

Alpha territorialisation in Milan: Framing a research agenda

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Abstract

Within the special issue, this paper aims to contribute to the debate on VIP urbanism in specific relation to phenomena of alpha territorialisation. Accordingly, it tries to apply this international figure to long-term analyses of the Milan case study, which can be considered an original intersection between the articulation of urbanisation and socio-spatial polarisation processes in the Italian national context and the dynamics of global cities, integrating international trends with site-specific characteristics. On this background and in relation to a comparison with the London case study, the article retraces the recent evolution of spatial processes, policy and planning in the Milan urban core: on the one hand, by recognising different local strategies, phases and possible meanings of phenomena of alpha territorialisation; on the other hand, by identifying open challenges for further research, policy making and planning. Two issues seem worth to be underlined and further explored: both the characteristics and spatial effects of super-rich in Milan, and the opportunities for value-capture mechanisms to work.

Keywords

Milan, urban change, socio-spatial polarisation, spatial policy and planning

Territorialización alfa en Milán: enmarcando una agenda de investigación

Resumen

Dentro del número especial, este artículo pretende contribuir al debate sobre el urbanismo VIP en relación específica con los fenómenos de territorialización alfa. En consecuencia, intenta aplicar esta figura internacional a los análisis a largo plazo del estudio de caso de Milán, que puede considerarse una intersección original entre la articulación de los procesos de urbanización y polarización socioespacial en el contexto nacional italiano y la dinámica de las ciudades globales, integrando tendencias internacionales con características específicas del sitio. En este contexto y en relación con una comparación con el estudio de caso de Londres, el artículo rastrea la evolución reciente de los procesos, las políticas y la planificación espacial en el núcleo urbano de Milán: por un lado, reconociendo diferentes estrategias, fases y posibles significados de fenómenos de territorialización alfa; por otro lado, identificando desafíos abiertos para futuras investigaciones, formulación de políticas y planificación. Parece que vale la pena subrayar y explorar más a fondo dos asuntos: tanto las características y los efectos espaciales de los superricos en Milán como las oportunidades para que funcionen los mecanismos de captura de valor.

Palabras claves

Milán, cambio urbano, polarización socioespacial, política espacial, ordenamiento territorial

Introduction: Alpha territorialisation in Italy

The international literature considers London, New York, Hong Kong, Singapore, Tokyo and several other global cities as economic leaders of the 21st century (Atkinson, 2020; Webber and Burrows, 2016). Accordingly, the international debate on alpha cities considers different parameters and rankings. For instance, in 2020 the Globalization and

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World Cities Research Network (GaWC) distinguished alpha, beta, gamma and other cities based on their levels of integration with world city networks.¹ According to this classification, London and New York are alpha++ cities for their high level of connections to global flows, both physical and intangible. Other cities such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Shanghai, Beijing, Dubai, Paris and Tokyo are classified as alpha+: these are worldwide cities that are highly integrated, complementing London and New York in filling in advanced service needs at the planetary level. Among the alpha+, the only European city is Paris. Only at a third level, there are ordinary alpha cities, which link major economic regions and nation-states to the global economy. In Europe, multiple cities are ranked in this way: Amsterdam, Milan, Frankfurt, Madrid, Moscow and Brussels.

Apart from this ranking, the characteristics of Milan as an alpha city still have not been explored by academic literature.² The first aim of this article is then opening a debate to figure out in what sense Milan could be considered an alpha city by focusing on the intertwining between theories of alpha territorialisation and those of VIP urbanism. The concept of VIP urbanism stems from the observation of the fact that in capitalist cities ordinary and *de-jure* urban planning rules are frequently contradicted or substituted by *de-facto* systems practiced by or targeted to elite investors. These parallel systems, even developed by lobbying for exemptions or taking advantage of law ambiguities, generate spatial externalities and impacts on urban landscapes (Lauermaun et al., 2022). At the same time, the concept of alpha territorialisation is related to luxury housing development processes in which the relocation of global 'super-rich' determines disruptive effects on local places and dynamics (Forrest et al., 2017; Webber and Burrows, 2016), including the colonialisation of cityscapes, the expulsion of urban poor and the growth of social injustices (Atkinson, 2020). These processes are not only the consequence of unplanned real estate market dynamics, but they are often exacerbated by long-term spatial policies and plans, generating (instead of mitigating) multi-faceted forms of socio-spatial segregation, both horizontally and vertically, as the paradigmatic case of Hong Kong more than others highlights (Ho and Yip, 2022, 2023).

These phenomena are more intense and evident in alpha++ cities and alpha+ cities. Whilst Italy has no comparable cities and might seem utterly excluded from these dynamics, in this country alpha territorialisation processes and VIP urbanism could be found through their downscaling from the main global cities to the multiplicity of local forms of contemporary urbanity (from metropolitan cores to tourist regions). In this direction, this paper is rooted in the work of an Italian network of researchers investigating *Alpha territorialisation and its leftovers. Exploring the wealthy/poverty nexus through spatial policies in Italy*, involving Milan, Turin, Venice,

Florence, Palermo, and their surroundings.³ The local peculiarities and varieties of contemporary urban phenomena in the Italian context (Balducci et al., 2017) represent an excellent field to expand the debate on alpha territorialisation and VIP urbanism, from bigger metropolises to smaller cities and rural regions which attract the super-rich or are affected by overtourism (e.g. art cities, seacoasts, ski destinations, country-sides with food and wine tourism excellences).⁴

Within such a national context and research network, this paper specifically relies on the conceptual framework of alpha territorialisation by applying it to the specific case of Milan in order to identify more locally articulated effects and issues determined by the 'super-rich' (thus, beyond the main global cities as alpha++ and alpha+ cities, already considered by the international literature). Milan, which is the main global city in Italy and the major economic and financial hub of the country, is a city where the attraction of global capital connected to real estate developments is relatively recent. At the same time, it is increasing socio-spatial polarisation inside the urban core and in comparison with the rest of the country (Armondi et al., 2022a, 2022b). However, the most common narratives on the city do not consider frames such as alpha territorialisation. The paper's main argument is that using this frame to explore different forms of urban transformation in Milan could provide a set of new questions to interrogate the potentialities and limits of current planning strategies and tools in relation to theoretical approaches that, in this city, until now look under-explored (if not un-explored).

