

4<sup>th</sup> ISUFitaly International Conference | Bari, 26-28 september 2018

# READING BUILT SPACES

Cities in the making and future urban form

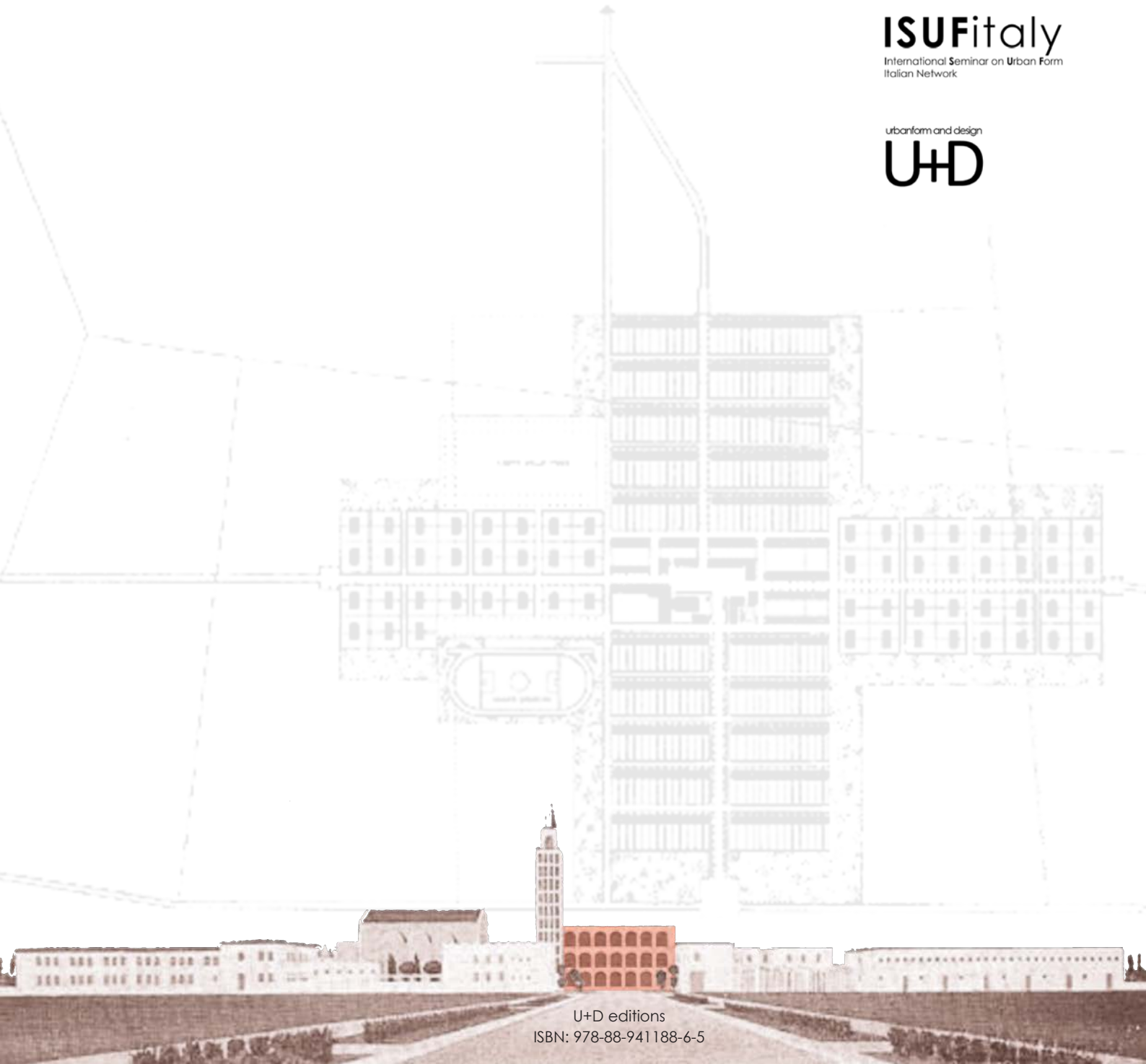
edited by  
Paolo Carlotti  
Loredana Ficarelli  
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Politecnico di Bari

