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Urban Landscapes on the Aurelia Road: the Apuan-Versilia Town

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The first stretch of sandy coast in Tuscany extends between the river Magra, on the northern border of the region, and the Leghorn Mountains. As most coastal areas, once this territory was occupied by marshes, woods and dunes. Following land reclamations and XIXth century changes, little of the original landscape remains today, having its place been taken by one of the most urbanized areas in the region; a urban sprawl which extends at the foot of the Apuan Alps and which lives mainly on beach holiday tourism. Analysing the landscape helps to single out the structural origins that provide an opportunity for re-developing the whole Apuan-Versiliese coastal landscape.

Foreword

The paper is the result of the research “Paesaggi urbani della Toscana: connotazione e trasformazioni”¹ which has identified the structural matrix of that coastal landscape. A useful analysis to single out concerns, problems and tendencies as well as landscape elements to be used both as a masterplan and design.

The building of the landscape in the Apuan-Versiliese town

The wide coastal plain between the Magra and the Serchio rivers and Lake Massaciuccoli is one of the most urbanized areas in Tuscany. Little more than a century ago its landscape used to be completely different. The process of evolution and change of the present landscape goes back to the historical events of the Apuan and Versilia areas (today part of the two provinces of Massa-Carrara and Lucca), strictly related to their mountainous background and their rivers. It used to be a marsh area at the foot of the Apuan Alps, little inhabited apart from some small fishing villages at the foot of the hills. Ineffectual and occasional reclamation is attempted in the Etruscan and Roman periods when, along the consular road Aemilia Scauri to Luni, the first settlements, such as Massa and Carrara, are started on the cones of the Frigido and the Carpiene.

Further attempts at reclamation take place during the Middle Ages but settlements are confined to the hills overlooking the plain, for hygienic and safety reasons. Along the Francigena Road, here following the old consular roman road, Pietrasanta and Camaiore are settled. This position helps the exploitation of resources such as rivers, beech and chestnut woods, fishing areas, iron and mostly marble that has been quarried since ancient times. A land full of resources but also disputed about the border by Lucca, Pisa, Florence and Genoa. In mid-500 this narrow coastal strip is politically greatly divided: the Republic of Lucca, Imperial Feuds, the three little Florentine dominions of Pietrasanta, Barga and Fivizzano, the Este dominion on part of Lunigiana and the remaining territory under the duchy of Massa and Carrara. An active and dynamic geographic area as well as a place of cultural transition² Attempts at reclamation continue in the following centuries and slowly the first settlements begin to appear around the military coastal towers (Viareggio and Forte dei Marmi); the land is reclaimed and pinewoods planted behind the dunes; rivers regimed to the benefit of quite fertile agricultural areas. During the XIXth century Lorenzo Nottolini, royal architect of Maria Luisa Borbone, starts transforming Viareggio from a little fishing village into a working class town (the port) and particularly into an internationally known seaside resort inspired to English models. The seaside promenade is designed and in the 30s artists, painters and writers meet among its liberty and art deco' buildings³.

In post-war years different land-reclamation syndicates regime high tides, build dewatering pumps, canals and complete the reclamation. At the same time the Viareggio linear model, with its promenade as the main axis from which an orthogonal system of secondary streets (chessboard like) runs inland, becomes the main reference along the coast. Such urban development with its different functions (seaside town, port, seaside holiday camps..) completely modifies the original coastal landscape of dunes and pinewoods. Its place is taken by bathing establishments (with their “guardianaggio” houses), accommodation and low housing forming a continuum along the sea; as a consequence the few remaining natural areas are marginalized and the historical connection between the mountain/hill-tops and the sea is upset.

At the same time along with the newly born province of Apuania (1938-1946) a vast area is dedicated to big enterprises and heavy, mechanic, chemical and arms industry: with Z.I.A. (Apuan Industrial Zone) about

1 “Paesaggi urbani della Toscana: connotazioni e trasformazioni” 2008-10, funded by Regione Toscana, project PAYS. MED. URBAN, done by Dipartimento di Pianificazione Urbana e Territoriale, University of Florence, dr. Emanuela Morelli and coordinated by prof. Mariella C. Zoppi.

2 Here was the border between gallo-romani dialects (ligure and emiliano) and the italic ones.

3 “They are generally two-floor buildings, surrounded by gardens in either the ‘new’ Liberty style or Umbertine; the same can be seen in Nice, Trouville or on the Alpine lakes” (Zoppi 2008).



800 agricultural hectares are taken by the big industry and some working class villages; neither of them connected to the rural or craftsman context (the latter connected to the marble activity).

Along with mass tourism, since the 50s, agricultural areas tend to be left out and confined in what land remains from building; urbanization is greatly boosted by road infrastructures like Firenze-mare (built in the 30s⁴ and Autostrada Azzurra A12 in the 70s) which bring the sea and the inland nearer⁵.



Figures 1-2 | View of the plain of Pietrasanta and Massa

Reading the landscape: structural matrixes and components.