In some cases, urban change in Milan has many points in common with global processes of alpha territorialisation, namely the realisation of new developments able to attract the super-rich through large-scale urban projects. These projects are realised by development coalitions where a core role is played by private partners. In the case of Milan, traditionally these private partners have been national-level real estate developers, but recently they have been integrated by international investors. Besides this more mainstream process, this paper looks also at some specificities of the ongoing Milan repositioning in the global and national market as a creative city region, characterised by a diversified knowledge-based economy, questioning how much these processes produce 'elitist' effects which are similar to those of alpha territorialisation. Specifically, the paper explores both developments related to luxury real estate and those related to knowledge and creative economy. Accordingly, several typologies of interventions are outlined: on the one hand, large-scale urban projects, which are mainly targeted to the transformation of large brownfields, aimed to attract real estate investors by (re)locating new high-value functions (hospitals, universities, technopoles, museums, foundations, fairground); on the other hand, cultural and creative districts, which are mainly based on smaller but widespread processes of urban

regeneration and gentrification, driven to attract high-level professionals by recycling smaller but widespread buildings and spaces.

This essay is grounded on long-term and multifaceted research projects and cooperations with institutional, private and third-sector actors in Milan, as well as on multiple teaching studios with students in Urban Planning and Design degrees at the Politecnico di Milano. These activities are based, on the one hand, on the literature review regarding large-scale urban projects, the spatial effects of knowledge and creative economy, and the spatial implications of programs targeted to social innovation; on the other hand, on the analysis of policy and planning documents, specialised press, consultancy briefs, community reports and field observations. On this background, the paper aims: (i) to reinterpret the results of these long-term and multilayered activities in relation to the frames of alpha territorialisation emerging at the global level, and to their possible and original articulation at the local level; (ii) consequently, to identify new questions for further research on urbanisation processes and, specifically, on challenges determined by dynamics of socio-spatial polarisation and by demands for more inclusive spatial policy and planning, starting from the peculiarities of the Milan case.

The super-rich as an ‘urban issue’: Learnings from London

In the last decades, urban areas have reacted in different ways to the global turn, to the impacts of neoliberalism, and to the consequent economic, financial and pandemic crises. In many situations, these phenomena have exacerbated already existing inequalities between rich and poor people (Burdett and Rode, 2018; Cucca and Ranci, 2017; Fainstein, 2011; Rodriguez-Pose, 2018). Academic research has dedicated lots of attention to problematic aspects of the concentration of poor people, and the debate on this issue has also resulted in the mainstreaming of social mix policies.⁵ On the opposite side, literature on alpha territorialisation and VIP urbanism has focused on different issues, such as the relationships between the production of alpha cities and the role played by the so-called super-rich, the consequent definition of the super-rich and the structural forces that have contributed to their emergence and growth, the connected role of real estate investments, as well as the elites spatialities and social practices, including reflections on the super-rich dynamics and effects in urban life.

This literature review aims at looking at studies that have specifically and critically analysed alpha territorialisation to underline that also the concentration of super-rich elites could be problematic for cities and urban life (Atkinson, 2017, 2020; Webber and Burrows, 2016). Specifically, studies have been developed for the cases of London, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Singapore, and New York (Ho, 2020;

Pow, 2017). This attention is related to the increasing visibility of the super-rich, but also to the fact that the economic instability of the last decade has transformed the real estate market of these cities into a crucial node of the global capital, looking for a low-risk investment with high returns (Dorling, 2014). The narrative that comes out from the media as well as from books (not only for academic audiences) sees alpha-hoods as places where the super-rich ‘park’ their money, without an intention of a permanent life (Atkinson, 2020; Frank, 2007; Savage, 2014). It has been estimated that people live in alpha-hoods no more than three months per year, a situation that leads to the presence of ghost neighbourhoods even in very central areas of the cities. Here local services and shops may close, and urban vitality results threatened. Therefore, the concentration of the super-rich – often attracted by public policies and tax relief – has started to be depicted as a problem, also for more traditional urban elites.

In this article, criticalities are considered especially by looking at the London case, which is defined as the alpha city *par excellence* (Atkinson, 2020). Although and consequently to its international exceptionality, the London case provides useful learnings for analysing alpha territorialisation in different territorial contexts, showing more clearly phenomena which are recurrently growing also in other alpha cities. As well, although the worldwide dynamics of global cities and, at the same time, the differences between the UK and continental Europe, it is geographically rooted in the specificities of the European spatial context. Accordingly, the London case, where research on alpha territorialisation is more advanced, can provide useful learnings for transferring this debate to Milan that, although its differences in terms of spatial size and international ranking, is the only alpha city in Italy (as indicated by the above-mentioned GaWC report), where the international analysis on alpha territorialisation has not been so far practiced.

According to Knight Frank (2020), London is the most attractive city in the world for the alpha elites. It is characterised by a very favourable taxation regime for foreign investors and many commentators see it as a tax haven. In his book *Treasure Islands*, Nicholas Shaxson (2012) describes London as a node linking the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man and the Caribbean. In London, the presence of 100 multimillionaires, and of 5000 super-rich people – that is, people with investable assets of more than £20 million – has been tracked. Moreover, the city can count on the presence of around 350,000 people with investable assets of more than £700,000 (Atkinson, 2020). London is thus an excellent example to analyse where alpha territories are located, which is the impact of the ‘presence’ of the super-rich on everyday life, as well as which type of spatialities and urban practices they express (Atkinson, 2017, 2020; Webber and Burrows, 2016).