**ISUFitaly**  
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## **READING BUILT SPACES**

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READING BUILT SPACES | cities in the making and future urban form

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## The future of marginal and residual spaces in contemporary peri-urban landscapes

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**Keywords:** *Residual Open Spaces, marginal spaces, peri-urban landscape*

In the last years, the topics of regeneration and transformation of peri-urban borders have assumed an extraordinary relevance. On one side the excessive soil consumption has obliged to reduce the advancement of urbanisation processes, to preserve permeable soil and guarantee the minimal continuity of residual open spaces. 1133

On the other, there has been growing evidence of marginalisation and decay in the existing borders that claims for reinvention and reevaluation of open spaces and city fabric. Those are topics that introduce a relevant material for the rediscussion of the role and the limits of open space design in the contemporary cities and highlight some ambiguities that require a cultural and theoretical realignment. It can be noticed the existence of an unmotivated disjunction between the physical reality of the built environment and an idealised concept of landscape as well as an evident ambiguity in the definition of the notion of nature.

In addition to this, it is indispensable reflecting on the role played by infrastructures as substantial elements of these territories. The contribution addresses these topics to the attention of the conference presenting some studies, analysis, and strategical proposals developed during the last decade in Milan and its metropolitan area.

Here the limits of the cities are faded in the residual open spaces where the traces of the previous territorial organisation are still visible. Territories that are cut by new and old infrastructures were vast industrial brownfields demand recovering, reuse or renaturalization. Obsolescence, neglect, abandonment, and diffused marginality are the topic where landscape and architectural design can still offer a possible future.

Today there has been a growth of interest in the topics of the regeneration and the transformation of peri-urban borders. Such attention can be related to a plurality of concurrent factors. For this reason, the critical debate on these territorial materials implies the necessity to deepen some probable reasons justifying such interest, to recalibrate the cultural terms involved in the debate, and finally to present some possible strategic approaches.

In fact, the design interpretation of the highly urbanised regions surrounding the major settlements implies an extensive revision of the cultural models inherited from the traditional disciplinary references, in favour of a more inclusive view on landscape. In these territories, limits are faded, coexistence and confusion are dominant and the whole pattern is unclear and unstable. The traditional opposition between urban and rural has ceased to exist since a long time. The dense traditional urban fabric has been replaced in place of a different concept of density based on the dilatation of distances. Here, in the place dominated by connecting infrastructures, the role and meaning of open spaces have undergone a constant change, losing of significance and progressive decline. These complex fields are difficult to understand and describe, as well as, because of their ambiguity, improbable to classify using the classical vocabulary. This paper tries to offer a possible view, discussing some theoretical questions and building a comparison with some research by design experiences developed around Milan.

### **A short trip in a standard scenario**

1134 *Moving outside the city the reassuring succession of row houses started being discontinued. Old blind facades, with weak and peeling plasters, suitable only for billboards, were still waiting to accommodate other buildings never arrived. The interstitial spaces, occupied by leftovers of small productive activities and old mansions were still surviving to the urban growth. Vacant plots were unreasonably left to their destiny. Around there were some new buildings, breaking the friendly structure, like wedges in the voids, partially masking the nudity of the neighbouring fronts.*

*This was only the premise to a quick change of condition. After crossing the bridge on a small river, which was like sewage, the street surroundings became being variable.*

*The limits were faded, the space of the street grew incredibly. On the sides of the main lanes, a succession of spaces with variable depth and uncertain character preceded a varied succession of buildings. Here the most forbidden dreams of building contractors have become a reality in the form of unqualifiable architectural pieces. Massive brutalist blocks interrupted by clear crystal prisms were counterposed to hybrids post-modern linguistic experiments. This scenario appeared completed by private gardens full of trees, and concrete paved public parking areas, with rows of "ball-style" street lamps. Morphological and typological constants, rhythms, harmonies of the old city: all disappeared.*

