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Urban Diffused Settlements in Romagna. The Role of the Street and the Identity of the Public Space¹

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In Romagna, urban diffused settlement appears to be evident all over its flatlands up to the coast: in this context the main urban settlements are the old historical towns which are aligned along two routes that date back to Roman times, the foothill Emilia (SS9) and the coastal Popilia (SS16), the main axes of urban settlements.

In this context, the space of the street itself, especially via Emilia, can become an element that may improve the quality of landscape and regain its narrative dimension, which has been ripped out by the process of modernization, by offering a positive connotation to these urban diffused settlement.

Via Emilia, being object of several improvement interventions of its outline in the past, is now going through a heterogeneous territory, where a sequence of provisional spaces meant to solve a functional role, either lost, or forgotten by the planning tools and its own inhabitants.

In this paper I intend to show you the result, even though is partial, of a research project developed in the Architecture Department of Bologna University, starting from the PhD thesis (2010), that concerns the relationship between infrastructure and settlement.

Analyzing the dynamics that has led to the present condition of the territory, in order to plan its growth, implies first of all interpreting its geography. Inside this process, the public space and its architecture, hold a fundamental role, becoming the principal instruments capable of heading towards future scenarios of urban and territorial transformations.

¹ The title of the original paper is *I luoghi della diffusione urbana in Romagna*. The author has preferred a literal translation instead of the american expression “sprawl” that is referred to a radically different context.

Urban diffused settlement in Romagna

Running through Romagna's territory in order to capture the essence of the landscape and its settlements, inevitably implies dealing with via Emilia, which since Roman times has substantially contributed to its construction. Being a borderline between the flatlands in the north and the Apennines in the south, via Emilia is assumed as the vector that fueled the spread of settlements responsible for the condition of contemporary landscape.

Even if Romagna may be considered tied to its rural and agricultural customs, its territory has been subject of that "metropolization" phenomena that started in the sixties and seventies and reconfigured the layout of the city and society through mechanisms such as "individualistic mobilization" and "incrementalism" (Secchi, 1996). In this process, a key role was played by what Ascher (2006, p.2) defines as the "bip system", meant as a set of "forms of transport and storage of goods (b) of information (i) of people (p)". The evolution and increasing efficiency achieved over the years by this system has led to a growing propensity for individual mobility, significantly shrinking time and distance. The car, becoming in this scenario preferential means of transport by the population, can be considered one of the main reasons of the urban diffused settlement (Secchi, 2005). Analyzing the main cartographic documents that portray the region in the last century (from the "Tavolette IGM" up to the recent satellite orthophotos) comes out that the process of "densification" of the agricultural areas has triggered an increasingly accelerated pace after WWII.

The often deregulated occupation of rural territory is confirmed by the data provided by *Primo rapporto sul consumo del suolo* (ONCS, 2009). This report highlights the fact that between 1976 and 2003 the periodical growth rate has been at 76%. Since the sixties, Emilia Romagna has been oriented to urban and industrial growth and foothills crossed by via Emilia is included in the "development areas" compared to an overall interpretation of the regional territory for homogenous areas according to demographic, economic and social parameters (Truffelli, 1983). It appears that the street is the most affected from urban planning programs and local settlement choices, being the guideline over which the diffusion of the private means of transportation is the most sensible. Spatial boundaries expanded and "smashed". The traveler finds himself going through this "infinity of places that follow one another" boundless, is "like being in the same space that is no space at all" (Bonomi, Abruzzese, 2010, p.32).

The explosion of the historical town cores and the inevitable transformation of urban agglomerations (Lefebvre, 1973), have shifted the attention to the territory as a whole, intended as a "container" (Indovina, Fregolent, Savino, 2005) of multiple settlement conditions largely historicized.

"The dispersal landscape was born, as many others, without authors, as the result of small causes, as if nobody thought anything original and had copied from each others, until you get territories made of ordinary objects, singularity with no individuality juxtaposed in indefinite sequences: houses on lots, halls, showcases, commercial containers, residential blocks, service areas, large-scale infrastructure" (Bianchetti, 2003, p.89).

In this perspective, via Emilia can be analyzed from two points of view: firstly as a highway that connects Rimini to Milano (SS9), and secondly as a thousand-year old road which has been the "generator" of settlement and organization of the local context.

In the first case, it is possible to locate the road layout within the main reflections over the metropolisation of northern Italy generated in the second half of the seventies with the hypothesis of a "megapolis padana" coined by Jean Gottman (1978), and developed by Eugenio Turri (2000) several years later to described a great polynuclear "urban structure" between the Alps, the Apennines and the Adriatic, where coexist a heterogeneous mosaic of landscapes, economic functions and lifestyles (Figure 1).





