

# **The family house and its territories in contemporary Italy: present conditions and future perspectives**

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## **1. The *città diffusa*: the landscape and the family house, 1970s–1990s**

Until the early 1950s, the Italian landscape was still mainly defined by compact and clearly recognizable urban centres. During the 1960s, and even more so in subsequent decades, a new phenomenon began to emerge. In many parts of the country – around Milan and Turin, in large portions of the Veneto, in the central regions like Marches and Abruzzi, in the plain around Florence, in the valleys and along the coast of Puglia, Calabria and Sicily – the so-called *città diffusa* (diffuse city) became the main urban development model (Indovina 1990; Clementi, De Matteis, and Palermo 1996). This model spread to large portions of the territory (Figure 1) with an intensity that was probably unequalled in the rest of Europe (Baurer and Roux 1976; Paone 1994; Bertuglia, Stanghellini, and Staricco 2003; Font 2004; Viganò 2004; European Environment Agency 2006).

### **1.1. Social and geographical features of a new urban model**

Two features define this new form of spatial organization. The first is that the *città diffusa* reused the existing infrastructure network (Figure 2), a legacy of country lanes, canals, minor roads and ditches, all highly ramified throughout the territory and conveniently providing a support to accommodate new building projects. In the course of time, this led to more extensive use of the territory, thanks to the widespread ownership of cars and a road system that served an increasingly varied set of destinations. Hence, an entirely new form of city came into being alongside the existing model, which gradually underwent a process

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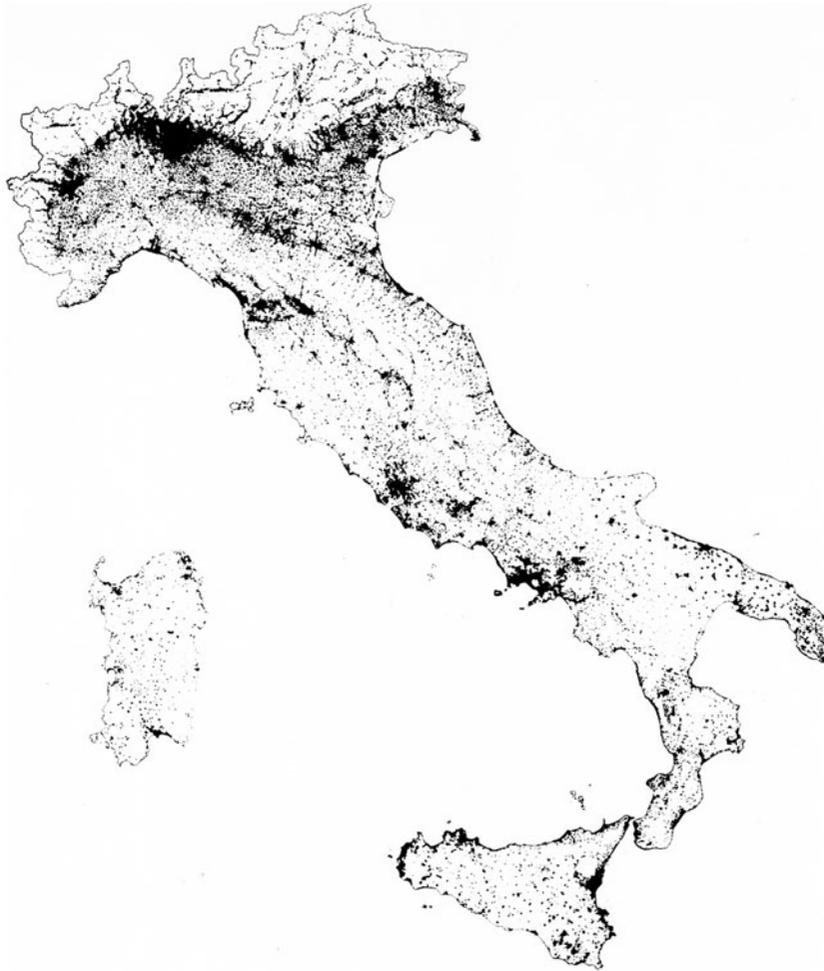


Figure 1. Map of urbanization in Italy up to 1991, showing the extent of the *città diffusa* in a variety of regional contexts and shapes: linear conurbations, dense patterns, constellations of small centers. (Clementi, Dematteis, and Palermo 1996, 141).

of transformation. This process altered the territory's fixed capital by making constant changes designed to increase its efficiency. However, these changes were piecemeal rather than part of a long-term planning policy (Secchi 1996).

This incremental approach – and here is the second distinguishing feature – went hand in hand with the implicit policy known as *mobilizzazione individuale* (individual mobilization). This term, coined by sociologist Alessandro Pizzorno (Pizzorno 1974), refers to the way residents in the new dispersed settlements were encouraged to act individually in building their living space. In other words, development was largely left to the initiative of private individuals, who adopted a do-it-yourself approach to solving problems related to their houses. Whether it be in the more explicit forms of self-promoted housing, in the customized house-cum-workshop format, or in the widespread unauthorized building projects in Southern Italy, the *città diffusa* bears witness to this bottom-up, constitutive metamorphosis.

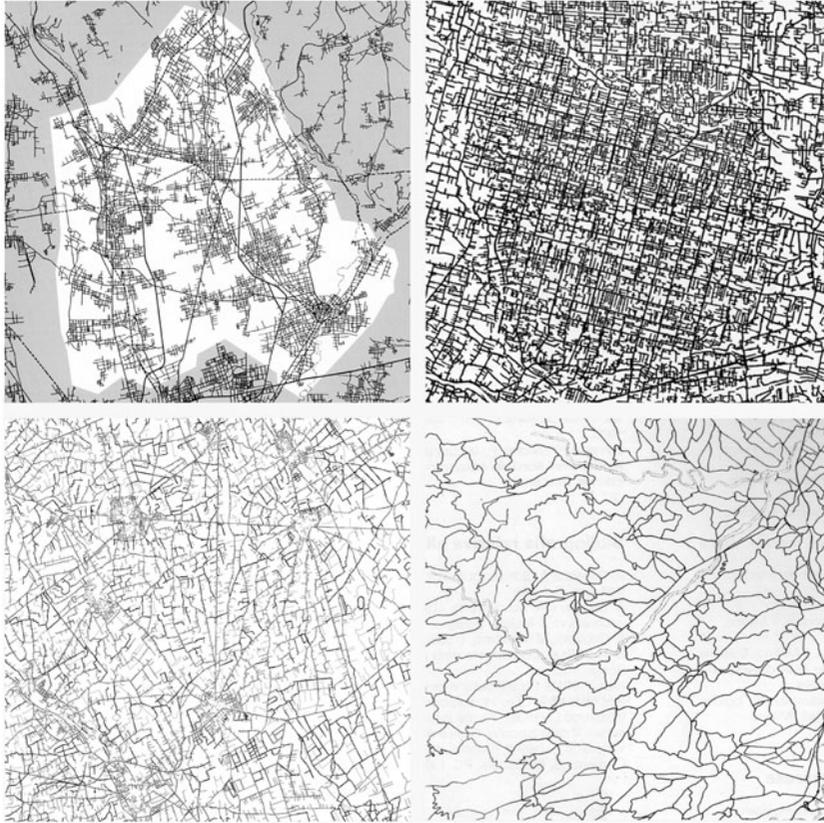


Figure 2. Supports for the *città diffusa* in four territorial contexts. Top left, dense and urbanized road network in the Brianza Milanese, Lombardy (Boeri, Lanzani, and Marini 1993, 222); top right, road network in central Veneto up to 1968 (Munarín and Tosi 2001, 155); bottom left, small-scale infrastructure in Salento: paved roads, unpaved roads and pathways (Viganò 2001, 126); bottom right, road network in Pescara Province, Marche 1993 (Bianchetti and Vettoretto 1999).