*Immediately after, on the right, like a mirage, a dense scrub of trees partially covered a well-organised group of modest but fair buildings. It was a social housing complex from the fifties, once isolated in the peri-urban landscape. A little further on a group of towers emphasised the presence of a modest park. From the car, behind the bushes, it was possible noticing two battered swings and further an almost crumbling pedestrian bridge. It probably crossed the same derelict river we met before. Almost immediately a timid reappearance of row houses seemed to demonstrate the presence of a historically sedimented place.*

*Tha car was finally reaching the ring road that leads to the highway.*

*Some semi-abandoned industrial buildings appeared as a counterpoint to shreds of scattered agricultural fields on both sides. The view of a row of trees mirrored in a moat returned the sense of the original landscape. It was only a transitory image, lasted few seconds, because immediately the car was swallowed by the fast road junction.*

### **The landscape of fringe belts**

The scenario just now described is not far from the typical situation prevailing in many Italian and European cities. In fact, the progressive abandonment of the standard block type pattern, typical of the nineteenth-century city, has allover produced a decrease of

compactness in favour of dispersion. The result is from case to case variable, but almost everywhere characters and shapes produce a weak condition, where city users are still looking for a “traditional” urban realm, that is missing. All these aspects are emphasised in proximity to urban borders and fringe areas. Here the condition of dispersion is more critical because of a high level of contamination between different categories of spaces, and as a result of the degree of incompleteness of some parts.

The responsibility for the production of this condition is difficult to ascribe. Undoubtedly a crucial role has been played by urban and design theories that revolutionised the traditional idea of the city in favour of new models. As noticed by some scholars the progressive abandonment of the human scale of the old city also depends on the technological advancement of the first half of Twentieth Century. The diffusion of cars has undoubtedly increased the possibility of movement, allowing the growth of distances, as well as new space requirements. All factors that match the model of the diffused city (Gehl, 1971, 2010).

Looking at the physical conditions of fringe areas sometimes leaves astonished, and it appears unbelievable that such squalor can derive from a planning action. In this sense, it is necessary considering the complex interaction between processes of territorial economy, social dynamics and development, as well as transport and logistics system; all components strictly linked but not synergic in their reciprocal work. As a consequence, it appears a striking distance between the ideal forecasts and the actual results of the development, with results that are not gratifying compared to expectations.

Despite described in a rather simplistic way, this complicated relationship between project, territory, political, economic and social issues is crucial, and it is manifest in multiple phenomena regarding ordinary life. The image of a car-dominated scenery, for example, is well expressive of the suffering that contemporary humanity experiences concerning the spaces of dispersion. Moreover, it represents a cultural failure and highlights the necessity of “a new planning dimension”, recovering the human scale for a more “lively, safe, sustainable and healthy city” (Gehl, 2010). 1135

This problematic condition has a quite long critical history. The change in scale between the compact city inherited from history, and the dispersed form, typical of the developmental era, has been underlined more than thirty years ago (Choay, 1992). A little later this physical entity has been named as “urbanised territory” (Turri, 2000). More recently there have been many experiments in describing these territorial materials where it is difficult to identify borders, to highlight a centre, to recognise the thresholds that allow the distinction of the parts (Boeri, 2011). Meanwhile, it has been made recurrent the idea that “the future city will be that one built on the already urbanised territory” (Sotoca, 2012). Thought that opened a season of investigation of topics related to the possibilities of regeneration, recovering and reuse of existing buildings and fabric (Muck and Heilmeyer, 2012). Furthermore, the necessity of preserving virgin soils as an ecological and environmental resource for urban areas has imposed new rules for land use reduction.

