

The background of the entire page is a detailed topographic map rendered in shades of blue and purple. The map features intricate contour lines that create a complex, swirling pattern across the surface, suggesting a landscape with many hills and valleys. The lines are more densely packed in some areas, indicating steeper slopes, and more widely spaced in others, indicating flatter terrain. The overall effect is a rich, textured background that complements the text.

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EURAU26

*Situated reflections on
architectural research*

UMA 10-13 June 2026



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Fig. 1. Explorations on the adaptive reuse of an airfield. Models by T. Pasquinucci, S. Tremolada, G. Vercelloni (top); A. Belloni, I. Blazelevicius, A. D'Argenio (middle); I. Filippini, C. Mangialardi, P. M. Rombusch (bottom).
Photo by the authors, 2024.

Adaptive Reuse of an Airfield. Design Experimentations for the Bresso Airport in Milan

Sara Anna, Sapone, Department of Architecture and Urban Studies – DASTU, Politecnico di Milano, saraanna.sapone@polimi.it 45° 28' 36.239" N 9°13' 33.30" E

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As technology evolves, unprecedented possibilities raise new questions for the design of cities' infrastructures and logistics (Ferlenga et al., 2012). In this context, the advent of *Vertical Urban Air Mobility* (UAM) represents an opportunity to transform and adapt existing buildings while updating and opening infrastructures to citizens, shifting the narratives traditionally associated with mobility systems and the devices that host them (Dümplemann, Waldheim, 2016). It is a revolutionary transition for design processes, enabling new approaches to capillary infrastructure systems (Berlingieri, Setti, 2022). Each infrastructure defines a relationship with a natural element – airports with the sky, ports with the water; they could become gateways that mark the access to cities, drive new economies or distribute access to goods and materials (Khosravi et al., 2019). Therefore, research into new infrastructure requires understanding the multidisciplinary field and, in the case of UAM, the role of space, intended as the sky above our cities, a potential place of conquest and design explorations (Marini, 2022). To evaluate the potentialities of this phenomenon, which will ultimately affect cities worldwide, the exploration was grounded in a specific site: the Bresso airport.

The underlying research question is: how can architecture and landscape design react to diverse needs in an urban context when

approaching the design of a new mobility infrastructure?

The core of this proposal is the exploration carried out with third-year students of the Bachelor program in Architectural Design at Politecnico di Milano¹³, operating through the methodology of *research by design* (Groat, Wang, 2013), intended as an act of critical thinking to explore an ultimately unpredictable future (Monacella, Keane, 2023). The setting is a real place, to ground the proposals in a site shaped by the overlay of past traces (Burns, Kahn, 2005) – the Bresso airport of Milan – an infrastructural point of regional relevance, looking at the adaptation of its existing commercial and touristic airport. This site is particularly significant because of its industrial history, associated with the Breda factory, and the relation with a green network at the city scale, represented by the Parco Nord of Milan. Historically, this site triggered the development of the surrounding city, originally agricultural fields, progressively densified to host factory workers. Nowadays, it is a closed-off site, carrying conflicting interests, between devoted private users of the airport for commercial purposes and surrounding communities disturbed by constant noise pollution.

In this frame, the Studio's goal was to design a vertiport, together with a research center and the configuration of the surrounding open spaces, to provide a new infrastructure hub for Urban Air Mobility. The choice to redesign the airfield typology is specifically relevant because of its inherent criticalities: such sites face worldwide phenomena of underuse and neglect, due to infrastructure obsolescence or global shifts in demand (Waldheim et al., 2017). Thus, exploring the reorganization of such open landscapes could provide a new opportunity for the surrounding contexts.

The overarching question posed to students at the beginning of the course was to take a position on what to reuse, demolish, or preserve as a memory of the site's past, and discuss the ratio

¹³ The design test on the Bresso airport has been carried out in the Architectural Design Studio 3, held by Giulia Setti and Sara Anna Sapone, with the support of Saskia De Fabritiis, Chiara Ferrelli, Mara Fraticelli, Yara Teresa Gibin, Ottavio Pedretti during the a.y. 2024-25 and 2025-26.

between unbuilt spaces and new infrastructure needs, negotiating the relation between the traditional airport and the new mobility typology. The idea was to test visions, even though utopian design proposals, to stress the feasibility and the challenges that UAM poses. The resulting projects explore the topic with diametrically diverse strategies: from acupuncture interventions, that adapt existing buildings to co-exist with established uses, to the complete removal of the airport function in favor of concentrated interventions within a park, leading to interesting comparisons in terms of scale and layout. The design programs address cultural and leisure aspects, alongside flexible spaces for work and public functions open to the citizens, emphasizing the experimentation of a hybrid and adaptable program. Reusing airport hangars as spaces for leisure serves local communities that need representational spaces and shared infrastructures. Moreover, many proposals investigated the possibility of reconnecting the site to the surrounding landscape infrastructure, considering the proximity to the Parco Nord and its ecological value. The area's ecological potential lies in its nature of being a void – an open free space in one of the densest conurbations around Milan – making the void the primary stage for the development of new infrastructure.

The Studio addressed the advent of Urban Air Mobility, developing considerations related to the ecological and environmental issues that infrastructure raises. Not only that, the UAM revolution is also a typological issue; it requires imagining new architectural devices capable of evolving from the traditional airport into smaller-scale, hybrid, and flexible spaces, adaptable to different functions. Architectural questions about forms and materials were linked to the development of the surrounding landscape, raising concerns in terms of ecology and embracing the possibility of designing with change, natural dynamics (Corner, 1999), and soil movement, shaping open spaces and architectural forms. One shared focus was the treatment of existing asphalt surfaces, considering their reuse or potential for decay.

The pedagogy applied in the Studio allowed students to experiment with an innovative topic, still in the testing phase, whilst recognizing the need to integrate different disciplines, promoting the development of hybrid and adaptable buildings.

The Studio proposes a methodology that could be tested in other latitudes, as the development of UAM is a challenge that will soon impact many European cities. The idea is to envision an integrated infrastructural model, an intermodal hub, that represents a future need, a testing ground also serving as a pedagogical tool. While the results display some limitations in their capacity to address complexity and the necessary interdisciplinary requirements to work in this field, the design methodology remains transferable to other sites and scales, focusing on redefining the link between design and landscape to update infrastructural areas.

Ultimately, the Studio explored the boundaries between landscape and architecture and their reciprocal influences and implications in the development of such proposals. This led to the ideation of transcalar projects that shift the relation between a singular plot and the city scale, the interactions between it and the surrounding neighborhood, and the individual experience of open spaces and architectures.

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