Since these changes took place the length and breadth of the peninsula, it is hardly surprising that regional variations in the *città diffusa* also occurred. Throughout Italy the “minute particles” (Figure 3) observable in the urban fabric are more or less the same: individual housing, small industrial warehouses, and commercial buildings (Basilico and Boeri 1998; Giriodi and Robiglio 2001). This homogeneity reflects a general redefinition of mass consumption models and housing aspirations (Crainz 2005). On the other hand, variations occur due to differences in geography, infrastructure, socio-economic conditions, development trends and, crucially, in the effectiveness of local urban planning measures (Boeri, Lanzani, and Marini 1993; Munarín and Tosi 2001; Merlini 2009).

It should be noted that, while in Central and Northern Italy the *città diffusa* arises chiefly within the context of ordinary planning, in the south it often coincides with so-called *abusivismo edilizio* (outlaw building). Thus, in the Mezzogiorno we find vast unauthorized urban development both on the coast and inland, a subject which deserves separate discussion but which is not the focus of the present study (see Zanfi 2013).



Figure 3. House and shed, the building blocks in the widespread urbanization of the *città diffusa*, Piedmont, 2001. Courtesy: Sisto Giriodi.

Apart from these shades of difference, the *città diffusa* is the most distinctive feature in Italian urban transformation in the second half of the twentieth century. As such, it is quite distinct from suburbanization and sprawl, which emerged in North America from the 1930s on. The latter mainly exhibited exogenous growth, but the Italian model was driven by endogenous forces (Bagnasco 1978; Fuà and Zacchia 1983; Bonomi 1997) and resulted in the gradual densification of a rural setting already inhabited and provided with infrastructure. As in other European and Mediterranean areas, the Italian *città diffusa* presents an essentially molecular and pulviscular form, resulting in an aggregate of small-scale building projects which, with respect to more dense and compact urban forms, radically subverts the rules on proximity between objects, the spatial hierarchies and sequences, and the ratios between built and open space (De Meulder et al. 1999; Secchi 2005; Indovina 2007; Domingues 2010; Grosjean 2010).

### ***1.2. Roles of the family house within the generative processes of the città diffusa***

Within this specific context, the family house has long been a key element, assuming different forms, meanings and values. First, it features extended families, rooted in tradition, where grown-up children continue to live close to their parents for many years, a model which has been passed on from generation to generation, slightly modified with time. The house then undergoes a process of continuous metamorphosis and adaptation, reflecting the processes of change and growth within the family.

Second, it has performed a key social function by making a variety of economies possible. These include housing more than one family, creating space in which crafts and commercial work can be carried out, and providing a family welfare system (Munarin and Tosi 2001; Merlini 2009). The latter is a key aspect and works in a variety of ways: by extending the living space (a new service building, an extra floor for accommodating

grown-up children or elderly parents, redeploying a disused outhouse as a leisure space, and so forth); by diversifying a building's function (creating a workspace, a small office or studio, an extended garage, turning the garden into a vegetable plot); or by making more modest changes, either to the façade or inside the building (closing off balconies, loggias or porticos, etc.).

However, this versatility of the family house also has a downside: though it implies a high level of personal involvement, allowing for forms of appropriation and do-it-yourself, doubts can be raised about the quality of the space created. Two particular factors come into play in the issues created by such spaces.

First, precisely because its individual houses constantly adapt with time, and also due to the gradual “molecular” densification of the single building plots, the *città diffusa* can no longer claim to be comfortable. While the quality of individual family houses has improved, there has been no corresponding improvement in the public amenities and urbanity of the urban fabrics they occupy (Bianchetti 2003).

Secondly, focusing alone on improving the function of family houses in response to individual needs has meant that a city has formed which, in many respects, displays an overall inefficiency. Given the relatively weak role of Italian local administrations in directing building processes, the *città diffusa* today registers a high level in consumption of farmland, high rates of energy waste due to the isolation and inefficiency of its buildings, and high costs deriving from its private transport model (Camagni, Gibelli, and Rigamonti 2002).

## **2. Family houses and their territories: what is currently at stake**

Seen close up, these territories today reveal mechanisms for change which are reshaping the landscape<sup>1</sup>. These phenomena were already picked up by scholars in the 1990s, but they have become more striking, many of them only recently.

### **2.1. Emerging under-use**

First should be mentioned the widespread molecular under-use of inhabited spaces – in particular the older family houses – which have begun to replace the self-promoted growth processes associated with the emergence of the *città diffusa* in the 1970s–1990s. The underlying causes are multi-factorial (Figure 4).

Principal among them are the thoroughgoing changes that are reshaping the average Italian family (Saraceno and Naldini 2007) and its relationship with the built environment. The canonical model, whereby the traditional family continued to live in a single house, is making way for a plurality of forms of being and living together, forms that require spaces quite different from those of the family house (Granata and Lanzani 2006).

Secondly, new generations progressively prefer living arrangements which differ from those envisaged by the original promoters of these buildings, and in many contexts they are making alternative choices. The desire to be near improved public amenities and the urban realm is prompting a faint return to centres, while the need to cut accommodation costs – more keenly felt in the current economic crisis – is creating demand for smaller units, where maintenance and energy costs can be contained (Lanzani and Zanfi 2010).

In the third place, the original promoters of such projects are themselves voicing preferences at variance with the model that led to the *città diffusa* only a few decades ago. The original ideal of the family house, once a byword for autonomy and privacy, today spells insecurity because of its isolation (Cittalia 2008). Media coverage portrays such houses as being more exposed to the risk of burglary and violence. The garden, once a



Figure 4. Under-used house near Treviso, Veneto, 2009. Courtesy: Stefano Graziani.

status symbol and the scene of family interaction, is now thought of in terms of its need for maintenance. To this should be added the premature decay of this kind of construction – a legacy of its being built in a rush and on the cheap – which is creating high maintenance costs, both ordinary and extraordinary. Finally, current inhabitants are now growing old, and increasingly express the desire to be close to amenities and shops. They resent the high transport costs that living in the congested *città diffusa* imposes, and this comes just at a time when senior citizens are having difficulty in using the car to reach public facilities (Vallerani and Varotto 2005; Zanfi 2011).

This explains why many of these old family houses, located in small municipalities or rural areas, are today on the real estate market. In some cases they are overpriced, since their owners have invested heavily in them – albeit symbolically – and it is a buyer's market. According to real estate agents, at least one third of these houses in Mestre Province are in this limbo state: too expensive to be sold, too expensive to be maintained.<sup>2</sup> The result is that many of them are inhabited by the original elderly owners, but only partially, to reduce energy and maintenance costs. In some other cases, in those contexts of lower quality, you can detect a growing presence of foreign immigrants who re-occupy the old family houses. (Figure 5).