### Reclaiming fringe belts

This set of factors, as well as a diffused economic crisis, has imposed a rethinking of policies, processes and ways of development. As a result, it is undergoing a profound revision of the meaning of existing or potential void spaces characterising urban fringe belts.

The situation already described is clearly showing the existing of crisis phenomena that requires a consistent shift in the management of space. It is mandatory finding out a new concept for the scattered peripheries around the cities. The same idea of relationship must be upgraded, basing it on weak textures instead of massive connecting infrastructure. In the same way, the meaning of spaces and their hierarchy has to be revised, breaking the dominance of buildings in favour of open spaces, using landscape as the mean to give back form to the city (Comer, 1999; Waldheim, 2006). Similarly, the time of the transformation needs to increase, allowing sedimentation of ideas, choices, and processes. This goal can be obtained, first of all, revising the old vocabulary used to name the traditional city, assuming the ambiguities of fringe spaces as the starting point for a theoretical reinvention or realignment.

Fringe areas are unclear, and this character makes the traditional vocabulary uncertain if applied to them. For instance, the idea itself of the piazza, frequently used for a generic public space, does not correspond to the meaning, the morphological quality and the scale of the historical one. Here thinking on urban fabric in term of form is impossible as well it is almost unrealistic reasoning on scales and proportions. Distances are augmented, limits are faded, the compactness minimal, and the possibilities of geometrical relationships very low. After a long time of experimentation, it can be noticed that the attempts to re-shape the morphology of diffused city working on the vocabulary of the old urban form are widely failed. For this reason, the quality of traditional public spaces obtained from the generic city is even so poor.

### **Some key-concepts on open spaces in peri-urban borders**

The character of ambiguity it has been already underlined can be applied to the open spaces of the fringe belt areas. As well as for public spaces and urban fabric a new vocabulary is missing, and the traditional definition does not work with the real meaning.

There are at least three main words/concepts that should be briefly analysed.

The first is the concept of "void". Premised the vagueness of this term, the idea of "void" as "emptiness" (like a vacant lot, an interstitial space, or an open urban area) always refers to the fullness of the constructed fabric, and it rarely represents a problem in the traditional city. Vacant or interstitial places were historically waiting to be filled by new constructions, and, in contrast, open spaces were private or public gardens offering a controlled, measurable break in the compactness of the cities.

As opposite, the fringe areas offer uncertain voids, reluctant to be categorised into  
1136 specific types. Some of them are merely areas that have escaped the building process, resulting as vacant lands. In this category, they can also be considered the numerous areas resulting from demolition processes. Together with this, the majority of these unclassifiable "voids" are the result of planning rules and urbanisation processes. Indeed, the demand for public green standards has produced a constellation of separate fragments and degraded areas, including countless piazzas without sense and meaning. In the border areas are frequent also interstitial agricultural lands. Those are only partially active spaces in which the ancient functional vocation persists, including pre-existing signs and traces of the agricultural palimpsest (Dondieau, 2006; White and Przybylski, 2010). This complex mosaic is completed by many other residuals produced by infrastructural design. These fringes should be not confused with the spaces placed alongside roads designed according to a late nineteenth-century style that included large parterre, quays, strolls, today improperly used as parking areas, unrecognisable, and waiting to be recovered.

Fringe belts voids are demanding new ideas and use for these voids. The peripheral city should be redone starting from the design of new narratives based on open spaces. The traditional separations between streets, sidewalks, public and private green areas must be reviewed and modified in favour of a more complex and rich dialectic, that includes the creation of green masses, a sort of "vegetal blocks", obtained between the voids, through the concentration of trees, up to overturn the traditional figure-ground concept: a green morphology to restore the city.