The last 10 years have been by a radical change in areas that developers refer to as ‘super-prime areas’ or ‘golden post-codes’. In London, at least three types of alpha-territories can be distinguished: (1) central settlements in the traditional elite areas of the West End; (2) less central settlements traditionally inhabited by upper classes in North London; (3) inner-city settlements where peripheral but well-connected areas are radically transformed through large-scale development projects.

According to Atkinson (2020), an example of the first type of process in the historically rich areas of the West End has been observed in Kensington, Chelsea or Belgravia, where the impact of the super-rich has been significant. In a few years, house prices have increased by 40%. At the same time, 25% of residential properties have been bought for investment, and this means they stay empty most of the year. The typical bourgeois terraced houses have been changed, but most of the changes are visible only on the ground floors and on the basements. The arrival of the super-rich has been coupled with ‘digging’ to insert pools, private parking and exclusive clubs. A private city has been developed below the level of the ground, whereas the public city over the ground is empty and services and shops are closed.

The second type of alpha territorialisation in less central but traditionally elitist areas of North London has been recognised in Hampstead or Highgate. Here Webber and Burrows (2016) have observed a series of conflicts between traditional and new elite settlements. Until 15 years ago the residents in the Victorian and Edwardian terraces were high-level professionals, befitting of a cosmopolitan way of life in a totally gentrified urban environment. Nowadays these places are accessible only to global financial elites. Traditional elites decided to live in these neighbourhoods because of their historical, cultural and social values, while new elites choose these areas for a combination of prestige and breadth of properties. Established rich populations had a connection with the neighbourhoods through their participation in secular and religious associations. The new rich do not seem to be rooted locally and often buy homes through intermediaries, living there a few months per year. However, compared with the West End, here the density is lower, and properties can be modified without digging.

The third type of alpha territorialisation in inner-city neighbourhoods can be noticed in areas such as Vauxhall, Nine Elms and Battersea, where large-scale projects have been carried out in the name of urban renewal. Former industrial and/or peripheral areas, nowadays well connected with metropolitan and global infrastructures, have been invested by radical transformations, very visible in the city skyline and with a strong impact on the real estate market of the city. For instance, an iconic project is occurring in the long-term decommissioned power station of Battersea. After many attempts to bring regeneration to the area, it has become the epicentre of a master plan signed by Sir Norman Foster and Frank O. Gehry. The large-scale project led by the Malaysian

Group SP Setia includes the American Embassy, skyscrapers and luxury apartments that have been sold to the global elite of super-rich even before they were finished under the brand ‘own a home designed by Gehry [or Foster]’. It’s hard to say that the former power station has just been ‘restored’, as it hosts a congress centre, a roof pool, new apartments and services. The Battersea Power Station Development Company is selling an ‘exclusive and contemporary’ lifestyle in an iconic place in the city (Minton, 2017). Luxury goods shops and starred restaurants complete an urban environment that is formally open to everyone, but controlled 24 h a day through drones, CCTV cameras and private guards.

This review of literature on alpha territories in London helps in understanding that empty neighbourhoods and the consequent crisis in urban vitality are just a surface of a series of broader problems. Among the less visible consequences, Anna Minton (2017) has underlined how much the presence of the super-rich in historically elite areas of London, as well as the new production of the city for the super-rich, is contributing highly to worsening an already severe housing crisis. Gentrification and super-gentrification (Glass, 1964; Lees, 2002) are established categories to describe urban change, but what is happening nowadays in London occurs much and much faster. If previous change became evident in a couple of generations, nowadays it is very fast, and the presence of foreign capital makes it faster. At the same time, the hyper-controlled areas of large-scale developments outline a second type of crisis related to the contraction of the ‘public sphere’.

Among the Italian cities, Milan’s dynamics are the most similar to London’s ones, along the same ‘blue banana’ backbone of the European economic and demographic development,⁶ although the above-mentioned differences in spatial size, international ranking and territorial context. As the following sections argue different-size but homogeneous processes can be found in Milan in comparison to London. For instance, similar processes can be confirmed in terms of the rising unaffordability of the real estate market and of decades of public sphere contraction within large-scale redevelopment projects (where public spaces are mostly designed as local endowments rather than as city connectors, thus risking segregation effects). According to these homogeneous processes in Milan and London, a set of questions – Where are the alpha territories of Milan? How are they produced? How are planning systems affecting them? – will be unpacked in the next sections in relation to two specific characteristics of contemporary Milan’s urban change: the realisation of large-scale development projects, and the smaller-scale but widespread regeneration and gentrification of cultural and creative districts.

Milan’s way to be global

Milan is the main financial and economic hub in Italy (Comune di Milano and Assolombarda, 2019), and it is the

city that most embodies the character of a global city in the Italian context in relation to its economy and society (Camera di Commercio di Milano, 2022; OECD, 2006). For instance, in 2021 the average income per capita in Milan was 37,200 euros in comparison with 20,745 euros at the national level,⁷ being the Italian city with the richest citizens;⁸ in 2022, the percentage of adults with degrees in Milan was around 30% in comparison with 20% at the national level;⁹ furthermore, Milan is the city where the higher number of headquarters of multinational companies concentrate in Italy, although they are more connected to Italian-based activities of international players, and not on their world investments.¹⁰

Accordingly, Milan is usually defined as a 'gateway city' to introduce international debates in the Italian context, as well as for the economic and cultural activities of the rest of the country (Perulli, 2017). Like other Western cities, since the 1980s it has been involved in a radical process of transition from a mainly (but not exclusively) industrial-based economy to a mainly (but not only) service-based economy (Centro Studi PIM, 2016). The industrial economy of the past has been replaced by highly specialised production, design, fashion, education and research institutions, which maintain some important manufacturing cornerstones in the city region (Knox, 2014). Milan-based hospitals, universities, banks, insurance, as well as the fair, provide high services to manufacturing activities spread in other regions of the country (Bolocan Goldstein, 2018).