## 2.2. *Materials and issues in a new urban development cycle*

However, the difficulties reflected by aged and under-used family houses in the *città diffusa* do not mean that their territories have ceased to grow. From the 1990s up to today, the response to changing demands for living solutions is in the hands of a supply sector that continues to urbanize the territory, offering new forms of housing, driven by new kinds of promoter. No longer is the landscape peppered by single self-promoted initiatives that rely on a pre-existing infrastructure network. What is now emerging is a trend towards medium-to-large projects, unitary in nature and carried out by promoters who comply with the rationality of the real estate sector. This practice is much closer to the mechanisms

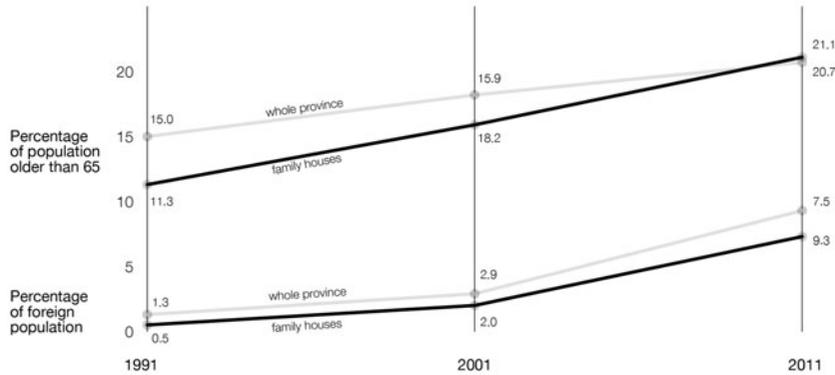


Figure 5. Evolution in the percentages of elderly and foreign inhabitants within the stock of “family houses” in the central Veneto area (provinces of Venice-Mestre, Padua, Treviso), in comparison with the average percentages in the same provinces. The considered stock includes buildings constructed before 1991, accommodating one or two families, and excludes farmhouses. Data sources: Italian Census, 1991, 2001, and 2011. Data editing by Fabio Manfredini at Laboratory of Data Analysis and Mapping, Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano.

historically associated with suburban sprawl in North American contexts – and more recently also in European contexts (Barattucci 2004; Indovina 2009; Grosjean 2010) – and it displays progressive autonomy and indifference towards pre-existing rural and urban settings (Figure 6). What we see now are introverted residential islands – sometimes still on the model of a single-family detached house, sometimes taking more aggregate forms – which offer better energy performance, greater security, and gated collective space for leisure, sport and the children. In general, there is a shift in scale away from individual space towards compounds, away from the single building towards a well-equipped island cluster where groups of individuals enjoy shared amenities and quality standards which, acting singly, they would not be able to afford (Lanzani 2009, 2012).

However, it should be observed that the factors behind these trends do not derive from an evolution in housing demands alone. These processes are impelled, first and foremost, by a planning policy, adopted by most municipal authorities, which seeks to raise revenues from new urbanization projects – albeit in the absence of any real housing demand – so as to tackle urgent budgetary requirements in a critical moment for local government finance (Pileri 2009).

We thus face the emerging and widespread under-use of older family houses, along with overproduction in the building industry which, within the same territory, prefers to urbanize farmland. The problem scenario that ensues means clustered urbanization and widespread abandonment in tandem, whereby new building projects proliferate while the old ones fall into premature ruin (Lanzani and Pasqui 2011). This trend is even more alarming given that this is all happening in territories already extensively urbanized – as in certain areas of the Lombardy (Figure 7) and Veneto regions. These processes are also further eroding what few residual spaces have not yet been built, creating serious consequences of a hydro-geological and environmental character.

This all invites a number of urgent questions. As an alternative to this scenario, can we intervene on building forms and materials that already exist within the *città diffusa*, adapting them to the new living demands? And if so, what chances are offered by Italy’s family-house heritage? To what extent and in what conditions can older family houses still be a desirable settlement model? How far can they respond to the qualitative demands of



Figure 6. The “new grain” of the *città diffusa*: residential clusters recently constructed in the middle of a residual agricultural area in Senago, Lombardy (1 x 1 km, sample © Google Earth). In the right part of the picture it is possible to see the finer grain of the older fabric formed by family houses.

contemporary Italian society? These are the questions which have informed our reflection on the planning of a possible future for the family house, aspects of which are outlined in the following section.

### 3. Strategies

Those areas of the *città diffusa* which feature family houses may appear today quite undecipherable: their current condition reflects complex histories and changing needs as one generation succeeds another, and as the structure of the family itself changes. However, a closer look reveals a limited number of recurrent patterns with regard to their real estate value and their relationship with urban centres and infrastructure networks. Identifying these patterns naturally implies making generalizations; however, recognizing the potential and limits of each situation allows us to define intervention strategies that take account of how various agents are likely to respond once the momentum for spontaneous change is underway within each of these patterns.

Our proposed strategies are thus based on the specifics of each situation; they define potential for change, and seek to stimulate and direct transformation processes, already

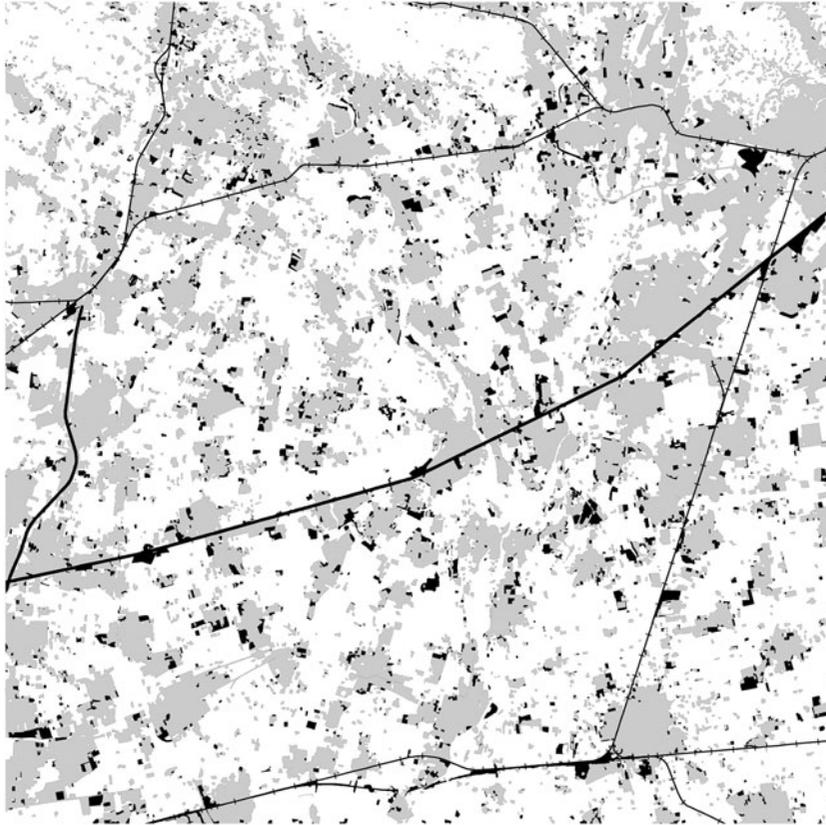


Figure 7. Recent growth in building in the region of Vercatese, Lombardy (20 x 20 km sample): comparison between urban extension in 1999 (light grey) and 2007 (black). Data source Dusaf 1.1 and 2.1 ([territorio.regione.lombardia.it](http://territorio.regione.lombardia.it)). Map by Anna Moro at Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano.

underway, towards social, environmental and economic sustainability. Future scenarios suggested by these strategies do not envisage radical transformations in these territories; rather, they are a projection of possible trajectories based on conditions already embedded and observable in the current situation.<sup>3</sup>

The three sections that follow correspond to three different scales of intervention; they also refer to three different types of subject – municipalities, residents' committees, single house owners – that might be involved in the process of change, and take account of the possible roles that they may perform in these situations. Any design project aspiring to urban transformation will naturally vary accordingly.