The second topic that requires rediscussion and cultural realignment is that of landscape. This concept is subject to a complicated history, strongly influenced by national cultural backgrounds, and despite the attempt to give a unitarian definition through the European Landscape Convention, it is still full of ambiguities. It is common assisting to an unmotivated disjunction between the physical reality of the built environment and an idealised concept of landscape. This cultural approach is evident in the fringe belts areas. Here the existence of various sized open spaces, including several agricultural territories, moves the public attention towards the preservation of the ecological values and the primigenial characters of these areas. That is evident in the diffusion of a multitude of peri-urban parks, grew up to protect and preserve these relics. Indeed those are great initiatives, that "saved" essential parts of the territory, but on the other hand, it is indispensable moving the general and specialised attention toward a more inclusive concept of landscape. The task is that of breaking some

barriers, making clear the idea of landscape as the totality of the territory, including the relationship between built parts, open spaces and infrastructures, their quality, mutual interaction, formal and aesthetical values. This view is aimed at clarifying that the landscape is not one “aspect” or a “part” of the environment, as often affirmed by some ecologist branches, but a more complex and historical notion, that includes a fundamental aesthetic analysis and the sum of multiple cultural values (Roger, 1999).

In this sense, it is imperative also reconsidering the role and meaning of nature.

Finally, the last key-topic for fringe belts it is contained in the concept of relationship. The process of recovering of peri-urban open spaces should be set up from a strategy of relationships. These will consists of, not only physical connections but also perceptive, sensory, environmental aspects. The generic city does not offer a variety of experiences. Walking in the fringe areas is hugely annoying because their city realm was not though for pedestrians. There is always a direct correspondence between streets and walkways. The atmosphere is messy, congested with cars, sometimes noisy. The scale is dominated by bigness. People do not feel safe. Public leisure areas and open spaces are excluded from walking routes, frequently are fenced, insolated from daily pedestrian movement. Varying the route trying to cross them is inconvenient, and the experienced offered does not compensate the efforts because of the laking of interesting points and the elementary and poor design. Despite some exceptions, broad interstitial agricultural areas are not accessible. Highways and ring-roads impose themselves as insurmountable barriers, surrounded by a halo of horror, made of waste spaces and squalid technical components, unable to build a pleasant aesthetic reality.

Building new relationships means collecting all these elements of friction, ways of use, spatial conditions and materials, trying to recycle them for a new general plot. Like in the process of montage the design will recombine all the ambiguities, working on the scarceness of fringe areas; increasing density, frequency, intensity and complexity of relationships. 1137

### **Strategic design experiments in the Milanese region**

Some strategic design experiences conducted in the Milanese region offer certain primary occasions to describe, understand and forecast the transformation of fringe belt areas.

The conditions are similar to those of the generic fringe territories previously described. The possibilities of perceiving the landscape are absent. Everywhere dominates atopy and generality, some identitarian elements and architectural emergencies disappear in the accumulation of ruins that these places evoke.

The experiences, developed on occasion of two research experiences of relevant national interest supported by the Italian Government, focused on Milan's west border (PRIN 2008), on the Metropolitan City of Milan in Magenta, and the context of Bergamo (PRIN 2010-11). Despite the differences regarding time, place, and research topics the three cases are significant compared to the themes of this paper because they allow a comparison, useful to acquire some generalizable indication for the study and the strategical design of peri-urban borders. The three geographical conditions, although territorially close, offers multiple views on the typicalities of fringe belts. Milan's west border provides a focus on the typical assets of the metropolitan peri-urban areas, grown up to incorporate the neighbouring centres, and developed along radial and annular infrastructural systems, within a dense fabric where persist some residual interstitial agricultural areas.

The situation of Magenta, in the Metropolitan Region of Milan, offers another view on fringe belts areas. Here critical infrastructural corridors superimposed themselves to historical axes, still significant in the territorial order. The territory offers, together with some significant agricultural landscape, brownfields areas that require the development of recovering strategies for a vast area.

The condition of Bergamo, autonomous reality in the context of a dense and connected territory, allows a reflection on the relationship between industrial dismissions, residual open spaces and urban fabric. Significantly a minor reality offers similar topics for comparison with larger scale situations.