Despite Milan being an important European city, the municipal area is very small in comparison to other global cities (181 sqkm for 1.4 million inhabitants). In order to relate to London and other world urban areas, Milan rank should be considered with regards to physical and socio-economic connections and networks with other Italian cities and regions within the trans-scalar context of the Milan metropolitan area (1580 sqkm for 3.2 million inhabitants), the Lombardy urban region (14,900 sqkm for 7.5 million inhabitants), up to the wider North-Italy city region (Pasqui, 2018).

During the 2007–2008 financial crisis, Milan's economic performances were better than in other Italian cities: in 2008–2017, the city's GDP grew +3.4%, in contrast with Lombardy (−1.0%) and Italy (−4.2%); the city hosts 4600 of 14,000 international companies based in its national context, and it captures 34.2% of the international investments in the country; according to the Rothschild Bank's estimates, in the period 2019–2021 the investments in the real estate market were around 5 billion euro (Comune di Milano and Assolombarda, 2019). According to its national and global networks, Milan is still a very attractive city for international investors, even during and after COVID-19 (Assolombarda and Milano & Partners, 2022).

Milan has seen only recently the entrance of big capital in the real estate market, but it has rapidly become the eighth most attractive European city for the real estate market

(Urban Land Institute and Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2017). The tax relief, recently introduced by the National Government,¹¹ has significantly contributed to bringing foreign capital to Italy, in particular that of the super-rich.¹² Within this national context, Milan is the leading city, only followed by Rome. Whilst the real estate values in city centres decreased in all the Italian regions from 2011 to 2021 (−15.8% for dwellings and −22.3% for offices), Milan has been playing against the trend (with +15.6% for dwellings and +16.4% for offices),¹³ concentrating the most expensive neighbourhoods of the country and unveiling strong disparities with other Italian cities and regions.¹⁴ Specifically, the Milan real estate market and demand for luxury real estate have been growing, although the quantity, quality and costs of the building stock are lower than in international competitors.¹⁵

Since the 2000s, especially two large-scale transformation projects – Porta Nuova and CityLife – in very central and well-connected areas have played a core role. These projects have also had a symbolic value for Milan's positioning as an alpha city. These projects represent very typical examples of financialisation in urban transformation, with related processes of alpha territorialisation. With financialisation we mean a process through which land is treated as a financial asset and urban space becomes a carrier of exchange values (Farahani and Clark, 2016), increasingly developed with an investor rather than a user in mind (Aalbers, 2019; Briata and Raco, 2022). Porta Nuova and City Life are in fact an expression of the importance in the city of new real estate players (e.g. insurance companies, mega-developers and transnational corporate investors) after decades of urban development being dominated by mid-sized local developers (Bolocan Goldstein and Bonfantini, 2007).

Considering alpha territorialisation as an interpretative keyword of this contribution to the special issue, in the next section these two iconic projects are analysed, also in comparison with other big transformations which have characterised the post-industrial transition of Milan. In the following section, this approach by large-scale urban projects is compared with smaller-scale and finer-grain culture and creative districts.

Alpha territorialisation in Milan through large-scale urban projects

The origins of the contemporary Milan urban change lead back to the 1970s, when the municipal area reached the demographic peak of 1.7 million inhabitants, and when the decentralisation of residential and industrial activities intensified. The statutory urban plan, approved in 1976–1980 and based on zoning, ideologically aimed to contain the already ongoing trends of metropolitan relocation of urban functions and of global redistribution of production activities.

However, the opposite trends of the real estate market prevailed, generating an intense process of city transformation by large-scale projects, and big industrial brownfields were redeveloped into mixed-use functions (Morandi, 2007).

In contradiction with the statutory urban plan (1976–1980), in the 1980s the Milan Municipality radically changed the spatial vision and, until the approval of the new general urban plan (in 2012), it supported the post-industrial transformation of the urban core through multiple derogations to the industrial zoning. These variations were mainly based on the negotiation (case-by-case) of the industrial brownfields' re-development into mixed-use settlements driven by the real estate market sector. On the background of following structural plans,¹⁶ the re-development of industrial sites into office, commercial and residential spaces by large-scale projects involved 7 million square meters (total area) and 17 million cubic meters (total volume) (Oliva, 2002). Since that phase, the real estate transformation of large industrial brownfields and vacant spaces in Milan has been mainly pushed by the (re)location of new high-value functions (private and public company headquarters, hospitals, museums, foundations, fair-ground, universities) (Bolocan Goldstein et al., 2011).

The most iconic of these interventions has been developed since the 2000s in the Porta Nuova area, which was a formerly vacant space along the north-west border of the city centre, between the main Centrale and Porta Garibaldi railway stations. According to this location, the site extends for 300,000 sqm total area generating 230,000 sqm of Gross Floor Area, and it has been favoured by high accessibility: from regional, national and international trains in the two railway stations, to multiple suburban train lines and metro lines (existing and new), beyond new underground car parking. The market success of this large-scale urban project has induced the transformation of a former enclave into a main urban attractor. The project has been implemented through a high functional mix and building density. After a series of deadlocks in decision-making, an agreement between the Italian branch of Hines (an American real estate and financial giant) and local political actors was signed, making the transformation possible. In three years, from 2012 to 2014, massive construction works transformed the area completely. Thirty star-architectural firms and architects from eight different countries were engaged, including Stefano Boeri, Leoh Ming Pei and Cesar Pelli. According to the planning agreement,¹⁷ it comprises office towers, both private and public (145,000 sqm of GFA), luxury housing towers (46,000 sqm of GFA), accommodation and food services (23,000 sqm of GFA) and commercial spaces (16,100 sqm of GFA). An urban park (90,000 sqm of area) and a circular public space only partially play as urban connector in direct relation to the surroundings, from the Corso Como to the South, to the Isola and Centro Direzionale neighbourhoods to the North. They overcome the barrier

effects of the former infrastructure and vacant spaces, although a direct pedestrian connection with the Garibaldi railway station has not been designed, and it remains an open question for future solutions.

