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Scuola di Architettura, Urbanistica e Ingegneria delle Costruzioni  
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**OC-Open City**  
**INTERNATIONAL SUMMER SCHOOL**  
WORKSHOP IN ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN DESIGN

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## **New Next Nature**

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# INDEX

## PREFACE

<b>New scenarios for new developments: the OC Summer School experience</b> <i>Guya Bertelli</i>	14
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## BACKGROUND | TOPICS AND CONTEXT

<b>A new 'loss of the center'</b> <i>Guya Bertelli</i>	25
<b>Landscape nature ecology</b> <i>Sara Protasoni</i>	39
<b>Future urban utopias</b> <i>Pasquale Mei</i>	43
<b>Piacenza 2050: Postcards from the future</b> <i>Michele Roda</i>	51

## PIACENZA DIARY

<b>Description of Actions + Lecturers Biographies + International Juries + Roma MAXXI</b> <i>Guya Bertelli, Pasquale Mei, Michele Roda</i>	62
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## PROJECT AREAS

<b>Programs and goals</b> <i>OC Coordination</i>	90
---	----

## PROJECTS

<b>ATELIER 1</b>	102
<b>Transparen(cit)y   Methodologies, strategies and results</b> <i>Chiara Bertoli, Nicola Russi</i>	
<b>ATELIER 2</b>	126
<b>Vers une nature?   Methodologies, strategies and results</b> <i>Laura Pujia, Gaia Redaelli, Francesca Schepis</i>	
<b>ATELIER 3</b>	150
<b>Parangolé   Methodologies, strategies and results</b> <i>Massimo Galluzzi, Mario Morrica, Roy Emiliano Nash</i>	

<b>Piacenza Prize 2017</b>	174
<b>Press Review</b>	176
<b>Bibliography</b>	180

# BACKGROUND



## A NEW 'LOSS OF THE CENTER'

*Guya Bertelli*

The persistent crisis experienced by architecture in recent years is related to the wider cultural struggle which is reflected in the "loss of the center" that, interpreted by Sedlmayr more than fifty years ago as a transitional phenomenon, denounces by now an irreversible change in every area of knowledge. Its character of innovation, however, seems to evoke a parallel and dialectical acquisition of something 'other' and 'different' from what has been lost, forgotten, overcome, though, Benjamin remembers, every "novelty appearance is reflected, as a mirror, in the essence of the always similar". Precisely, this illusory contradiction immediately leads to an explanation of the concept of centrality which is suspended among a condition recognized as new and a re-stressed urbanity which brings, on the contrary, as a counterpoint, to the idea of a reference center.