### **3.1. *The family house is disappearing: rarefaction and selective consolidation of the città diffusa***

A preliminary strategy targets those parts of the *città diffusa* where, after a period of growth in which building was fairly evenly distributed, areas have emerged with marked variations in dynamism and real estate values.

In those areas better served by the main infrastructure network or close to town, the desirability (and thus market value) of plots occupied by family houses has gone up (Figure 8). We are already witnessing a spontaneous attempt to replace existing buildings with new ones. Demolition and rebuilding are often granted approval under local planning provisions, even if an overall policy is often absent. This has had the effect of increasing the density of plots formerly occupied by two-storey houses and now replaced by “urban villas” (townhouses) or multi-storey apartment blocks.

By contrast, a fall in property values is underway in those zones where development is patchier and where buildings are more isolated, less well served by main roads, and remote from amenities and town centres (Figure 9). It is here that under-use and disuse chiefly occur: maintaining and restoring a family house is not economically viable in such contexts. In the absence of specific planning norms, entire sectors of the *città diffusa* are sliding into decline.

In our submission, these two contrasting situations create the preconditions for transference of development rights aimed at selective thinning and consolidation of the built environment. We argue that the volumes of family houses can perform a key role in this process.



Figure 8. Consolidation sector along a new tram line in Desio, Lombardy (2 x 2 km sample, © Google Earth). The perimeters highlight the presence of commercial services and amenities.

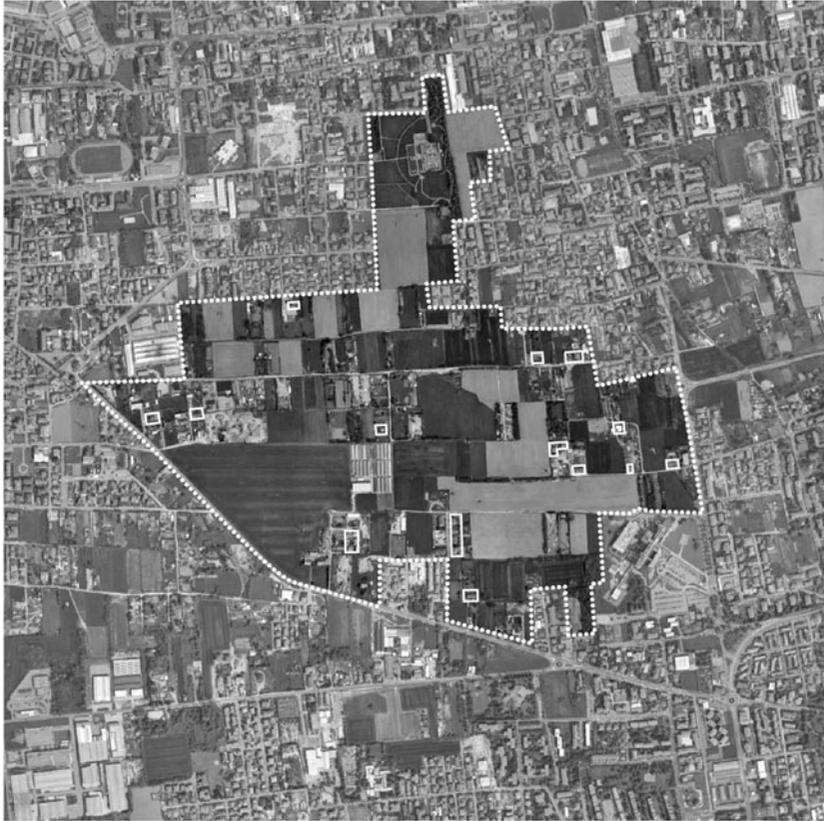


Figure 9. Area of rarefaction on a portion of farmland near Desio, Lombardy (2 x 2 km sample, © Google Earth). The perimeters highlight the presence of scattered family houses.

To this end, we first need to pinpoint those zones that are already well served by amenities and adequate public transport systems, and that can be rationally consolidated and densified. Secondly, we need to pinpoint less densely built-up areas, those more remote from the infrastructure network and amenities, where family houses are in decline or decay, and where we can reasonably envisage their removal.

These areas might be earmarked respectively for *strategic densification* and *strategic rarefaction*; they could be disciplined under a public policy aimed at encouraging the transfer of development rights (Micelli 2002) by means of streamlined procedures and incentives (Figure 10). Accordingly, owners of under-used property in areas already in decline would be encouraged to sell their development rights. However, this would occur only after two factors have come into play: a fall in the value of the original built plot; and a rise in value generated by the relocation of equivalent volumes to a location today considered more attractive in real estate terms. This all presupposes a key role played by a public body able to design and implement a long-term strategy and devise policies to deal with the context-specific issues created by the *città diffusa* – issues that cannot always be dealt with at the local authority level. Indeed, in many cases the scale suitable for planning operations of this type seems to be that of the provinces or the *comprensori di comuni* (areas covering a number of municipalities).

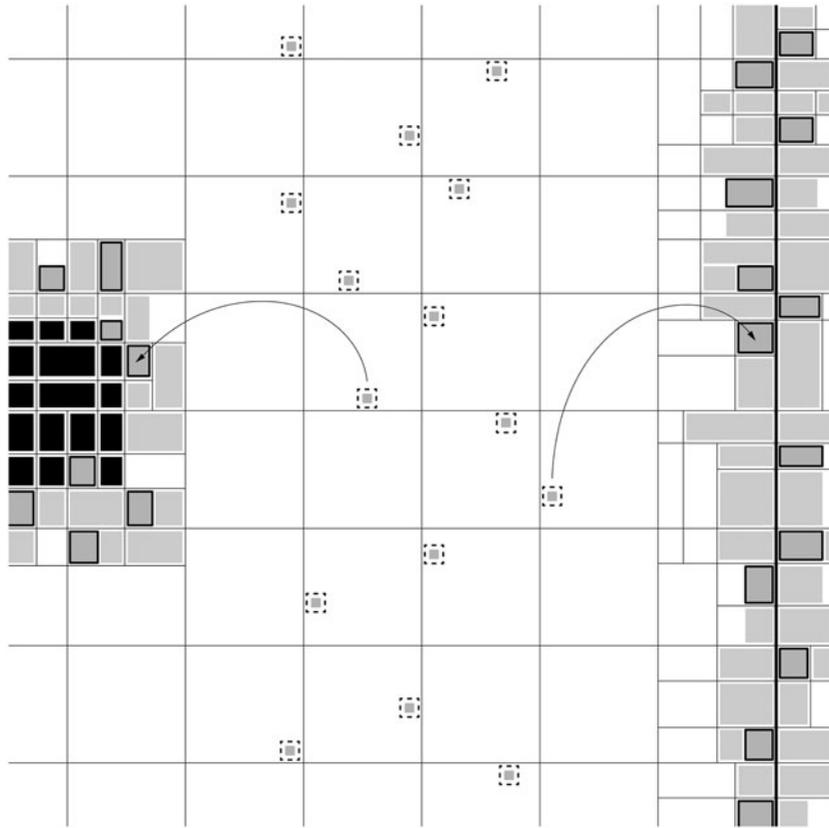


Figure 10. Conceptual diagram of the transfer of development rights from an area of rarefaction to sectors for consolidation around existing centres and services (left) and areas along a public pathway (right). Declining and under-used family houses situated in the rarefaction sector are demolished, and their volumes are used as building material to reinforce and densify urban fabrics in consolidation sectors. Drawing by the authors and Marco Zanini.

