, agricultural *friches* and cultivated areas. The environmental value of these territories and the capacity of farmers to be important agents for environmental policy enforcement has certainly been one of the drivers of this renewed interest. More recently, issues of food production and food security also emerged as major planning issues (Morgan, 2009). Beyond these motivations, the landscape value of agricultural lands has also been underlined, for instance by Jean Viard (2008).

Cities now commonly include agriculture (both urban and peri-urban) in their strategic planning documents. Montpellier's metropolitan 2006 *Schéma de Cohérence Territoriale* (SCOT) for instance strongly stated that one of its ambitions was to preserve and retrieve agricultural and natural spaces. Its coordinator, Bernard Reichen, advocated for a radical lens-shifting exercise (“*inversion du regard*”). In the SCOT, the “natural capital” is seen as one of the territory's pillars, the agricultural and natural areas identified as the armature of the metropolitan geography (Montpellier Metropole, 2006).

Among European metropolises, the case of Milan is quite remarkable since the city very early developed a consciousness (around the late 1980's) of this issue and adopted strategies to counterbalance the natural trend of agricultural land reduction on metropolitan territories. The main institutional innovation has been the creation, by a regional law in 1990, of the Parco Agricolo Sud Milano (PASM). It has been explicitly designed to preserve and enhance the multifunctionality of agricultural land (landscape and environmental protection, productive activities, recreational and educative functions...) (Targetti et al., 2010).

In spite of the progressive installation of strategic governance tools (“Piano Territoriale di Coordinamento” – Territorial Coordination Plan in 2000, “Distretto Agricolo Milanese” – Agricultural District of Milan, 2011), Milan did not manage to propose an integrated vision of the PASM territories' development. Actually, although the PASM had a very positive role in the preservation of agricultural areas (over 36 000 ha out of 47 000 of the park's total surface still have an agricultural destination), it can also be seen as having frozen the evolution of a couple of territories without providing them with alternative opportunities.

This frozen urban development logically left agricultural enclaves, small to medium areas of agricultural land surrounded by built environment. Muggiano, at the extreme west of Milan, is one of them. Administratively part of the municipal territory, but historically and independent *borgo*, that remains considerably cut out from the rest of the city.



Figure 1 | Territorial framework_Muggiano, an island in the outskirts of Milan, source: the authors

2 | Muggiano, shifting focus to reframe the issue

Based on maps, pictures, academic works, planning documents and media sources, our initial comprehension was that the Muggiano area suffered from:

- Its isolation from other urbanized areas, and especially its separation from the rest of Milan by the “tangenziale” (Milan’s ring road).
- The monotony of its landscape, dedicated to intensive agriculture.
- The coexistence between intensive agriculture and residential areas.

Muggiano’s situation is however a quite exceptional one. It departs from the prejudices one could have on an agricultural enclave and only direct field observation can allow grasping (part of) the complexity of that territory.

The first thing we understood, following the narrow roads between corn and rice fields, was that the Muggiano’s enclave landscape is everything but boring. The diversity of cultures, often separated by a line of tree, offers a pleasant patchwork of colours. Small to medium canals run through the territory, as a network of veins bringing blood to this four-hundred-hectares agricultural organism. Yet, the Muggiano enclave is not a bucolic cliché: frequent encounters with agricultural machines remind the visitor that the primary function of the land is intensive production. Muggiano also hosts numerous *Casinas*, these traditional farms from Lombardy around which the agricultural production has historically been organized. In Muggiano, five *Casinas* are still –at least partially- used for agricultural production: Molino del Paradiso, Corte Granda, Cascina Nuova, Cascina Guascona and Cascina Moiranino. Another Cascina had a productive function but is now slowly becoming a ruin: the “Borgo d’Assiano”, located at the main “entrance” of Muggiano enclave.



Figure 2 | Natural landscape_”Lago dei cigni” Muggiano, source: the authors

This diversity of rural landscape is however highly contrasted by the banality of the “urban” Muggiano. Beside a few buildings of architectural interest in the historical part (including two cascine, one still active the other turned into housing; see also Bianchi & Bianchi, 2006), most of the built environment is composed by slowly (but surely) degrading standard residential complexes as well as unused and poorly maintained public spaces (chiefly the park and the central square).

An encounter with the head of an important farm allowed us to understand the great challenges that agricultural production in the Muggiano was facing. The first one would be the insufficient availability of skilled young workforce to maintain the activity. Another one would be the sustainability of this type of production, disconnected from the immediate environment (very few short supply chain), relying on important subsidies from EU and without the possibility of long term development strategies. Similar issues are central also in the projects proposed to address the regeneration of Muggiano (e.g. Dam, 2007).

The problems therefore appeared to be:

- The declining attraction of the territory for populations and activities.
- The necessity to transform and relaunch agricultural production in order to maintain it.