Today, the development of the site is almost completed, including the new headquarters of the Lombardy Regional Government, the Unicredit Bank, and the Coima real estate developer. The area is now owned by the Qatari Investment Authority, and its implementation at only market values (without social housing) has driven both: (i) the further gentrification of the surroundings, even with the new centralities made by the Fondazione Feltrinelli, the Eataly store or the Muhma maker hub; (ii) the further raise of the real estate prices in the involved district, currently ranging from 8000 euros per sqm to 16,600 euro per sqm.¹⁸ The skyline of the city has changed in an unprecedented way as tall buildings constitute an exception in Milan. According to Anselmi and Vicari (2020), 'other mega-projects have been built in the city, but none in such a central area nor with such a complex configuration or so strong a symbolic component. Together these projects have allegedly lifted Milan's standing among European cities, but Porta Nuova in itself contributed significantly to the city's ascension into the "big leagues" of global cities. The city also achieved a unique standing vis-a-vis other Italian cities, Rome in particular, where no such projects have been implemented' (Anselmi and Vicari, 2020: 115).

A similar, iconic and archistar intervention has been developed by the CityLife project, designed by Zaha Hadid, Arata Isozaki and Daniel Libeskind since 2010s, in the north-western district of the Milan urban core. This project has been transforming the enclave of the former fairground into a new urban centrality, again mixing private and public spaces.¹⁹ Also in this case, the already high and new accessibility of the site has been capitalised: from the existing and new metro lines, and the new suburban and regional train station, to the new road tunnels from the north-western motorways, and the new underground parking. This high accessibility has been transferred into a mixed-use and high-density project: on a territorial area of 365,000 sqm, a Gross Floor Area of 290,000 sqm has been generated, hosting office towers (120,000 sqm of GFA), mainly luxury housing condos with high fences (150,000 sqm of GFA), and a shopping mall (20,000 sqm of GFA), developed around a large but enclaved public green area (90,000 sqm of area).

The site is located in a historically upper-class area of the city, and risks of socio-spatial polarisation are high in relation to introverted design solutions of both indoor and outdoor spaces (Boatti, 2007), lack of social housing, and high costs, currently ranging from 7100 euro per sqm to 13,100 euro per sqm.²⁰ A development coalition has sponsored the project, gradually centralising the power in the hands of core private partners, such as the Generali and Allianz Insurance Group, which has relocated here its Italian

headquarter. Also in this case, after a series of deadlocking and changes, an agreement between the private investor and the Municipality was signed, and the project has been implemented. Both the Generali and Allianz headquarter and the shopping mall have compensated the delay of a public attractor (at the origins, the plan for a new museum), which had penalised the beginning of the operation.

Both Porta Nuova and CityLife directly remind to the third field of analysis for alpha territorialisation recognised in London and, as reported in section 'The super-rich as an 'urban issue': Learnings from London', connected to large-scale urban projects. Indeed, both these two large-scale urban projects paved the way in Milan for international investors, particularly from overseas (Conte and Anselmi, 2022), and for luxury real estate, with apartments at average standing from 90/100 sqm in three-room solutions to 200 sqm in duplex solutions (Scenari Immobiliari and Risanamento, 2019).

Chronologically, before the iconic interventions of Porta Nuova and CityLife, the first transformation within the Milan approach by large-scale projects was implemented in the 1990s in the Bicocca area, along the north-east axis of the city, where the former enclave of the Pirelli factory plant was redeveloped into a new mixed-use neighbourhood,²¹ designed by Vittorio Gregotti (Kaika and Ruggiero, 2016). This is also the first of a long series of large-scale projects in Milan, where the development of technopoles has been increasingly considered as a 'public anchor' for the attraction of other functions (Morandi, 2007). After the opening of the new university campus in the Bicocca area, a new hospital cluster has been planned since the 2000s for the transformation of the former Falck industrial site²² in Sesto San Giovanni, designed by Renzo Piano to the north-east of the urban core (although its development is still far). As well, a new hospital and university campus have been planned for the post-event transformation of the Expo 2015 site near the new Fairground into the so-called Milan Innovation District (MIND) designed by Lendlease with Carlo Ratti²³ and now in a phase of implementation, to the north-west of the metropolitan area (Di Vita, 2018).

The large-scale project approach has been relaunched by the new urban plans, approved by the Milan Municipality in 2012 and in 2019, including the future redevelopment of the seven former large railway yards around the city centre, even in the prospect of the Winter Olympics 2026. However, the doubts on this spatial strategy are multiple: on the one hand, the competition of multiple large transformation projects in the metropolitan area (with similar functional mix and often out of scale) has been slowing down the implementation of several interventions (from the former Expo site to the Falck brownfield); on the other hand, the real estate market-driven functional mix, combined with the lack of social housing strategies (growing, but still

insufficient) and the high costs of dwellings, offices and retails, risk to increase the already existing socio-spatial polarisation, to push poorer classes to metropolitan outskirts and to transform the urban core into an exclusive privilege.

All the large-scale urban projects mentioned in this section are mainly targeted at the upper classes, contributing to the growing unaffordability of housing in the perimeter of the Milan municipal area (Bricocoli et al., 2023; Cucca and Ranci, 2017; Pasqui, 2018). However, in comparison with the other large-scale real estate redevelopment projects (frequently driven by the public anchors of the technopoles, in both the urban core and the metropolitan area), the only Porta Nuova and CityLife projects can be so far considered examples of alpha territorialisation processes in Milan, specifically in relation to luxury real estate dynamics, and consequently to their higher costs of purchasing due to more central locations and more exclusive targets. However, whilst multiple Italian celebrities live on these two sites (soccer players, singers, actors, influencers)²⁴ and the international profile of Milan residents is generally growing,²⁵ further research on buyers and users of such spaces still has to be developed.