In the medium-to-long term, this process envisages the gradual abandonment of the isolated family house and its transfer to two new landscapes, both quite different from the environment formed by the *città diffusa* today. Where work is carried out to add volumes, existing family houses are replaced by urban villas and apartment blocks, and the unfinished urban fabric can be consolidated and completed (Figure 11). In this way, a denser, more compact urban landscape is achieved, offering a wider choice of residential solutions, which, in theory at least, meet the requirements of new house-owners: their desire to be nearer to amenities and their need to contain house-related costs. Conversely, where work is carried out to reduce volumes, a thoroughgoing renaturalization plan could be put in place to restore areas left by demolishing or removing family houses. The cost of such an operation could be absorbed in the value increase generated by the transfer of volumes and the incentive scheme (see Oswald 2006; Schilling and Logan 2008 on contexts affected by urban shrinkage). The areas thus reclaimed, denied planning permission and acquired by the local authorities (*comuni*), makes it possible to carry out specific programs

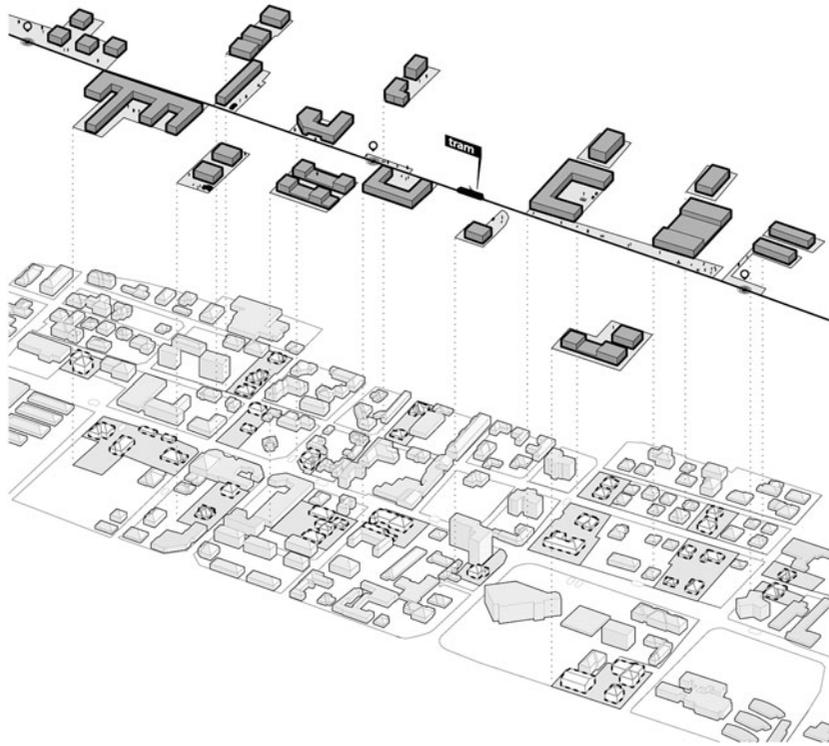


Figure 11. Detail of a consolidation sector along a new tram line in Desio, Lombardy. Family houses are demolished and replaced by larger buildings, thanks to a policy of incentives and volume-related premiums aimed at creating denser and more intense urban landscape along public transport lanes. Existing context in white; demolished parts in black; new buildings and public spaces in light grey. Drawing by the authors and Marco Zanini.

aimed at restoring the environmental balance of the open spaces. Alternatively, they can remain in private ownership and be placed on the market as farmland.

Finally, in the scenario outlined here, a public body implements a more rational and economic long-term strategy for the management of its infrastructure networks. In one case, this means withdrawing the technology networks and decommissioning segments of the sewage system, electricity and road connections that today serve the buildings to be removed (Kozioł 2006). This allows cutting the per capita public costs that accrue from maintaining such tracts, costs which are disproportionately high given the small number of inhabitants actually served, and considering the low density of settlements and the dispersed location of the buildings. In the other case, it means concentrating investment in strategic infrastructure-innovation projects (remote district heating, telematic networks, new public transport lanes) and upgrading public spaces in those urban sectors where building and population density will be increased. This all means enhancing their urbanity, attractiveness and liveability.

### 3.2. The family house regroups: a “coarse grain” for the città diffusa

A second strategy might target contexts where, in areas with dispersed urban development, clusters of family houses can be pinpointed which are isolated from the surrounding built environment (Figure 12). In such settlements, a series of defining structural elements are usually recognizable: a country road along which buildings are located; and a fulcrum, such as a building which stands out from the others, around which the cluster grew. These are places in which a rooted sense of local identity survives, where place names still resonate on the mental maps and in the customs of the local people. Directly or indirectly, these people are a part of local history, a past attested by the ancient farmsteads which punctuated the plains of Italy’s pre-industrial central north (Bellicini 1989).

The specificity of such features, both morphological and sociological, can be taken as the starting point for an infrastructure reform of the *città diffusa* which is achieved by promoting the autonomy of countless devolved epicentres. In the examples we have mentioned, a transition is required from the current situation, where each family house is served by a public infrastructure network, towards a consortium-based model. Under this model, adjacent family houses are aggregated into an “island” which achieves progressive self-sufficiency in terms of infrastructure and energy (Figure 13).

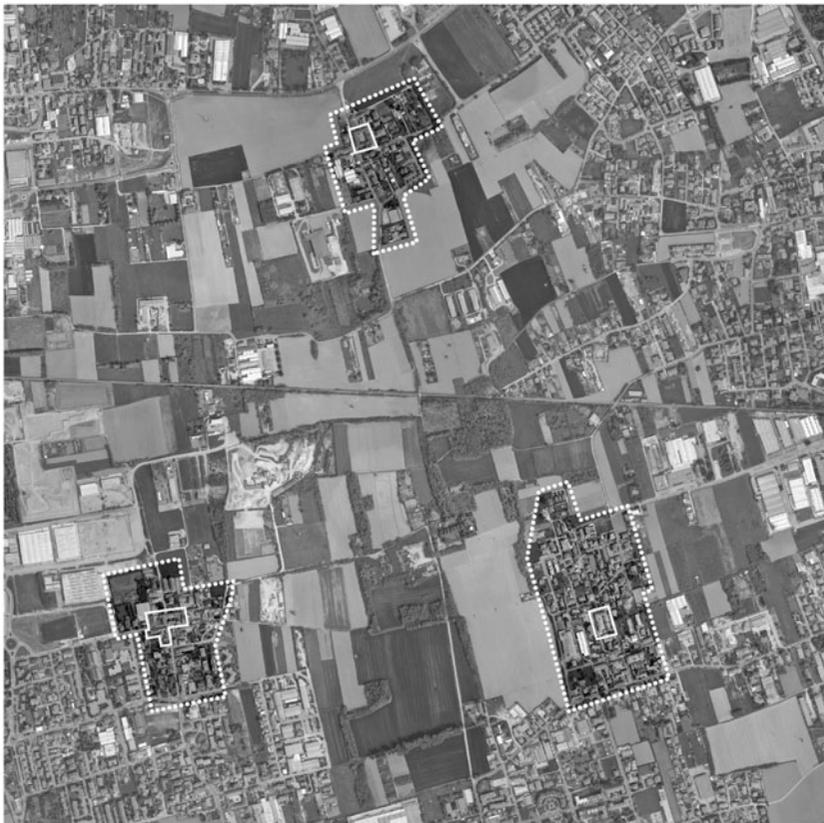


Figure 12. Isolated and semi-isolated groups of family houses in the environs of Sovico, Lombardy (2 x 2 km sample, © Google Earth). The perimeters highlight the presence of old rural centres of farmsteads.