3 | Three scenarios for Muggiano

We first adopted an incremental approach, trying to understand what could marginally be improved in order to tackle the main two challenges of the territory, namely its declining attractiveness for people and activities, and the slow decline of its agricultural production model, that needed to be reinvented in order to endure.

Therefore, although we tried to develop a global territorial reflexion, we drew a typology of four different spaces with untapped potential or a need for transformation, allowing us to understand precisely what could be done concretely to start addressing the two problems detailed above:

- Muggiano’s urban “centre”, and especially its central square that is crucially needing revitalisation

- The “Fringe” between urban and rural Muggiano, a porous space where the limit between an urban park and the surrounding fields is hard to delimitate.
- The “Borgo d’Assiano”, entry point in the territory, that has an important untapped potential and that, should it be renewed, could direct existing fluxes towards Muggiano rather than around it
- The Parco della Cava di Muggiano, an already active leisure area, connecting natural and agricultural spaces.

Yet, this marginal approach soon proved to be insufficient and lead us to focus on details and loose the holistic vision of the territory, therefore barring us from comprehending the full range of implications of our project.

We used the two axes of understanding described above in order to define trajectories for potential development scenarios (Hillier, 2011), to stimulate our reflection on the territory’s future.

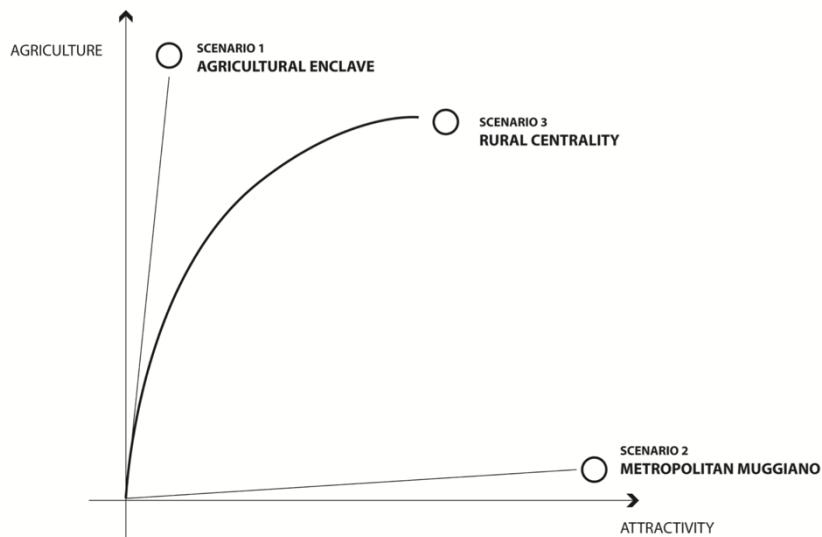


Figure 3 | Forecasting future scenarios, source: the authors

We therefore complemented our incremental vision with strong, voluntarily excessive, scenarios, assuming strategies as tools for exploration (Balducci, 2011). These extreme points, far away in time and spatial organization, drew lines of forces revealing the tensions and strengths resulting from our projected actions.