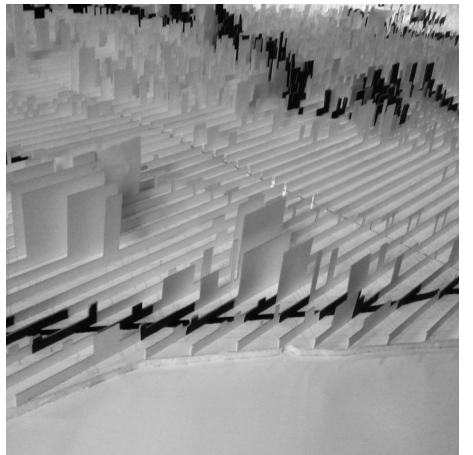
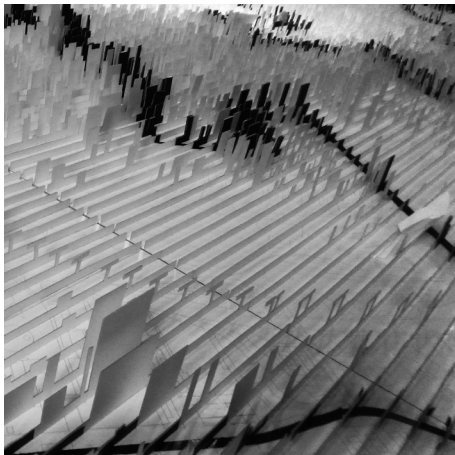
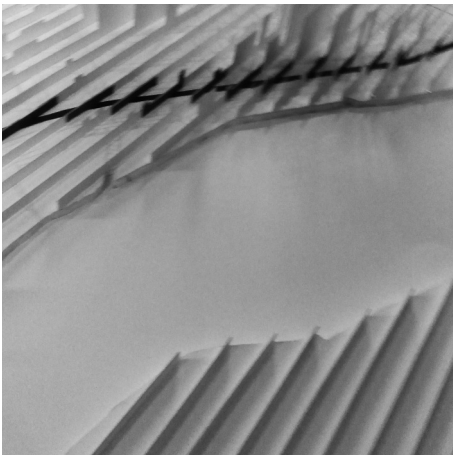
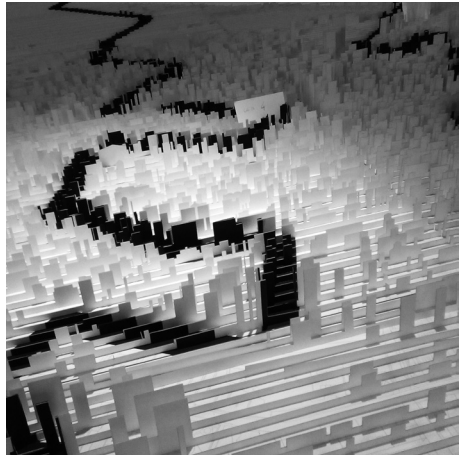
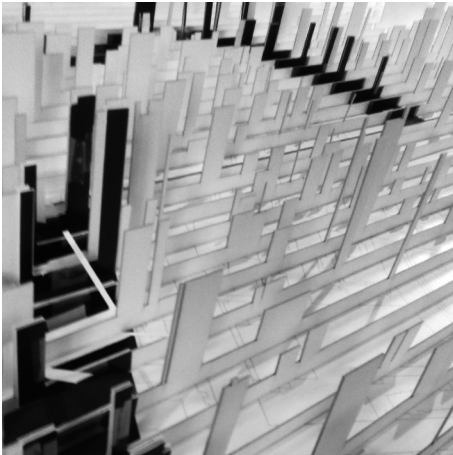
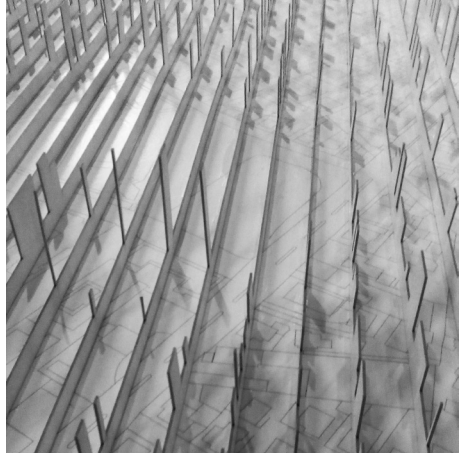
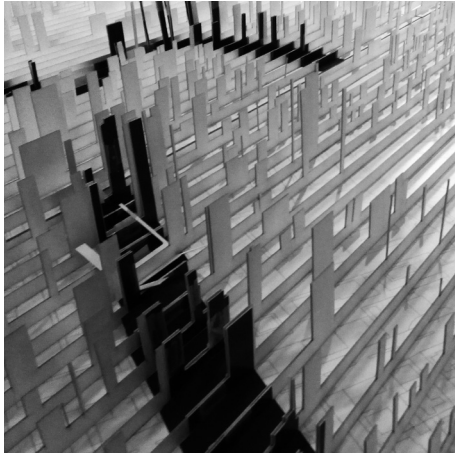
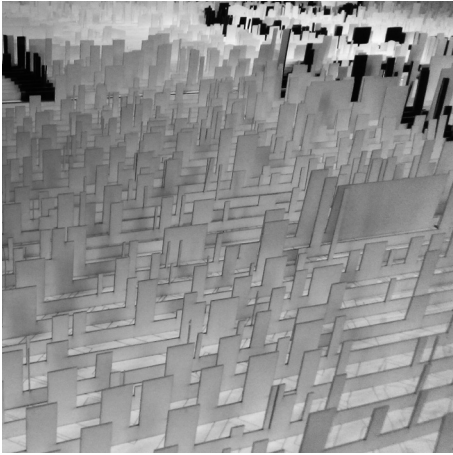
"Canonization of unit, regularity, stability", the centered figure maintained over the time a structuring role widely linked to the image of the 'circle', as a favorite signifier. As point of reference in theological and cosmological doctrines, it reveals, starting from the ancient thinking, its geometric origin, its spatiality: center is the *place* in contrast with the space, it is what emerges from the surrounding and from the surrounding it distinguishes itself as a known entity; but it is also the site for the sacralisation of an event, the preferred area for a collective activity, the principle of 'limitation' outside and of centralization inside, as Assunto remembers evoking the sacred rite of the foundation. Nucleus creator of the universe, it is the middle point of the celestial spheres, the *axis mundi*, the sign that 'holds together' the four regions of the space. But the center of the city is also a temporal center that, according to Müller, doesn't only represent the point zero of spatiality, but also the 'principle' of time intended as 'history', the exact point of its 'beginning'. Today, the 'loss of the center', doesn't only deny the explosion