Here the aim is not offering a detailed presentation of these experiences, already

commented and described, but highlighting some clue-topics essential to establish a methodological approach for the recovering of fringe belt landscapes.

At first, it should be highlighted the importance of description. Despite traditionally considered as a tool, limited to approach the context to take design decisions, today this process of knowledge should become a public, shared and fundamental, part of each strategical design process. Indispensable resource to explain the critical position assumed, to illustrate it and to explain the relationships between place understanding and design choices. Deepening the knowledge of peri-urban borders requires encouragement of use and innovation of descriptive tools. The experience developed has been based on the use of maps in combination with photographic sections to maximise the effectiveness of the description. Maps, selecting, highlighting and hierarchically ordering, show the real consistency of the parts, emphasising factors of absence and future possibilities. Photographs allow the acquisition of a sequence of critical points of view on the landscape. Together the two analytical tools avoid the possibility of separating the perceptual reality from the synthetic and abstract vision.

The process allows deepening the complexity of fringe belt areas, building a catalogue of ambiguities, ready to be reordered through design.

The second aspect that emerges from these case studies is linked to the sense of impossibility that distinguishes the recovering of periurban landscapes. Traditional tools and qualifying categories, like scale, measure, morphology, cannot be applied.

The developed experiences demonstrate how the idea of relationship can be assumed as a first tool to establish some form of hierarchy in a too generic totality. Consequently, the design in peri-urban areas should be set according to a multiscale logic, starting with macro-actions in the broad area, going then to focus on local implementations. Recovering  
1138 fringe belt areas imply the idea of working prevalently on open spaces and, if possible, at the ground level of buildings. For this reason, it is fundamental to reconsider the concept of relationship, concentrating all the actions in the design of the ground. The horizontal surface increases its thickness allowing a complex narration. Spaces should be strongly characterised, with the intent to build a rich plot, calibrated on every possible use and able to offer multiple experiences. This aspect obliges to consider a visual rearrangement of these places, aimed at characterising the landscape, offering some identification elements, ordinarily absent. Likewise, it stimulates to include new forms of public green, including the possibility of dense episodes. Not walkable woods, capable of constructing visual and physical limits in contexts predominantly horizontal.

Another third essential aspect pointed out by the research it is related to the question of time. Some proposals have been developed focusing on this question. Thus produced the idea of an incremental project for the reflexive transformation of fringe belt landscapes. The actions follow each other, with various steps to test and verify the effectiveness of the interventions. This necessity derives from the ascertainment of the failure of an "accomplished" idea of design that characterised a long season of architecture. Consequently, it consists of an "open" hypothesis, able to respond flexibly to the solicitations that may incur.

Finally, the future of fringe belts area depends also on a firm intention to replace some models inherited from the consumer society. For instance, one of the most problematic conditions afflicting peri-urban contexts is related to car's congestion. Accordingly, a useful infrastructural project finalised to implement an active, sustainable mobility system, should act as an engine for the landscape recovery.