Scenario 1: Agricultural Enclave

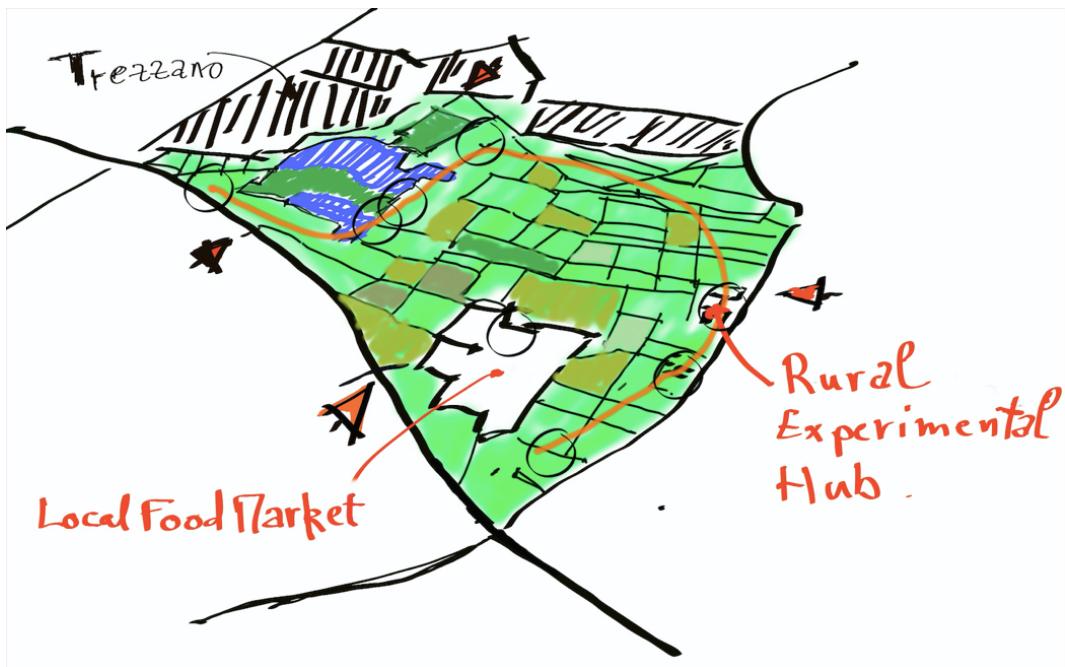


Figure 4 | Scenario 1_Agricultural Enclave, source: the authors

This scenario is principally focused on maintaining the productive agricultural function of the area. Our interpretation is that business as usual is no option for this declining sector. Important investment in innovation and production diversification are crucially needed. The renovated Borgo di Assiano would be the epicentre of this renewal, concentrating research activities. The connection with the urban part of Muggiano would be achieved through the creation of the local farmer's market on its central place. This layout could be related to some of the practices of exchange between the environmental features of the area: "projects that invite citizens to be involved in ecological research in their own backyards or neighborhoods may provide rich opportunities for community members of all ages to improve their science literacy" (Evans et. Al, 2005:589).

Scenario 2: Metropolitan Muggiano

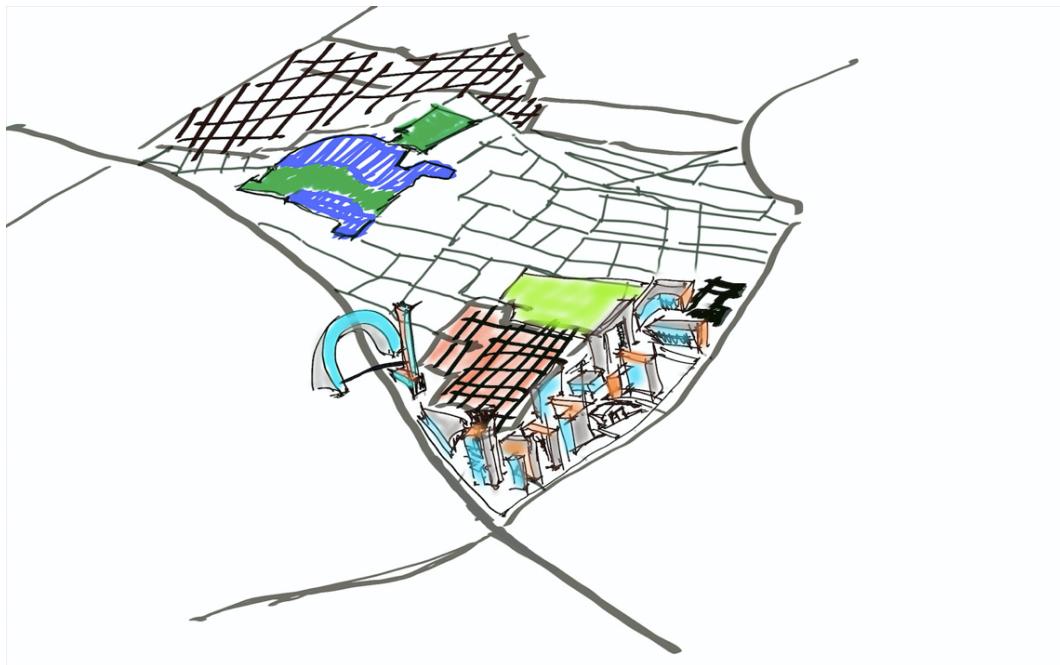


Figure 5 | Scenario 2_Metropolitan Muggiano, source: the authors

In that scenario, all of the effort would be directed towards improving connectivity with the rest of Milan's municipal territory. The goal being increasing the residential attractiveness of Muggiano in order to re-densify it and attract new services. The urban complexity would then be enhanced. The feasibility of that scenario remains however highly dependent on the realisation of current heavy infrastructure projects and chiefly the extension of Milan's metro line 1.