Figure 1 | (left) the northern Italian *megalopoli* (Muscarà, 1978, p.75), and (right) the “*megalopoli padana*” of Eugenio Turri (2000, pp.18-19).

In the local context, via Emilia may be considered as a polarizing axis of a dispersive growth: along its course a continuous linear city has built up (Cervellati, 1997; Ingersoll, 2001), from which are branching out new settlements that are gradually invading the agricultural texture and crossbreeding the landscape.

In particular, the town of Cesena is the overlapping point of two different territorial organization: a linear dispersion in the direction of Forlì and a reticular character in the direction of Rimini where via Emilia encounters the Adriatica state highway and the coastal urbanization, building a sort of “*città diffusa*” (Indovina, 1990) included between the hills and the sea and characterized by multiple relations (Brighi, 2010).

In this new urban dimension “every inhabitant or user fails to take over, either mentally, or through everyday activities, of urban space as a whole” (Secchi, Pellegrini, 2010, p.13). The importance of proximity is reduced and relationships associated with it and “the local seems no longer to be an obligation on most of the social practices in different fields” (Ascher, 2006, p.42). The outcome of this process, which seems to be tended to the optimization of interactions at a distance, is the lack of attention paid to the planning process and maintenance of public space.

The voids of the contemporary city are in fact deprived of their social role and put at the service of transport and production, often assuming the condition of residual spaces or transitional ones, simple interruption of the settlement *continuum*.

The road as a succession of places

In the incremental process that has distinguished the territory, Via Emilia has become the scene of new forms of contemporary settlements, in which complexity is the primary key to the reading of the succession of traveled places. The semantic plurality that articulates the path of the road is, in fact, the inevitable result, on the one hand of the intrinsic dimension of palimpsest (Corboz, 1997) of its layout, on the other the different needs of the functional mix.

For this reason, via Emilia has been the stage of numerous photographic campaigns aimed at narrating a multiplicity of laying settlements which follow one another along its own path (Guerrieri, Guidi, 1999; Guerrieri, Guidi, 2000).

The different analysis that had figured out the phenomenon from a quantitative point of view were then flanked by numerous shots that have tried to read and narrate the new conformation of the *extra moenia* landscape also from a qualitative point of view.

The “ordinary” has become the adjective describing the general impoverishment of both semantic and identity of the diffused settlements, and via Emilia has been chosen as the primary field of investigation. The road today runs through an “in between” territory, in which the boundaries between the outer fringes and countryside, towns and hamlets, have faded, and disorder, intended as the coexistence of multiple orders at

the same time, has become a structural feature (Lanzani, 2003). Mobility has completely redefined the old relations between road and territory and the technical aspect has often prevailed over the morphogenetic, contributing to the current condition of atopy. In this scenario however it is still possible to identify the places where the layout of the road assumes a particular characterization, from a settlement, infrastructural and relational point of view. More specifically, there is some spatial and functional recurring circumstances where the road establishes a precise relationship with the surroundings, which is determined by the context and the articulation of its section: the *boulevard* (*viale urbano*), the storefront window road (*strada vetrina*), the road as a public space (*strada come spazio pubblico delle frazioni*), the manufacture-road (*strada produttiva*) and the infrastructure-road (*strada-infrastruttura*) (Figure 2).



Figure 2 | The places of the via Emilia between Rimini and Forlì. From left to right: the *boulevard*, the storefront window road, the road as a public space, the manufacture-road, the infrastructure-road.

- The *boulevard* corresponds to those traits, just outside old town centers, in which via Emilia continues to show its morphogenetic feature in comparison to the settlement it travels across. The coexistence of all current kind of users (by the pedestrian to the vehicles) implies a large and divided cross section, equipped with all the facilities that can guarantee maximum safety and a high level of quantitative and qualitative standards.
- The storefront window road corresponds to those segments in which via Emilia distributes large commercial and handcrafted containers in a purely extra-urban territory. The fruition of these domains is generally vehicular and the road section is therefore much simplified, in favor of the crossing flow. The ratio between the road and the buildings is seen by a visual point of view, by the presence of storefront windows, billboards and signs, but often physically mediated by the presence of service roads or parking areas.
- The road as a public space corresponds to those situations in which via Emilia passes through the small historical settlements that appear as modest townhouse buildings directly overlooking the street. These conurbations which have a very heterogeneous aspect public space usually revolves around a collective building and the road cross section presents a variable tendency depending on the features

of the settlement.