of the temporal coordinates, but also the already recognized dissolution of the space coordinates. The consumption of physical and material boundaries, the disintegration of the concept of absolute centrality. Such a radical change is perceivable in a range of different fields: from linguistics, where 'dialectics' declines the abandonment of the fake center of thinking; to the musical composition, where 'dissonance' breaks the uniqueness of the harmonic center; to the narrative, where you can get "the passage from a unique element, dominant and centered to the coexistence of some interpenetrating realities"; to the arts, to painting, to cinema, to literature: there is no center in Cezanne's paintings, Kafka's novels, Schöenberg's music, Berg's and Bartok's rhythms, or Joyce's Ulysses or Beckett's theater. In addition, the shift of the point of view in the philosophy of science, "the emphasis placed by Foucault on discontinuity and difference in history ..., new developments in mathematics, in biological sciences, in topology," indicates a broad and deep change in the "structural feeling of the center".

In architecture the process has taken place in a complex way and advancing an univocal interpretation can be misleading. However recent sprawling processes clearly identify the breakdown of previous monocentric balances. On one hand the removing, more and more rapid, of the original centralities, on the other the appearing of new urban polarities that are no longer comparable to gravitational reference knots. It's a phenomenon that drags with it important consequences not only in physical space, but also in uses, social behaviors and symbolic expressions: the centrality of the 'model' was replaced by a new 'cultural relativism', very similar to a "hive of networks and of social interactions" to an "encyclopedia of values" in which every hierarchy or predetermined centrality dissolves itself". It is a passage that, in addition to causing a shift from the mono-nuclearism of the 'centered' to the multipolarity of the "a-centrate", provokes an important change in the scale, connected with the transformation of the three interrelated levels of the relationship between city and countryside, center and periphery, internal and external. At a first appropriation of the external territory by the central city, in fact, it was reflected, in a following moment, the transformation as suburb of the urban expansion around the consolidated and still gravitating on it core, according to a process that sees in recent times a reversal of the settlement balance: on one hand the explosion of the central sites, with the breakdown of the urban-centered model, on the other their progressive weakening, interpreted by many critics as the process of 'making the center suburbs' (peripheral center). The 'gray belts' of the industrial city transform themselves into wide regions surrounding the original centrality, causing the loss of absolute identity, because "what was peripheral in the past today is no longer peripheral, or it is but very differently".