Scenario 3: Rural Centrality

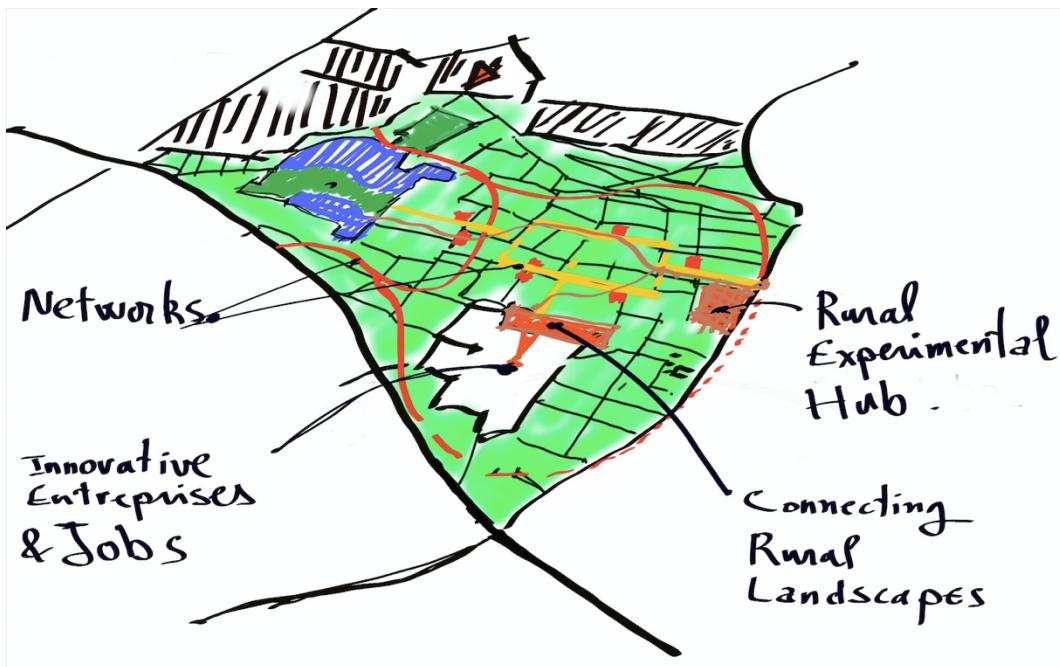


Figure 6 | Scenario 3_Rural Centrality, source: the authors

Like scenario 1, it would actively build on Muggiano's agricultural identity with the idea that innovation is key to its sustainability. The Key driver of the area will be based on the networking between the social innovation experiences within Milan Municipality, such as practices of urban agriculture and innovation in public spaces regeneration (Tricarico, 2014:14-16). It however diverges from scenario 1 in the sense that it also places multifunctionality as a cornerstone of future developments. Recreational and educational features here appear as important as productive ones. The spatial projection also differs from scenario 1: rather than concentrating activities around the Borgo di Assiano, it is articulated around a transversal backbone. This scenario embraces the dual multiple nature of Muggiano (rural, urban, natural and recreational), aiming at blurring the border between uses and spaces. It could find inspiration in Montpellier's 2007 SCOT as well as in other planning projects, such as the "Plaine Montjean", being currently developed in the South of Paris¹. In order to do so, it will make use of hybrid forms such as agricultural parks, inspired for instance by the neighbouring example of the Parco delle Risae².

¹ Link (French only): <http://www.epa-orsa.fr/Projets-et-operations/Colonne-3/Rungis-Fresnes-Wissous/La-plaine-de-Montjean/L-agroquartier-de-Montjean>

² Link (Italian only) : <http://www.parcodellerisaie.it/it/>

4 | Conclusions / Discussion: unifying by diversifying

Direct observation on the field allowed us to break a lot of prejudices and common-places that could be had when thinking about an agricultural enclave. It even reversed our perception of isolation, that we understood no longer as a weakness to be thought, but rather as an advantage providing opportunities to develop an independent territorial identity instead of becoming a satellite of the strong surrounding attraction points.

Among the three scenarios presented above, the “rural centrality” one appeared to us as the most stimulating, for it was the one with both the highest potentiality and probably the highest complexity as well.

The potentialities are evident, for this scenario is the only one integrating fully the territory of the enclave, along a spine of strong places going from the Borgo di Assiano to the Parco della Cava di Muggiano. Yet, precisely because it is the most integrated one, it bears in itself an important amount of potential contradictions and even conflicts. For instance, blurring the frontier between productive and recreational spaces, by integrating a “sustainability path” that would be in direct connection with fields, could generate problems in terms of access, but also safety.

The complete panel of the controversies arising from such a scenario is of course still to be drawn. Yet, the position defended in the present paper is that it is only through a diversification based on its strengths that Muggiano would find a coherent and enriching (for both parties) place within Milan's metropolitan territory.

Although it would be no guarantee of overcoming these difficulties, a sine qua non condition for having a chance to see this kind of scenario succeeding would be to implement an ambitious participation and concertation process.

In that matter, any plan willing at reinventing Muggiano's development should take advantage from the consultation strategy experimented in the development of Milan's Food Policy on closely related matters. It started with the work of experts, synthetizing available data and main issues in a widely spread document. This cornerstone was then used as a basis for consultation with stakeholders (private, institutions, third sector) and citizens of each of Milan's nine administrative subdivisions.

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