### **Abandoning the Romanticist perspective**

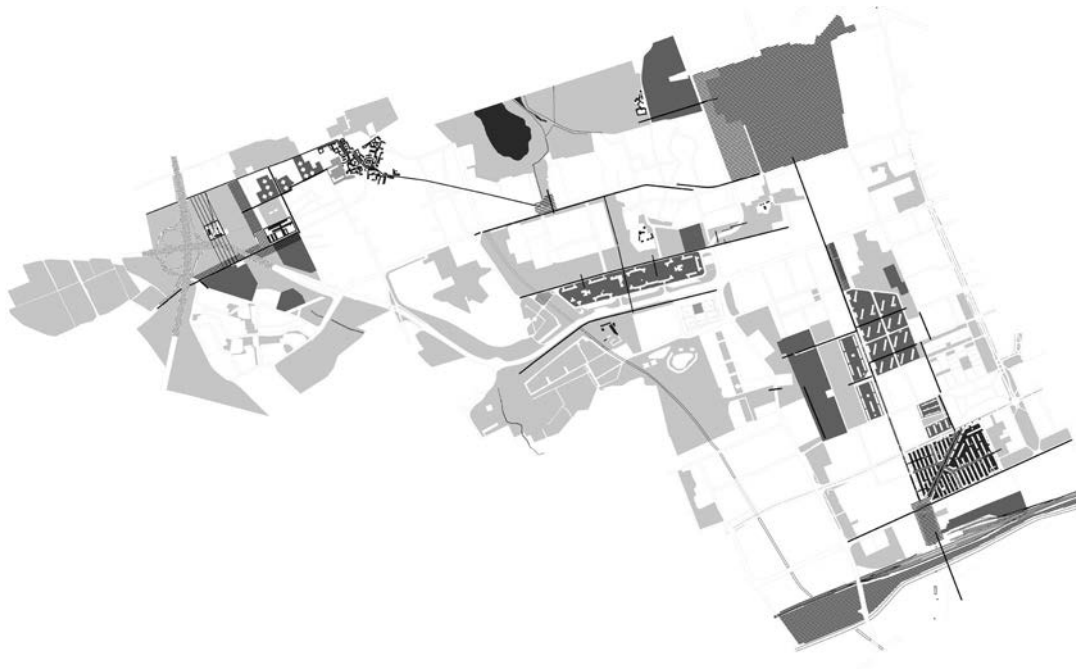
Sometimes it worth questioning if our century would be decisive in breaking a deep attachment in romanticist feelings towards the past and the tradition. If this also happens the destiny of fringe belts will be more clear. In other words, the future of peri-urban areas is strongly dependent on a shift of perspective. To stop looking at the historical city as a model and to invent a new city on the ashes of our suburbs is the starting point of a new renaissance. This paper points out some aspects that are fundamental to opening this new phase. First of all, it proposes to re-examine fringe belts areas through an accurate description.

Second, it indicates the question of open spaces as crucial and decisive compared to built spaces. Meanwhile, it underlines the necessity to create the landscape of peri-urban borders, revolutionising the idea itself of public open space, working on the hybridisation and the identification of forms of coexistence and distinction between spaces of diversified nature. Last, it evokes the perspective of open processes and development phases based on medium and slow time as opening for a more meditated development.

**Figure 1.** Milan's West sector: frictions, ambiguities and contraddictions. (Credits: Author).

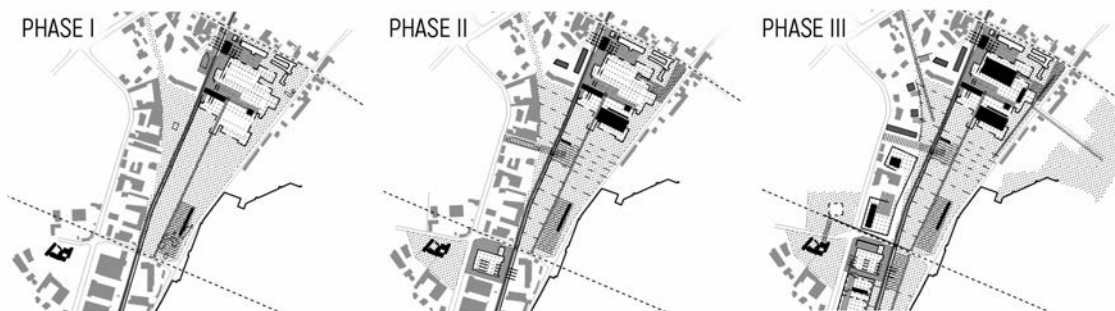


**Figure 2.** Milan's West sector: a new strategy of relationship. (Credits: Author).



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**Figure 3.** Bergamo, Area O.T.E: Incremental recovering process. (Credits: Author).





**Figure 4.** Magenta: Landscape porosity in brownfield recovery. (Credits: Author).



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