"Piacenza in section" is a model of sequences done by Guya Bertelli with Mario Morrica in the class "Caratteri tipologici e distributivi degli edifici"  
(2017-2018, Politecnico di Milano, Piacenza Campus)





The sprawling explosion therefore carries an important consequence: the center is no longer the highest concentration of presences, the maximum integration of functions or the highest expression of the service equipments, but it becomes the weakest node of the dialectic among centered and peripheral settings. By no longer constituting as antagonistic and referential polarizations, the two quoted entities promote a shift towards the new relationship between internal and external urban, implying a definitive relativisation of both quantitative levels on the ground and dimensional scales. They are replaced by relational scales linked to the new temporality of the communicational flows, according to a system of multiple connections that new urban nets establish between portions more or less distant from the original nucleus. Time, the main actor of the urban scene, changes the spatial coordinates of the original centrality and projects them into a "net without center" or even in a "network of homologated identities", where only relative centralities can claim a recognizable differentiability.

#### **A retrospective look: the 'relocation' of the center**

However, transition from centered systems to a-centered ones is not new at all, even if it has today special characters that have never before been reached. Compared to the transformations experienced by the settlements form, it can be read as a transition from a "figural" shape of the form itself to a new structure that recognizes it firstly as 'structure' and then as 'open system'.

Originating from the act itself of the built-up area's foundation, shape as a figure belongs to a space-time era that arrives until the mature Renaissance. It survives and it replicates every time in the magical rite of finding a center and tracing of a perimetral furrow, new defining signs of the human settlement. The integration of origin's myths and foundation rites allows to recognize an abstractive process that transfers conceptually the act of space's appropriation, firstly sublimated by its own materiality, then projected into an ideological circle of reference, finally contemplated as a rule of reproduction and reconstruction of the built-up area.

Precisely thanks to a process of abstraction of the formal idea as a figurative principle, the Renaissance imposes its cumulative and concentrating rule on urban space, where the figure of the built-up area gives strength to the surroundings extended, reinforcing the exclusive aspects and defining in a straightforward manner the conditions of the relationship. Coinciding with the development of the central perspective, the monocentric space of the Renaissance humanism comes to define that form of the 'aggressive' centrality that only the Mannerism, and later the Baroque, will tend to attenuate by

replacing the univocal and centered space with a polycentric one: the regularitas of the Renaissance squares, with a square and circular shape, give way to baroque ellipses and large urban rectangles which represent the dilation, the fragmentation and the multiplication of space; from a closed and centered figure, therefore, towards its deformed but concluded, as it's expressed in the anamorphic representations of the immediately following periods. Baroque polycentric space marks the decline of form as a figure exhibiting its own paradox and establishes new virtual positionings that later the Enlightenment will develop according to multiple triangulations. The ancient center and the urban walls mark in this period the surviving profiles of the figure of the built-up area, that are actually overcome by a re-measuring of the space that establishes new internal and external nodes in the city, points of support for a structure that proceeds with aligned bonds toward a basically undetermined surrounding, a new natural horizon which, as Diderot argues, is all explorable and therefore recognizable.

The shape, which now has become structure, is the mutual figurative geometry that overlooks delimitations or univocal centralities, re-establishing itself in the correlation principle of the built-up area with its surroundings. The will to subdue and act through an overall urban project focuses over the visibility of spatial boundaries. The new nodes firstly flank and then replace the previous symbolic nodes, redesigned by the rays which project themselves outside the inhabited area, becoming tracer elements, correlative, able to reach their external reproductive ganglia: the urban form as structure now prevails permanently over the idea of the city as figure.

While keeping both the original matrixes (concentric and polycentric), the structural model finds a partial outcome in the nineteenth-century city, which re-thinks it through a system of multiple connections activated and multiplied according a star-shaped articulation around the consolidated habitats. The result is that particular urban structure articulated according to a radial and annular system, which on the one hand it guarantees its primacy of centrality, on the other it extends its own connections, creating a new device of correlations among the interior and the exterior of the city. The body of the city, which works according to the logic of the industrial development, changes according the shifting of space-temporal new relations, suggesting, with Valery, that a new sensitivity of time spills among different city's places. With it a different sensitivity of the space related to the movement (which will be resumed later by the avant-garde), it now perceives fleeting, instantaneous, progressive forms, without definite contours, of fixed or predefined centers: the new landscape runs over time according to the dictated rules from circulation, from movement, from shifts.