- The manufacture-road corresponds to those extra urban traits in which via Emilia encounters a concentration of productive precincts, largely organized. The roadway has a very wide and simple section in these areas suitable for crossing through the driveway. Depending on the level of site planning the relation between the road and the “precinct” may be direct or mediated through road services or elements of mitigation.
- The infrastructure-road corresponds to the numerous beltway and ring roads that have been designed to preserve the historical parts of the city by vehicular traffic. In these cases the layout of the road assumes the form of a conduit in which the technical component nullifies the morphological and relational component. The perception of the urban landscape is altered and the city becomes a distant background reachable only by interchange junctions.

This interpretation should not be intended as a typological reduction of the road structure but as a hypothesis of abstraction and schematization to describe some symbolic situations in which the repetition seem to redefine the identity of the actual space of the street. Contemporary planning should be focused in these areas, with the aim of formulating innovative design strategies aimed that recognize not only the role of the street in terms of physical communication within a road network, but also its social dimension as “area where the forms of the present time wielded” (Clementi, 1996, p.18).

Via Emilia as a magnetic space

Over the last decades the organization of the infrastructural system has proved to be a crucial issue compared to the general organization of the territory, its “function” and competitiveness: for these reasons, mobility has been chosen as one of the central issues of the general planning tools of Emilia Romagna. The developed strategies are mainly concentrated on the technical component of road infrastructure losing focus on the “vitality” of the road as a tool that supports the process of social reproduction (Secchi, Pellegrini, 2010).

Romagna is an emblematic case of this approach. The province of Forlì-Cesena has undertaken a series of actions aimed at strengthening the mobility system starting from the design of “*Via Emilia bis*”, a branch of via Emilia that includes a north doubling of the road planning to reach Rimini. The new infrastructure would simultaneously allow to thin and accelerate the extra urban traffic connections within the national road network which also involves highway A14, the E45 and the new SS16, and go back to the consideration about the historical layout of via Emilia, relieved from the heavy traffic and downgraded in its functional role. The layout of via Emilia over the centuries has undergone numerous multiplications and many layers have been overlapped since. Each one of these layers has played the role of settlement pattern in the various urban expansions and contributed in giving via Emilia the role of local territorial palimpsest. Even though the changes induced by modernity and settlement dispersion have trivialized the concept of “empty space” in general (Perulli, 2009) and that of the road in particular, via Emilia maintains its symbolic meaning /role and it is linked to the ‘identity and sociality of different community that intercepts (Torres, 1999).

Whether in the historical town open spaces have always been complementary parts of the built ones in shaping the urban image, out of the consolidated areas were gradually “acquired” by the mobility and deprived of their own public dimension. They appear as spaces with uncertain status, forgotten not only by people but also by planning, especially in a time when the economic crisis has triggered widespread urbanization and migration phenomena of discharge. Living in these parts of territory, built on a private logic in a period of economic boom which ended long ago, it is now far less attractive and the phenomenon of depletion appears incontestable. The objective of planning and infrastructure policies should be aimed at a “recomposition settlement” (Zanfi, 2011) of these areas by introducing urban quality and a new structure that focuses on man and his vital needs. Via Emilia can represent, as it used to in the past, the space from which the process of re-signification and repopulation of these “cold territories” may derive (La Varra, 2012).

Therefore becomes necessary to rethink the road as sequence of democratic identity spaces – and not as a

mere junction line between “*superluoghi*” (Agnoletto, Del Piano, Guerzoni, 2007) placed in strategic positions – in which the community can recognize itself and regain the sense of meeting and relations of proximity. Whether a part of the reflection should focus on the physical dimension, through reorganization and re-functionalization of abandoned buildings and open spaces, the other one has to deal with the relational, linked to the movement of the individuals, with strategies that give priority to public transport over the private sector. In this direction the viable hypothesis is the one that provides the introduction of a tramway line, that might contribute by giving order and structure to the fragmentation of settlements (Orioli, 2012) through its stations and the public spaces related. This hypothesis has been object of a study by a group of researchers of the Architecture Department of Bologna University (Figure 3). The section and shape of via Emilia would be subject of a reconfiguration that can implement sustainable mobility and slow forms of social aggregation and return to the road the role of “room of the community” (Kahn, 1971) in which it is possible to entertain multiple forms of sociality. Porosity and transitivity have become structural components of the city and the experience within it passes through the rediscovery of the practice of *flânerie*.



Figure 3 | The hypothesis of a tramway line along the via Emilia. The case study of Capocolle near Cesena (authors: V. Balducci, V. Orioli, E. Brighi).

The enhancement of pedestrian and cycling mobility, together with the systematization of the periurban agricultural areas, would provide an opportunity to enable a series of slow circuits capable of improving the substantial rural heritage present in the territory that lies in the form of untapped potential. A strategy based on the systematization of the open space could then upgrade the image and the role of via Emilia, a carrier that has fueled the process of diffused settlement to a distribution network of “narrative itineraries” (Viganò, 2000) able to describe the complexity of the contemporary landscape.

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