



# LINKING TERRITORIES

RURALITY, LANDSCAPE AND URBAN BORDERS

Edited by Antonella Bruzzese and Annarita Lapenna



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**POLITECNICO DI MILANO**  
**DIPARTIMENTO DI**  
**ARCHITETTURA E**  
**STUDI URBANI**



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# URBAN AND RURAL ARE NOT SYMMETRICAL CATEGORIES. THE CHALLENGES OF THE HYBRIDIZATION PROCESSES

Paola Pucci

## **SUPERSEDING THE URBAN/NON-URBAN DIVIDE: TWO POINTS OF VIEW**

Wondering about “the role of urban agriculture in defining new opportunities for sustainable development in the Milan Urban Region”<sup>1</sup> imposes to reflection on what rurality is today in metropolitan areas, what the boundaries between “rural” and “urban” are, not only because the borders are often fractal and practices have a cross-scaling dimension, but also because new co-habitation spaces between different “urban” and “rural” ways of life are emerging, redefining, in the end, the concept of rurality and its relation with the urban conditions.

To address these issues we can take into account two views, based on two different corpus of the literature.

From an “urban-centric” point of view, through this theme we can intercept some important issues on the transformation processes of the contemporary cities, in term of “urban regionalization processes” (Soja, 2011) and some challenges for urban projects and policy.

The multi-scalar regional urbanization processes, described by several authors (Soja, 2000, 2013; Brenner, 2013; Young & Keil, 2010; Sievert, 2003) and characterizing different contexts in the world, have highlighted the progressive erosion of the boundary between urban and rural, showing homogenization of the urban landscape, as well as an increasing differentiation and specialization of the peri-urban areas, with a disappearance of significant differences in lifestyles between “urban”, “peri-urban” and “rural”.

In this way, Neil Brenner (2013) questions an accepts understandings on the urban and rural, and argues instead for new urban epistemology that embodies «urban theory without an outside (...) to supersede the urban/non-urban divide that has long anchored the epistemology of urban research» (Brenner, 2013: 15).

These processes call for a new definition of “urban”, whereby peri-urban spaces are conceived not simply as transitional areas located between urban and rural, between Town and Country, but rather as new and emerging forms of “urbanity” that bring into play new life styles, new forms of urbanity, summarized in the idea of “cityness” (Sennett, 2007).

Despite an increasingly dominant approach in urban studies, these processes pose new challenges for the analytical approaches and descriptions, as well as for institutional and governance processes, also because current research has mainly set out a new research agenda, but has not provided a sufficient theoretical and methodological ‘tool kit’ which allows for its application.

In addition, the universalizing vocabulary of planetary urbanism (Brenner, 2013) as it is called, can

be criticized for leaving hardly any room to decipher new and “emergent urban spaces”, as well the reason for the open and agricultural spaces in these regional urbanization processes.

An alternative approach, consolidated in multi-year reflections<sup>2</sup> (Whitehand, 1988; Gant et al., 2011) should think about the consequences of the forms of hybridization between urban and rural, to understand the role of the urban countryside and the features of the urban agriculture and food planning in rethinking the settlement patterns and the functional specialization in metropolitan areas.

By focusing attention on the transformations of the traditional agricultural functions, replaced by new non-or post productive ones, and adding a consumption-oriented component (Marsden, 1999), some scholars (Wilson, 2007; van Huylenbroeck et al., 2007) pay particular attention to the relevance of multi-functional agriculture in peri-urban areas.

Due to the societal and lifestyle transitions in these areas, such as strong non-productivist tendencies that include local embeddedness, short supply chains, low farming intensity, and a high degree of diversification and open-minded societies (Wilson, 2007), the multifunctional agriculture in peri-urban areas – where agriculture is under pressure – can be an important strategy for linking the positive supply side to the normative demand side as a locally embedded model of agriculture (as described by van Huylenbroeck et al., 2007).

A proactive manner of planning urban and peri-urban agricultural landscapes, endorsing the reason of the open and agricultural spaces through the multifunctional development paradigm, makes it possible, in the urban planning approach, to surpass actions often oriented only at protecting the countryside, the prevention and promotion of urban regeneration.

This protectionist approach belongs to an outdated vision – even if in the past it produced significant results in restricting soil consumption – because this is not a “project for these spaces”; it ignores the conditions, requirements and constraints of agricultural production processes in peri-urban areas.

Also following this perspective, new analytical and design approaches are needed to guide policies and projects, to overcome passive protection, or finalized to enhance the existing situation or even to insert new natural figures according to a “formalistic” approach.

These processes call for new “alliances” between actors, farmers, and the communities involved, in order to stimulate the innovation of production processes, as well as the dynamics of productive integration of products in these peri-urban agriculture spaces.

The effort is twofold: on the one hand it is necessary to deal with hybrid forms of landscapes characterizing the peri-urban fringes, which cannot be treated with traditional urban design approaches. On the other hand, it is necessary to ensure the conditions for re-defining the peri-urban agriculture and its functions as a producer of goods and services for the citizens, and, at the same time, as profitable for the farmers, to cope with post-productive challenges.

According to Zasada (2011), if multifunctional farming activities refer to landscape management and agri-environmental production, to experience recreation-oriented diversification, social and organic farming, short supply chains and direct marketing, “the potential synergy effects between landscape management practices and other diversification measures remain underdeveloped” (Zasada, 2011: 644).

In this perspective, it becomes important to search for a “virtuous concatenation of a variety of small-scale projects supported by a frame of structuring spatial and economic choices and synergistic policies, forced to be faced with scarcity of resources” (Gasparini, 2015: 35).