The premises of the conceptual categories of 'modern' are already defined: they 'open' new spatial coordinates that make the relationship between built elements largely independent from the connective system, which is now limited to a simple circulatory mechanism. Circulation, repetition and simultaneity are the new conceptual categories that graft themselves into the idea of form as an open system, where the center undergoes a decisive shift. Involved in the space-time 'compression', it is now dynamizing itself in the involutive/evolutive spirals of Constructivists, now breaks against the deformation of L. Kahn's circles, now emancipates from the ground in the vertical districts by Le Corbusier, as a substantially "anti-urban" device that compares with a new spatial horizon (the sky, the soil, the four horizons), but aware of the mechanical effort of the transfer. Finally, it expands as an extensible element able to bind the consolidated nuclei with a large surrounding area, according to a new city-countryside relationship that opens to a new territorial scale, where the great innovation of the industrial linear city is. The centrally-centered historical city now stretches along an indefinite linear beam. Brought to the extreme limit, exactly the form's matrix as an open system seems already to support the proliferation of the early twentieth-century suburbs, when any premise of reunification of the built-up area lacks and the analytical and decomposing process finds free grounds to play. Even the topical sprawled space seems to force permanently the formulation of the modern open system, still tied to the logic of the geometric logs and of the relations between the parties.

### **The sites of transformation: "new urban centralities"**

Facing the today dissipative phenomena, however, you can recognize the inadequacy or perhaps the lack of interpretative models that followed the crisis of traditional categories of space description. A situation that causes explanations of the problem that are also opposed, they're schematically ascribable to some of the 'positions' prevalent in the contemporary critical horizon. You can read the built-up sprawling as a 'deformation' of a previous urban centered structure, which was weakened in its physical and social conditions, yet still conceivable as a preferential referent. The city, as *urbs*, is still quoted as a central condition, even when it remains merely a reference category: "centrality remains synonym of higher values (cultural, economic, environmental) to be exported in the suburbs to redeem them, to emancipate them, but together to homologate them". Or, on the contrary, you can read an 'aesthetic surplus value' of the outer, fragmentary, subordinate, marginalized bands, so much to give them the possibility of a positive ransom of the environment: urban fringes are considered as autonomous housing,



avoided by hierarchical logics and paradoxically interpreted as models that are valid for future settlement positions, internal too, as they are able to “exploit the new kingdom of hybridization and atopia”. The dialectics between the two previous positions, however, reveals a third mean, of ‘transformative’ nature, which is based on an evaluation of the real possibilities to modify of the urban landscape, seen as a dynamic system that moves from a centered setting to an a-centered one. Its connotation of trasformativity gives this vision a character specifically linked with the design, whose essence goes back, every time, to the original act of foundation of the places, far beyond the unlikely reproductive reasons or the obsolete ideologies of the re-balancing.

From the end effects of a centered system resulting from the exhaustion of its original role, in fact the a-centered and dispersed structure emerges; it is something that the design recognizes and interprets as the necessary material on which acting and to which giving back sense and meaning. The “design hope” of reconstructing the architectural space of our era can only derive from the conscious assumption of the dispersed, the fragmentary, the discontinuous, where their possible re-composition has to be balanced with the traces of our past, reinterpreted by the project itself as ‘explanatory keys’ of the future transformations. In such an idea, new centralities can no longer be considered gravitational reference nuclei, attractors with their own circularity, but rather ‘spatial and’ ridge ‘consolidations of the form corresponding to aggregations recognizable like a system of knots discrete, interdependent and interfering. Organized because of the rules of spatial correlation and interactive hierarchy, they mark the transition from a dimensional logic of the space to a relational logic, overthrowing the ancient gravitational relationship with the historical center and placing itself in a simultaneous relation with emerging structural lines, where previous polarizations look now obsolete or completely absent. So centralities related, tendentious, articulated, no longer pre-established or absolute as the past ones, but reconstituted by the competition of shapes or by the interference of dots, lines, urban meshes, able to outline an ‘other landscape’ made up of interconnections and intervals. Even though they are anchored in residual forms of the past, they are generally involved in the topical shaping processes which are dictated by the sprawling of the inhabited area, whose pre-existing traces belong to the larger system of overlapping designs, that cannot just can be made historical in their specific formal stratification but which can be also assumed in design as generic matrixes of the actual set-up.