In synthesis, this section highlights that in Milan there are not super rich areas and developments as in London and in other global cities, with the only exception of Porta Nuova and CityLife. However, for years the urban agenda has been driven by urban policy and planning tools and strategies aimed at the international repositioning of the city, and by real-estate market dynamics and projects that are not affordable for all the citizens, thus exacerbating socio-spatial disparities and segregations. This trajectory of Milan paves the way for further research activities focused on local articulations of international interpretative figures concerning alpha territorialisation in relation to contextual specificities. Accordingly, the following section provides an example of this potential articulation focusing on cultural and creative districts.

Alpha territorialisation in Milan through cultural and creative districts?

In the Milan post-industrial transition, an important role has been played by mega-events, which have not been the main drivers, but which have been relevant episodes of the ongoing urban change: from the Expo 2015 to the Winter Olympics 2026. Considering the Expo 2015, a double event legacy can be so far recognised, despite the long times and the uncertainties for the post-event transformation of the exhibition site into the new large-scale MIND project: on the one hand, the mega-event was a booster for the implementation of already planned infrastructure and public space projects, but also for the acceleration of already ongoing large-scale real estate development projects (including Porta Nuova and CityLife), and for the relaunch of the city

image at international level (even with episodic but connected processes of alpha territorialisation); on the other hand, and on the background of the ExpoinCittà program,²⁶ the mega-event has accelerated an already ongoing smaller-scale but widespread regeneration of the city, mainly based on cultural heritage, cultural events and cultural economies, and the connected emersion of a new urban agenda that, until then, had not been considered by both spatial policy and research (Di Vita, 2022).

Since the 1990s, the spontaneous recycling of smaller-scale but widespread buildings and spaces has been occurring and leading to the development of cultural and creative clusters, thus emerging new geographies of involved districts in the north-east of the city (Garibaldi-Isola, Porta Venezia) and in the south (Darsena-Porta Genova, Porta Romana). A very typical example of this type of process happened in Porta Genova, a former pericentral industrial and working-class area. Here, in the late 1980s, the worldwide known fashion photographer Fabrizio Ferri established his headquarters in a former industrial block, the so-called Superstudio. Ferri's arrival and the expansion of his activities in other blocks (Superstudio 13 and Industria Superstudio) stimulated an imitative behaviour by world-wide known designers, artists and people working in the fashion and advertisement industry: a super-rich creative class that includes Armani, Kenzo and Hugo Boss, just to make some examples. During the 2000s–2010s the area was officially rebranded as Zona Tortona, and the regeneration process was consolidated by the arrival of schools such as the Domus Academy, the realisation of a series of Museums in former industrial buildings such as the Fondazione Armando Pomodoro, the Armani exhibition silo or the MUDEC (Museum of Milan's cultures), but also a creative hub like BASE, that became a sort symbol of this fashion and creative 'renaissance' of the city (Sedini and Fois, 2016).

As said, Zona Tortona is just one example of the multitude of long-term regeneration trajectories that have led to a series of transformations characterised by the recycling of smaller-scale but widespread buildings and spaces (D'Ovidio and Ponzini, 2014). This process was emphasised on the occasion of the Expo 2015, but its origins can be traced in the long term, both driven by and influencing the yearly Design Week and Fashion Week: yearly events that, since 1980s, have involved multiple city districts, but have also excluded some areas of the urban core and the larger metropolitan area (Bojardi and Cuman, 2022).

As in Zona Tortona, spread regeneration related to the cultural and creative economy has been leading to the gentrification of many historical industrial and popular areas, with their characteristic urban fabric, where the former industrial buildings and warehouses, as well as the typical Milanese *case di ringhiera* have become very attractive for a global cultural and creative class. This regeneration and gentrification have contributed to the raising international image of Milan as a cultural and creative hub, which is much stronger than

the global attraction determined by big projects of real estate developments (Comune di Milano and Assolombarda, 2019), but that suggests another site-specific decline of international interpretative figures of alpha territorialisation, to deeply investigate in further research. This class is not necessarily made by the super-rich, but it is in any case the expression of a cultural and creative elite (Pratt, 2008). Within this urban context, the peculiarity of Zona Tortona lies in the fact that what happened here is not the outcome of a typical gentrification process, where a young cultural and creative class (looking for affordable places to live and work) produces a transformation of former industrial or low-income areas, thus boosting the following arrival of a wealthier cultural and creative class (and wealthier residents). On the contrary, this area was originally and radically transformed by the arrival of an established and super-rich cultural and creative class, that had all the means to sell it through the 'Zona Tortona' brand. Moreover, the realisation of a 'fashion district' had been on Milan's agenda for a long time and its location should have been in the above-analysed large-scale project of Porta Nuova.²⁷ This 'bottom-up' process, which was carried out by a super-rich cultural and creative class with many links to the fashion industries, overcame the idea of having a fashion district in Porta Nuova. Accordingly, it suggests a specific 'Milan model' of alpha territorialisation, that this paper proposes in comparison with the more conventional 'international model' made by large-scale projects, recognised by the literature on the London case and analysed in the previous section on the Milan case.

The already ongoing brandification and festivalisation of cultural and creative districts, but also their mitigation and redistribution in other peripheral neighbourhoods, have been focused on by the Milan Municipality since the 2010s, in coherence with the proliferation of public policies and plans targeted to spatial reuse, economic innovation and social inclusion (Armondi and Di Vita, 2021). For instance, even by collecting and distributing local, regional, national and European funds, multiple public actions have been launched to foster bottom-up initiatives (Comune di Milano, 2022): (i) the economic support to activities of co-workers, makers and innovative and digital manufacturing startups, as well as to related new workspaces registered in qualified lists; (ii) the special grants for the reuse of abandoned public spaces to host incubators of innovative economic activities and social events; (iii) the classification of new workspaces as public services in urban planning documents, in order to favour their development.