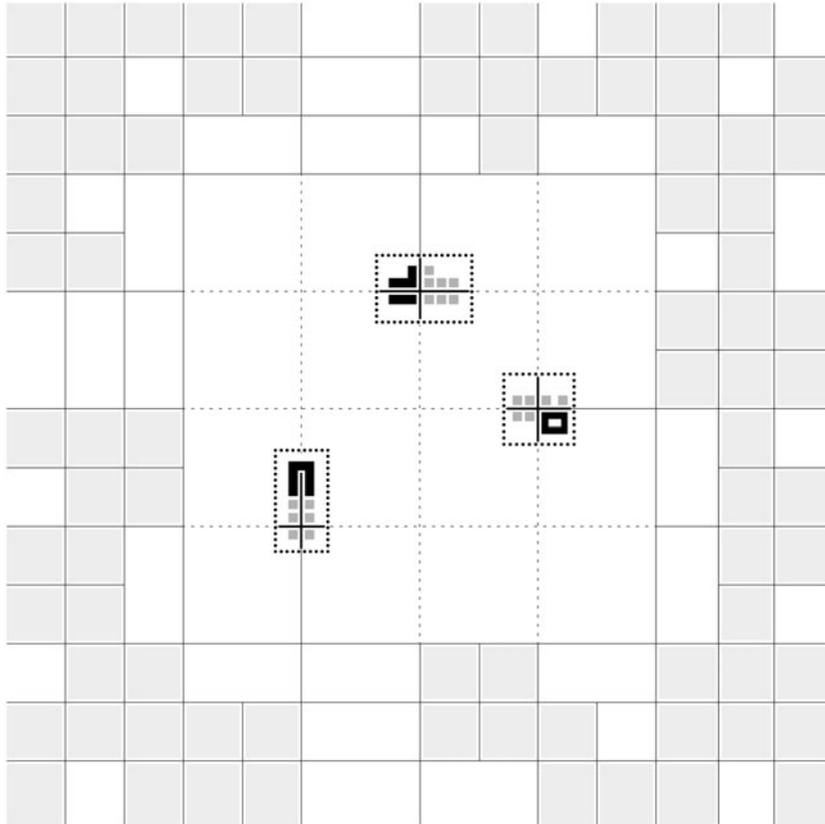


Figure 13. Conceptual diagram of the family-house grouping process. A policy of incentives and differentiated taxation prompts isolated clusters of family houses to seek autonomy *vis-à-vis* the existing infrastructure network. New collective infrastructures are promoted by homeowners, and the space between buildings is upgraded with new paving and amenities. Drawing by the authors and Marco Zanini.

This strategy can be implemented mainly through incentives (moderate volume-based grants; streamlined procedures; reduction in municipal taxes related to the maintenance of public infrastructures and refuse collection). In the medium term, these incentives would make it financially worthwhile for owners of family houses that might potentially qualify for “island” status to undertake innovation and infrastructure sharing under the aegis of a consortium scheme. This project is implemented almost exclusively in public space which falls within the perimeter fences of family houses, and regards road surfaces and the technology networks that lie beneath it. However, to implement such a scheme requires the commitment of residents, who might improve their living spaces and obtain benefits by setting up community associations and forms of sharing.

Today, the public space within these portions of the *città diffusa* is bereft of quality, and given its ramification, maintaining it puts an onus on the local municipality. In spaces like this, a whole range of potential intervention strategies opens up. One of the softer options would be to entrust road cleaning and maintenance to local residents in exchange for a reduction in community taxes. A second, intermediate-level scenario might be to

provide the “island” cluster of family houses with consortium-controlled infrastructure. These might include water management aimed at closed cycles and energy production from renewable sources, a scheme which makes it possible to achieve partial autonomy from the public networks. Economies of scale would also be achieved by means of a more efficient energy system shared by all residents in a given condominium. In a more radical scenario, the cul-de-sac between family houses might be privatized, management passing

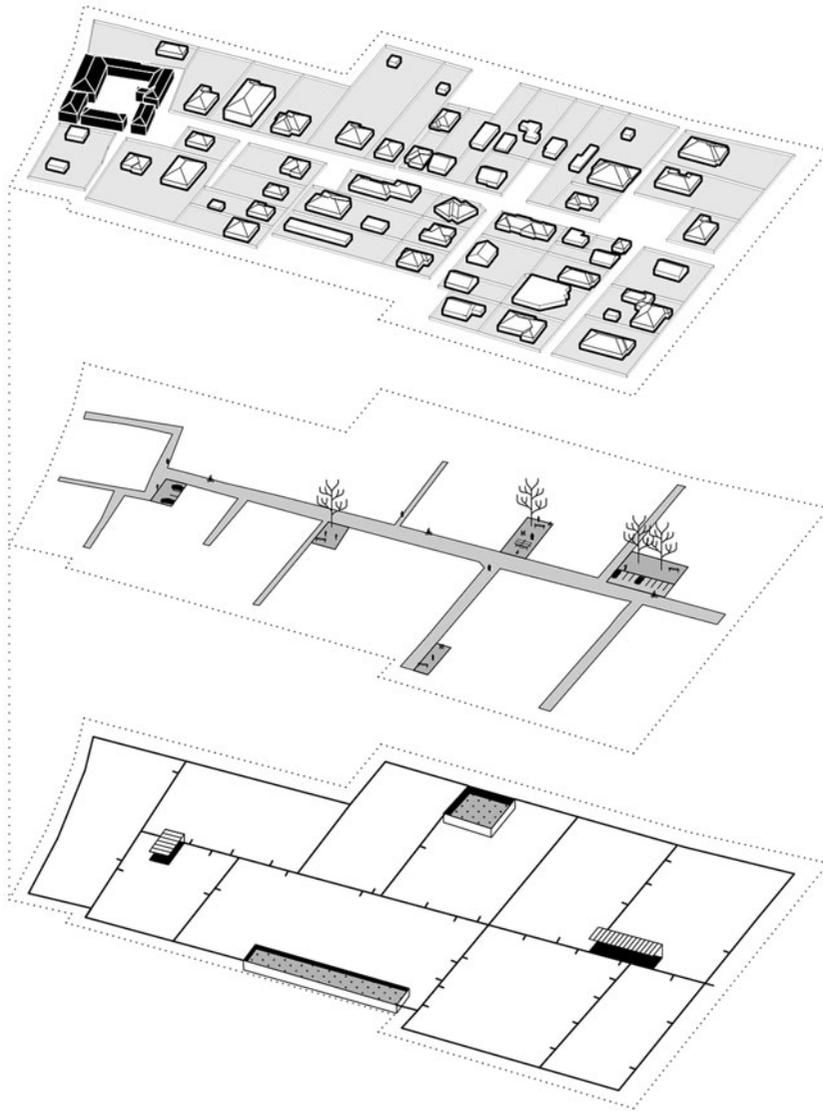


Figure 14. Layering of an “island” of family houses, showing the integration between the various components in the cluster: existing buildings and fences (above); the upgrade of open spaces and streets between the houses through new amenities and paving (centre); and the reorganization in closed circles of underground infrastructure – sewerage, rainwater – to achieve independence from public networks (below). Drawing by the authors and Marco Zanini.

entirely into the hands of a residents' consortium. It could become a backyard for activities unlike those normally performed in private gardens, thus cementing a sense of community that often emerges – albeit in an embryonic form – in such aggregations of houses.