This also implies solving the gap between the urban policy domain and the agriculture policy domain that are often not place-based, also because food system governance and planning had for a long time no relation with urban planning and policy making (De Shutter, 2014).

This is a relevant issue, taking into account the breakdown of the European Union support for rural development in the European Countries<sup>3</sup>, as well as the needs for coordination and integration between local communities, farmers, authorities and stakeholders in implementing the multifunctionality paradigm which modernizes peri-urban agriculture.

Following Donadieu (2013), «the agri-urban forms are built with the economic and political forces that want to produce the compact city with agricultural forms, in a democratic way with the designers, with farmers and with the inhabitants. Therefore, it is the governance of urban projects which co-produces the agri-urban forms»<sup>4</sup>. In this direction, some international experiences show the in-

terdependence between strengthening of peri-urban agricultural areas and a possible integration with planning and design tools, as in the case of London's Metropolitan Green Belt described by Gant, Robinson and Fazal (2011).

### **WORKING ON THE BORDERS: THE INTERPRETATIVE CHALLENGES**

Starting from the assumption that urban and rural are not symmetrical categories, because what defines the city and its territory is no longer what by opposition defines agriculture, we can grapple with the urban and rural in non-dualistic ways, highlighting the landscape at the city edge in its own right, beyond the rural-urban divide.

Dichotomous accounts neglect the complexity, values and conflicts of urban-rural fringe landscapes and propose an idea of fringes as a phase rather than a place; a phase in an unconditional urbanization process.

The blurring of urban-rural boundaries blend and form new types of landscape which are neither rural nor urban. If these conditions are shared by both the points of view introduced in the previous section, however, the looks addressed to the agricultural areas in peri-urban contexts are different. A first operational step towards searching and managing the nexus between urban-rural transition is the study of the urban-rural interfaces.

Searching for urban-rural interfaces makes it possible to recognize the mixed character of these areas without fixing them on a single and simple gradient (Ravetz, Fertner & Sick Nielsen, 2013: 17), and, at the same time, leads to work on the borders that became a site of investigations about the nexus between urban-rural transition.

Working on the borders becomes strategic from a project-oriented viewpoint.

This is because, according to a well-established literature<sup>5</sup>, the border is not static, but fluid, established and, at the same time, continuously crossed by a number of practices and relationships that highlight endless definitions and shifts between inside and outside, urban and rural.

Borders can therefore be created, moved and deconstructed by a range of actors, because they are constantly reproduced as part of shifting space-society relationships and the bordering processes they entail (Brambilla, 2014).

Based on this condition, identifying and interrogating the features of the borders between rural and urban, how they function in different settings, with what consequences and for whose benefit, makes it possible to explore landscape transformations at the fringe, as well as recognize the potential of peri-urban areas in accepting various demands and preferences for multiple goods and services related to the possible forms of agriculture.

This approach will offer a multifaceted analysis of urban-rural interfaces, which in turn will facilitate a more open discussion on land use and values within planning, because borders, as dynamic social processes, are interpreted as design tools, useful also for dealing with the governance process, to interpret and regulate the transformation processes in times, places, social life and work programs. In this case, working on the borders and their variabilities offers a way to analyze landscape transformations at the fringe, identifying what is - in any single contextualized situation - the right scale from which the urban-rural transition can be observed and planned in a pertinent way.

The challenges still remain in the operational understanding of the effects of these borders on the "formal hard spaces of governmental activity" (Haughton et al., 2010: 52).

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## NOTES

- 1 This is the goal covered by the Design Workshop held during the PhD Course in Urban Planning Design and Policy at Politecnico di Milano. The Milan Urban Region is an extensive area which goes beyond the institutional borders of the metropolitan city of Milan, representing an alternative territorial organization to the metropolitan area, characterized by a more complex model of settlement and relationships between urban-rural areas.
- 2 According to Gant et al. (2011), the notion of "urban-rural fringe" first appears in literature by geographers and planners in 1930 in UK at the time when there was great concern over the loss of agricultural land to urban sprawl.
- 3 According to the overall amounts of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period 2014- 2020, approved by the European Parliament on 19 November 2013, the breakdown of Union support for rural development (2014 to 2020) is 95,577,051,994 euros in the 28 countries (source: [http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/cap-funding/budget/mff-2014-2020/mff-figures-and-cap\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/cap-funding/budget/mff-2014-2020/mff-figures-and-cap_en.pdf)). As known, the expenditure for agriculture and rural development is financed by two funds, which form part of the EU's general budget. The European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) finances direct payments to farmers and measures to regulate agricultural markets such as intervention and export refunds, while the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) finances the rural development programs of the Member States.
- 4 "Le forme agri-urbane si costruiscono con le forze economiche e politiche che vogliono produrre la città compatta con le forme agricole, in modo democratico con i progettisti, con gli agricoltori e con gli abitanti. E' dunque la governance dei progetti urbani che co-produce le forme agri-urbane" (Donadieu, 2013: 138).
- 5 See the Border Studies literature and, in particular, Brambilla (2014) on the conceptual evolution of border-scapes concept in the Border studies.





**This book collects the outcomes of the workshop “Linking territories. Rurality, landscape and urban borders” jointly organised by the PhD course in Urban Planning, Design and Policy (UPDP) at the Politecnico di Milano and the Post-Master “Architecture des Milieux” of the Ecole Spéciale d’Architecture de Paris. The workshop has had a double aim: to widen the view on the relationship between urban and rural areas, by involving different groups of research and practice, and to define experimental proposals able to imagine new spaces for the co-habitation of urban and rural ways of living, in the end redefining the concept of rurality and its relation with the urban condition.**



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