More than any other Italian city, since the 2010s Milan has been experimenting with sectoral but innovative public policies to support the reuse of small but widespread spaces, private and public, in the prospect of new urban economies and social inclusion, even by supporting mainstream rhetoric

within the articulated framework of the Smart City Guidelines (2013), the Sharing City Guidelines (2014), the Inclusion Strategy (2015) or the 4.0 Manufacturing Program (2017). These policies (promoted by the Deputy Mayor for Economic Innovation and Social Inclusion) have been integrated by a growing sensitivity for peripheries, expressed in the Plan for the Neighbourhood (launched by the Mayor in 2017) and by the last general urban plan (promoted by the Deputy Mayor for Urban Planning and approved by the City Council in 2019). For sure, this is the expression of a new political vision, although the efforts to reduce long-term socio-spatial disparities will take time and continuity to consolidate and generate positive externalities, and the analysis of the effects so far determined by this evolving urban agenda on already ongoing processes of urban change still represents another field for further research.

Conclusions, challenges and open questions

This paper aims to delineate new questions for further research on challenges determined by phenomena of socio-spatial polarisation and by demands for more inclusive spatial policy and planning. For this purpose, using research on London as a comparative counterpart, it tries to describe some (mainstream) processes occurring in Milan by framing them through the lens of alpha territorialisation: on the one hand, by checking local effects of international dynamics; on the other, by identifying site-specific possibilities for their further articulations.

Milan has been inserted in international rankings of alpha cities, but its characters as an alpha city still have to be inquired by academic research. In this context, this work unveils some characteristics of alpha territorialisation in Milan, related to both the development of large-scale urban projects, as well as to the creation of cultural and creative districts. As anticipated, it does not aim to depict the outcomes of focused thematic research, but it aims to reinterpret the results of long-term and articulated investigation activities in relation to the emerging figures of alpha territorialisation in order to identify new demands for further research.

A really not explored issue that needs to be understood is related to the absence of any kind of academic research on the super-rich in Milan. While the press has widely recognised that a global elite of super-rich has been attracted by new developments as well as by flat tax schemes, in the Milanese context the super-rich profiles and their wealthiness have not been explored yet. The only investigation in this sense was carried out by Cousin in 2002, and it has been re-proposed without integrations on the current situation in Cousin and Chauvin (2017). Whilst the same Cousin and Chauvin (2021) question if there is a global super bourgeoisie, research carried out by Atkinson (2020) or Savage (2015) on this topic in London could and should be inspirational for similar works

in Milan. This missing background information represents an urgent need to enrich any kind of further research on alpha territorialisation in Milan, as well as to understand its possible controversial outcomes.

A second line for further research, which is already evident in the London case and could be an added value of framing processes of contemporary transformation occurring in Milan, regards how processes of alpha territorialisation and the presence of the super-rich are related to multiple 'urban crises'. As seen, in London some first very visible impacts are related to (i) the contraction of the public sphere, as places where the super-rich live are over-controlled and characterised by the presence of services that only the super-rich can afford; (ii) the relationship between the attraction of the super-rich and the increasing absence of affordable housing. These types of crises start to be evident also in Milan, in particular due to the increasing housing prices in a context of chronic absence of affordable housing, where waiting lists for public housing are exploding (Cucca and Ranci, 2017; Pasqui, 2018). Milan has in fact been classified as a 'high tension municipality concerning housing' in public policy documents (Confedilizia, 2022): a process that is displacing the poorest groups, but also young generations with precarious jobs and a growing range of other people, in the second belt of the metropolitan area (Arbaci et al., 2021; Bricocoli et al., 2023; De Vidovich and Bovo, 2023). Also the contraction of the public sphere can be observed, for instance as a consequence of poor design solutions for the reconnection between existing and new public spaces, often segregated inside the renovation sites (Morandi, 2007).

In a city like Milan, where 'elite capture' has been shaping the urban landscape through both large-scale projects of urban transformation and widespread processes of urban regeneration, an issue related to 'value capture' should become a focus of attention (Briata and Raco, 2022). Milan has in fact been described as a 'real estate Mecca', where large-scale projects could achieve up to a 50% return on investment and pay only 5–7% in local building rights (Gibelli, 2016). In both the cases of Porta Nuova and CityLife, the flagship projects have been the expression of powerful coalitions of financial and real estate interests and political elites, interested in profiting from the land development process and the local economic growth. New power configurations took shape: new players such as insurance companies, mega developers and industrial groups converted to finance entered the real estate market, replacing established local operators. Many authors argue that the arrival of these players represented a challenge for the public hand. Local authorities already possessed value capture tools, but they were poorly equipped in terms of technical and financial expertise to use them (Anselmi and Vicari, 2020; Savini and Aalbers, 2016). As well, many researchers show that developers were able to obtain a maximum return

on investment and conceded very little in terms of real public benefits. For example, in residential buildings, the provision of apartments for affordable or rental housing has always been no more than symbolic. Existing research on Porta Nuova and CityLife proves that both Hines Italia and Generali/Allianz Group took advantage of a large number of negotiations, seeing their requests recognised in specific land-use plans (Conte and Anselmi, 2022). Given the current trends of urban gentrification described in this article, value-capture mechanisms and the opportunity to use them need further and more in-depth research, although contradictions are diffusely registered in their application to many alpha cities worldwide (Ho and Yip, 2022, 2023).

The most visible results of the Milan post-Fordist urban change have been mainly the outcomes of a 30-year phase of fragmented spatial policies, plans and projects. However, the new political phase, started in 2011 at the municipal level and extended in 2014 to the metropolitan level, and the ongoing review of the general urban plan, launched in 2023, can become an opportunity to analyse and deal with the issues identified by this paper at the intersection between research and practices, in the longer-term and wider-scale perspective that is necessary to spread positive externalities and to reduce disparities.

Authors' note

This paper is the product of the collaboration between the two authors; however, sections 'Introduction: alpha territorialisation in Italy', 'The super-rich as an 'urban issue': Learnings from London' and 'Conclusions, challenges, and open questions' should be attributed to Paola Briata, and sections 'Milan's way to be global', 'Alpha territorialisation in Milan through large-scale urban projects' and 'Alpha territorialisation in Milan through cultural and creative districts?' should be attributed to Stefano Di Vita.