These operations imply a gradual reshaping of the infrastructure hierarchies within the *città diffusa*. There is a shift away from an existing network, which supports each single building, towards a “coarse-grain” texture of consortium-run islands. These islands are internally cohesive and more and more independent of the municipal network, where the connective tissue between family houses (roads and technology links) gradually acquire the status of a condominium to the point where they become – in the most radical of hypotheses – property of the consortium itself.

In spatial terms (Figure 14), reinforced clusters of pre-existing family houses emerge, and the streets between them are upgraded. Greater care and attention from the residents is lavished on this space, which becomes a kind of courtyard. The street takes on a more domestic feel and can be further enhanced by additional assets (a pergola equipped with solar panels for condominium parking; resurfacing; an equipped play area; etc.).

Finally, at the infrastructure level, this strategy has a dual outcome. A consortium-run “island” with condominium infrastructure independent of the public utility networks can also make new technologies available, thus allowing residents to achieve economies of scale and higher supply efficiency than before (Foldvary and Klein 2003). From the local



Figure 15. “Carpet” of family houses in Spinea, Veneto (2 x 2 km sample, © Google Earth).

authority's point of view, islands which achieve more and more autonomy in terms of energy production and water management lighten the burden on the public infrastructure. This triggers a move away from an overburdened, hierarchical infrastructure in need of modernization towards one that is decentralized, more stable and more flexible (Droegge 2008).

### **3.3. *The family house subdivides: the città diffusa redefines itself from the inside***

A third strategy might be proposed for those portions of the *città diffusa* which today find themselves in an intermediate position: the housing fabric is not radically impoverished, as happens in some of the more rarefied areas, but neither does spatial aggregation emerge such as to suggest new systems for relationships and sharing (Figure 15).

In such situations, the project might still have an impact on the malleability of the single "molecule" by channelling the bottom-up generative processes typical of the *città diffusa* (Figure 16). However, the current economic and social crisis has raised issues which differ from those we are familiar with, and various factors have combined to create a new picture. On the one hand, a reduction in disposable income is clearly taking its toll, while on the other, people are having increasing difficulty – due partly to changes in the composition of the family – in promoting their own home. This picture is further complicated by a general cultural and anthropological change, which is redefining preferences and tastes with respect to the house as an asset (Poggio 2008; Baldini 2010).

Many indications thus suggest that densification with significant volumetric increases may not be the most suitable and practicable way ahead (Sherman 1996; Munarin and Tosi 2001; Secchi and Viganò 2011),<sup>4</sup> because what is changing are the demands of the residents themselves. It is to the needs of the elderly parents, and no longer just to their grown-up children's needs, that the adapted house now has to respond. Old and young alike have stopped investing, in terms of both money and affection, in a large garden, once considered a status symbol. The costs of maintenance and management prove too high, and the upgrade interventions are too demanding.

All this spells out the ambivalence which attaches to the idea of the family house in Italy today: if on the one hand it can become an unmanageable burden or source of conflict between one generation and the next, at the same time – and very pragmatically – it is also regarded as the only available resource, and one which it is better to go on using.

Against the backdrop of these new issues, two major themes can be delineated to improve and upgrade these parts of the *città diffusa*, again promoted through the homeowners' direct initiatives (Figure 17).

A first step might be to segment the space, increasing the number of dwellings by reducing the surface area occupied by the lodgings. Once again it is the house that changes shape, but rather than getting bigger, it divides into smaller units: for parents or for the new family of the child who remains; for an elderly parent living alone and for the person who takes care of him or her; for a child or a new resident, either renting or owning, who takes a converted flat, and so on. Dividing up the space in this way, the project should be careful not just to offer solutions to new problems, but should maintain – and possibly increase – those features that enhance its value: from the presence of a small space that can be acquired for individual use (a resized garden, a terrace) to independent accesses and a favourable relationship between front and back for both units.

A second type of transformation could be the introduction of a new functional element. Where some of its premises are no longer used, the family house assimilates workspaces in a hybrid form which is relatively low-impact compared with the house-cum-warehouse

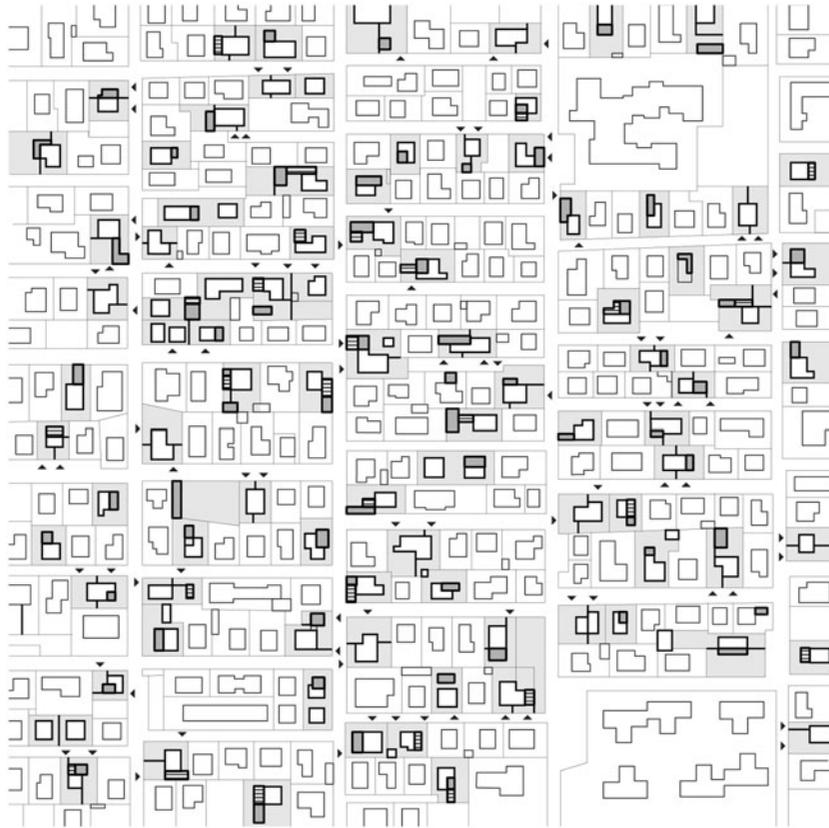


Figure 16. Conceptual diagram of a molecular modification process in a sector of family houses. (The lots that undergo transformation are highlighted in grey.) Individual gardens are subdivided, and new accesses are created in the existing fences; buildings are subdivided, and new (small) functional volumes are added to integrate the fractioned units according to specific needs; the local population is increased thanks to intensification of existing spaces and lowering of per capita room. Drawing by the authors and Marco Zanini.

combination (office for a professional practice, studio space, handcraft workshop, and so on), possibly making available to newcomers what was once “family” space. Here the point is to implement conversions in such a way as to safeguard the coexistence of available space and the new varieties of use.