Only the transformation of the boundaries which are previously identified in the generative critical lines ‘actualizes’ in fact the deep layers of the history making them comparable and

interfering with the most recent conformations of the built-up area. Coinciding with the new places of architectural representation, social use and infrastructural operation, the relative centralities are located along discrete lines, internal limits, measured intervals, whose multiple sequences are memorized and recomposed into the hetero-chronic synthesis of space-time experience.

Only the measurement of the intervals and the succession of events denote the raising of 'thresholds' capable of becoming correlative centralities for the new spatial disposition. The passage from the synchronous perception of the 'nuclearity', focused on the diachronic perception of the 'multipolarity', demands therefore new aggregative polarities, 'spread' according to the double forward and backward movement to expand through ribs or lines of strength where intercepted intervals can resonate. Alternative moving 'from' and 'to' is an irrevocable condition for the scaffolding of the nucleus 'grown together', governed by a 'nomadism' that connotes today's territorial mobility. They become potential "landing" locations, extremes that intertwine logical reasons and conceptual paradoxes, 'emerging places' and indifferent 'non-places', occasional signs of the present and lasting traces of the past, indelibly imprinted within a settlement design whose recent disruption urgently calls for a design.

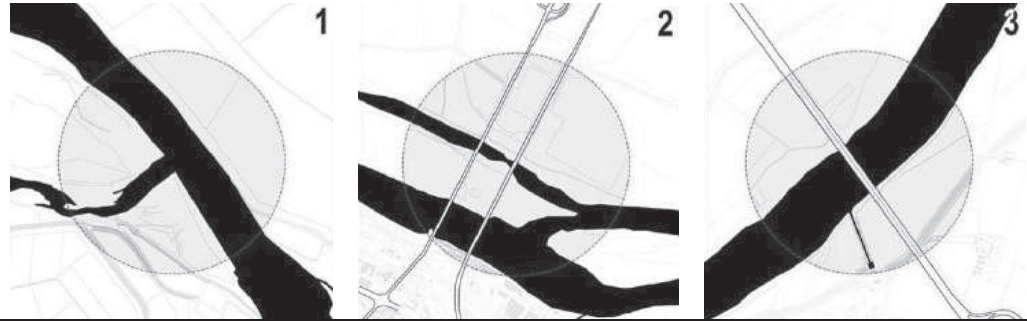
### **Importance of intermediate space**

Starting from this observatory, we can say that 'intermediate space' now takes more importance and becomes a significant threshold of design transformation, since it is no longer related to the opposition of individual parts (whether they are city-countryside, center-periphery, interior-exterior) but to the more conscious dialectic between the 'extension and contraction' of the dwellings, where artifice and nature constantly exchange their settlements; according to a movement intercepting, it also forms an evident hybridization between the two contending realities, fully involved in the formation of a new 'common' design. These fragile territories then coincide with the place of the project, an intermediate space of coexistence of different conditions, where only a relational approach can open to new living conditions. The relational approach is a non-superficial approach that goes deep into human experiences and traces of history; for this it needs new maps, new grammars, new trajectories that must also explain, not only describe, the theme of the 'journey' and the emotion of walking in, in search of a new possible 'narration'.

Series of diagrams of next pages describes Piacenza territorial and urban system highlighting nodal points and geometrical readings