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Notes

1. The GaWC report is available at www.lboro.ac.uk/microsites/geography/gawc/world2020t.html (last access on 10 July 2023). This report comes from a network created in the Geography Department at Loughborough University and focuses on the analysis of external relationships of world cities. The network aims to fill a research gap: indeed, although the global city literature is premised upon the existence of worldwide transactions, most of the research effort has gone

into studying the internal structures of individual cities and not on the relationships among the cities.

2. The press on the contrary has given some attention to these phenomena. See for instance: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/nov/10/how-europes-cities-stole-continents-wealth> (last accessed on 24 July 2023).
3. The research network is formed by Paola Briata and Stefano Di Vita (Politecnico di Milano), Nadia Caruso, Silvia Crivello and Elena Pede (Politecnico di Torino), Carla Tedesco and Matteo Basso (IUAV Venezia), Giulio Giovannoni (Università di Firenze), and Marco Picone and Chiara Giubilaro (Università di Palermo).
4. The press has underlined these phenomena. See for instance: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2023/may/09/global-super-rich-head-to-italy-for-tax-breaks-and-dolce-vita> (last accessed on 24 July 2023).
5. Literature is wide, but two references focussing on the (dangerous) 'parallel lives' of poorest group concentrating in some urban areas should be mentioned: Burgess et al. (2005); Finney and Simpson (2009). For a critical view of social mix policies, see Arthurson (2012).
6. <https://www.catella.com/en/germany/research/catella-infografik-die-blaue-banane-transportkorridore-in-europa> (last accessed on 12 October 2023).
7. https://www.corriere.it/tecnologia/23_giugno_05/milano-redditi-quartiere-per-quartiere-infografiche-dati-f6b5f97a-9bf9-4771-ba21-69b84e4b9xlk.shtml (last accessed on 10 July 2023); <https://www.infodata.ilsole24ore.com/2023/04/21/redditi-2021-la-ricchezza-e-sempre-piu-concentrata-nelle-mani-di-pochi-ecco-dove/> (last accessed on 10 July 2023).
8. <https://www.wantedinmilan.com/news/milan-has-italys-richest-citizens.html> (last accessed on 24 July 2023).
9. <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/milano-bologna-e-roma-cittametropolitane-piu-laureati-AE5YJ8fC> (last accessed on 10 July 2023).
10. <https://www.arcipelagomilano.org/archives/54009> (last accessed on 10 July 2023).
11. <https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/10/29/a-flat-tax-scheme-is-luring-the-wealthy-to-italy> (last accessed on 24 July 2023).
12. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2023/may/09/global-super-rich-head-to-italy-for-tax-breaks-and-dolce-vita>; <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-02-27/ultra-wealthy-drawn-to-italy-lured-by-tax-break-official-says>; <https://www.thelocal.it/20190516/the-little-known-tax-rule-thats-got-the-super-rich-flocking-to-italy> (last accessed on 24 July 2023).
13. https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/cantieri-rischio-ma-centro-roma-emilano-attirano-capitali-AE3dQY7B?refresh_ce (last accessed on 10 July 2023).
14. <https://montenapodaily.com/en/2023/02/28/i-quartieri-piu-cariditalia-da-roma-a-milano/>; <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/nov/10/how-europes-cities-stole-continents-wealth> (last accessed on 24 July 2023);

15. <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/milano-crescono-prezzi-72per-cento-e-domanda-case-lusso-ma-le-metropoli-resta-low-cost-AEkLszVC>; <https://housinganywhere.com/Milan-Italy/cost-of-living-milan> (last accessed on 10 July 2023).
16. Called 'Documento Direttore del Progetto Passante' in 1984, 'Documento Direttore delle aree dismesse' in 1988, and 'Documento di inquadramento Ricostruire la grande Milano' in 2000.
17. <https://www.comune.milano.it/aree-tematiche/rigenerazione-urbana-e-urbanistica/attuazione-pgt/garibaldi-repubblica-programma-integrato-di-intervento> (last accessed on 11 July 2023).
18. <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/milano-crescono-prezzi-72per-cento-e-domanda-case-lusso-ma-le-metropoli-resta-low-cost-AEkLszVC#U402154893302w5D> (last accessed on 10 July 2023).
19. https://www.comune.milano.it/documents/20126/2046103/Citylife_scheda_dati_tecnici_di_progetto_23_07_2021.pdf/eb61b9bf-8bf0-a1d2-aff1-69858835f794?t=1627397871360 (last accessed on 11 July 2023).
20. <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/milano-crescono-prezzi-72per-cento-e-domanda-case-lusso-ma-le-metropoli-resta-low-cost-AEkLszVC#U402154893302w5D> (last accessed on 10 July 2023).
21. Total Area: 714,000 sqm. Gross Floor Area: 658,000 sqm. University campus: 42,000 sqm. Public areas and facilities: 190,000 sqm.
22. Total area: 1,400,000 sqm. Gross Floor Area: 1,085,000 sqm. Hospitals: 180,000 sqm. Public areas and facilities: 650,000 sqm.
23. Total area: 914,000 sqm. Gross Floor Area: 475,000 sqm. Hospital: 95,000 sqm. University campus: 175,000 sqm. Public areas and facilities: 460,000 sqm.
24. https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2022/08/26/news/dove_vivono_celebrita_cantanti_influencer_calciatori_attrici_milano-363023774/ (last accessed on 24 July 2023).
25. <https://www.idealista.it/news/immobiliare/residenziale/2023/01/26/172398-cresce-il-settore-immobiliare-di-lusso-a-milano-con-l-arrivo-dei-banchieri> (last accessed on 24 July 2023).
26. Which in 2015 spread more 46,000 smaller events in around 1,000 sites in the city centre and in the metropolitan area.
27. Analysed in section 'Alpha territorialisation in Milan through large-scale urban projects'.

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