Both cases outlined here concern the main building in the cluster (i.e. the house normally located at the centre of the plot), but the project could also extend to the outhouses that often crowd the plots occupied by the *città diffusa* (garages, workrooms, storerooms, tool-sheds etc.). Alternatively, where settlement conditions allow it, a more radical project could be implemented, breaking up and recomposing the plots – for example by selling a portion of the original plot and using the land to build a new housing unit (for a similar approach in American and French contexts, see Vernez-Moudon and Sprague 1982; Desgrandchamps et al. 2010; Sabatier and Fordin 2012).

Since this strategy is still operationally dependent on the policy of *mobilitazione individuale*, i.e. private initiatives, the public body’s role is not so much to create an overall

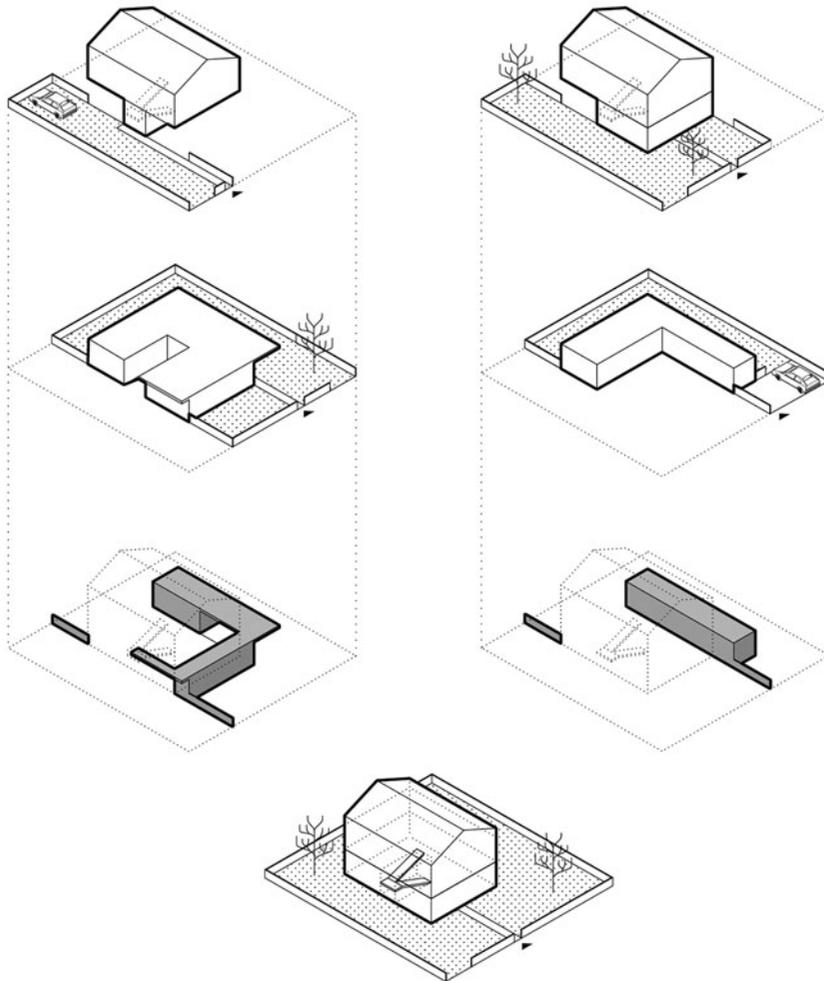


Figure 17. Detail describing molecular modifications to the family house by subdividing the original building and adding small functional volumes (light grey). The original family home now houses two independent families with reduced per capita individual space (left) and a family with a new independent workspace/warehouse (right). Drawing by the authors and Marco Zanini.

vision but rather to define measures to tackle the “fine-grain” issues – guidelines, building regulations, etc. (Infussi 2003; Rolfo 2010). At the same time, it performs a watchdog function, checking and inspecting more actively and consciously than was the case in previous phases of the development process.

It remains to be seen what kind of landscape might appear if such partial conversion projects were to take place with a certain frequency and within a framework of rigorously applied rules. Two elements might be mentioned. Firstly, keeping the practice of reuse and metamorphosis alive would allow us to contain decline and abandonment, while curbing further occupation of the land (and making savings, both private and public). Secondly, by producing a partial increase in settlement density, creating functional diversity and a new social mix in the neighbourhood, the changes outlined here might help the *città diffusa*

acquire a more urban feel, wherein opportunities for relational interaction are more vital and intense than is currently the case.

#### 4. Conclusion

The extensive body of research produced since the 1990s on the *città diffusa* in Italy has often highlighted key problems related to its lack of environmental sustainability, its high individual and social costs, and the scant regard it pays to public space. Given that the *città diffusa* has spread throughout the territory and taken root as a social practice, a response to these diseconomies – objective and not just perceived – cannot realistically come from simply abandoning this urban model in favour of more sustainable forms.

It is more reasonable to pose questions about the type of city that might emerge by redesigning the existing *città diffusa*, exploiting latent resources and following trends that are already underway. Besides providing the chief raw material, the family house also seems to offer the more operable solution.

In this regard, three aspects need to be explored. A first contribution might come from a move towards achieving greater environmental sustainability. This implies: renaturalizing residential plots from which houses have been removed in the more rarefied textures; densifying in those areas that are already more built up; reshaping, wherever possible, residential “islands”; and intensifying and articulating the use of existing plots, while avoiding further development on farmland. These are all provisions which reassign value to open space, in its varieties of form and scale, and which could also partially help to contain pollution and energy consumption.

A second contribution can be seen in greater economic sustainability. This includes: concentrating public investment in areas that are more densely populated; cutting the maintenance costs for under-used infrastructure; and sharing the management of amenities or maintenance of public space in contexts managed by a consortium. All these operations would make it possible to allocate public resources and promote infrastructure innovation, while also generating real economies, both for local government and private citizens.

Finally, a third contribution might be that of delineating new forms of urban realm within the urban fabric of the *città diffusa* we have inherited, weak and undifferentiated as that fabric may be. This would involve the selective consolidation of those portions which are already more central, and consortium management of the fabric in which the community has made a significant identity investment. In our submission, this means creating a landscape which partially changes the way people live together, the way they relate to each other, and the way they relate to the space around them. This is a space in which new attitudes might well emerge that restore to the territory a lost sense of its being a common asset.

#### Notes

1. These wide-ranging phenomena extend to large parts of Italy affected by forms of diffused urbanization. Between 2009 and 2013, the authors of this article observed them above all in the central area of the Veneto, in Friuli Venezia Giulia, in Brianza Milanese (Lombardy), in the industrial districts of Emilia Romagna and in some of the valleys of the Marche.
2. In the absence of official reports, the estimate referred to comes from a series of interviews with estate agents in the province of Mestre and the city of Treviso (central Veneto Region) carried out by Federico Zanfi in the three-year period 2009–2011.
3. The approach here proposed, seeking to interpret and channel the processes already underway, differs markedly from other recent approaches. The latter have recognized the non-sustainability

of this form of urban development and predict transformations that are perhaps more thorough-going and substantial, but less organic to the reality of the social and settlement conditions; see for example Dunham-Jones and Williamson (2009), Tachieva (2010), and Bergdoll and Martin (2012).

4. These scenarios were the subject of a recent national housing provision – the *Piano Casa* – which sought to find a convergence of interests between the needs to extend living space, save energy costs and stimulate activity in the building sector. However, the success of this provision has been quite modest, due to factors outlined above (Lanzani and Zanfi 2010).

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