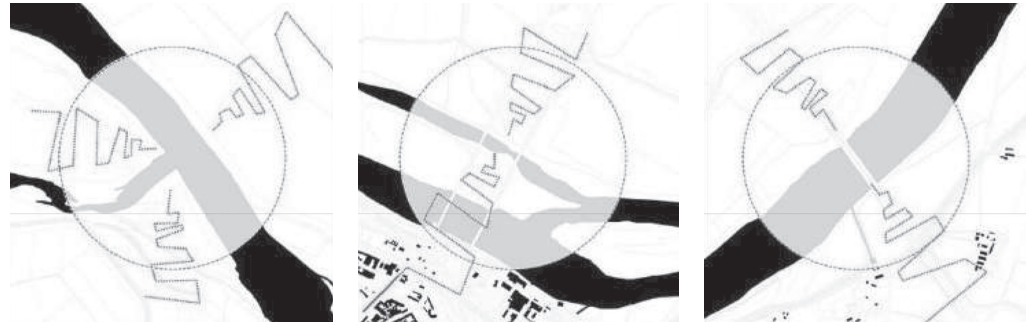
Special nucleus  
and  
main typologies



Nodes  
and  
margins



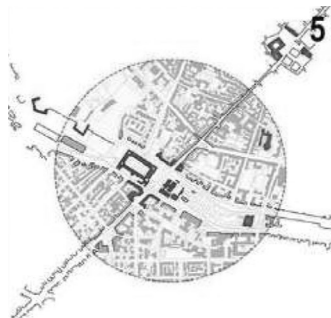
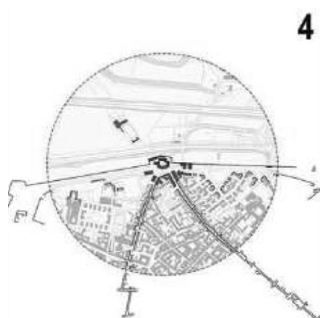
Flows  
and  
lines of strenght



Open spaces  
and  
relations







Special nucleus  
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# BACKGROUND

A new 'loss of the center'

Special nucleus  
and  
main typologies



Nodes  
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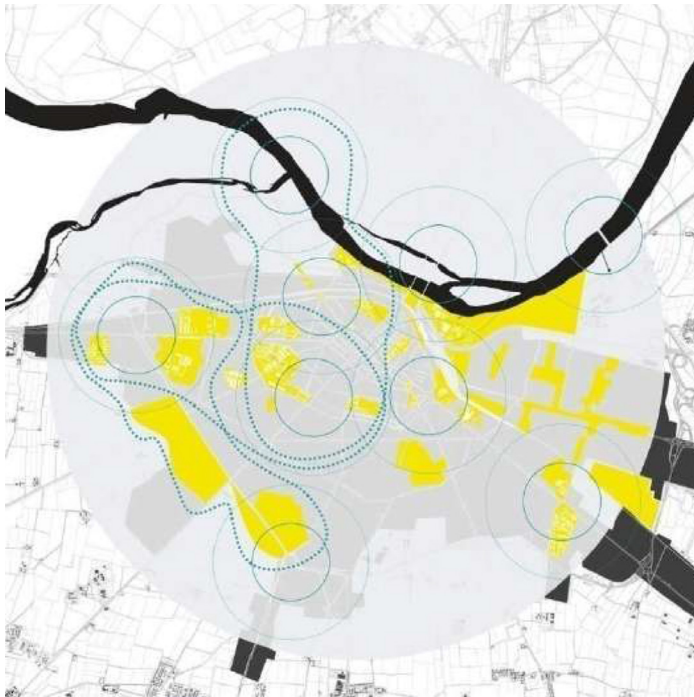
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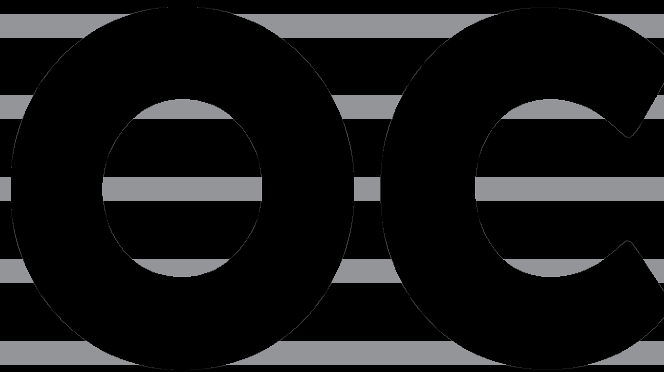


# International Summer School

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