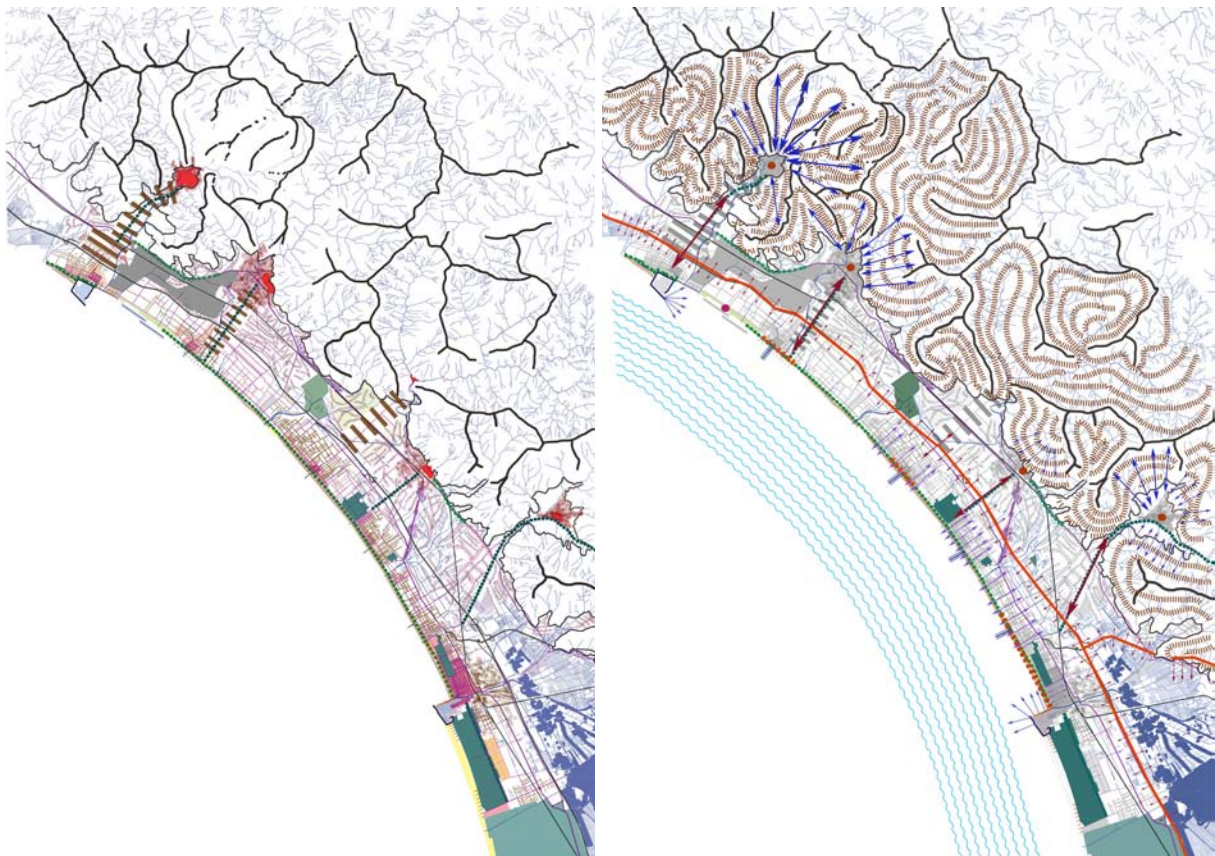
The reading of the landscape of the Apuan-Versiliese town starts from its history, which is essential to understand the many processes of stratification and their marks, and it analyses today's components: ecology/environmental, socio-historical, architectural, perceptive and visual. The research is summarized in the Map of the landscape structure and the Map of visual and perceptive relations as well as in a series of files describing each landscape component with its values and concerns.

The coast, once marshy and unhealthy, first became an agricultural area, rich in natural resources, and then a large urban sprawl where important landscape connections are getting lost.

From the reading it comes out that, even in an apparently unvarying urbanized landscape, there are important differences to be protected and which can trigger processes of development and re-development to be used in landscape plans and designs.

4 See Morelli 2007.

5 Viareggio is considered as Florence beach.



Figures 3-4 | The Map of the landscape structure and the Map of visual and perceptive relations.

Between these components we briefly mention a few.

The sea, the coastline, the line of separation between the plains, hills and the Apuan Alps define the boundaries and play an important role in the landscape: the plain took origins from the erosion of water which flowing on steep slopes has led the sediments downstream; the first human settlements sprang up on alluvial fans. The sea with its currents led to the rise of a dune belt and determined the continuous movement of the coastline. Such signs give identity: the Apuan Alps are a visual boundary and play an active role in the urban scene, together with the sea.

For centuries rivers and streams coming from the mountains down to the coast have triggered important sea-mountains relations and they have permeated the plain. Today rivers and streams have been completely modified by reclamation and little vegetation and high banks isolated them from the rest; they are perceived as dangerous and their historical and natural value has been forgotten.

Few traces are left of XIXth century landscape. Some of them are wetlands, oak and pine woods, and stretches of coastal dunes.

Lake Massaciuccoli with its watery landscape, its land fit for sowing and its typical texture given by reclamation, is the southern limit, with Pineta di Levante in Viareggio, of this stretch of coast. Over the centuries the process of urbanization has stopped here while it developed in the opposite direction.

Lake Porta is within the urban area and has become a relic of the wetlands in the plain.

Pinete di Levante e di Ponente in Viareggio are what remains from the natural oak, alder and pine woods planted during the XVIIIth century to protect the inland from the sea wind; the oak wood of Versiliana in Marina di Pietrasanta likewise.

Dune ecosystems are still present south of Viareggio town centre and at Vittoria Apuana (Forte dei Marmi)

in an area which is being upgraded; these areas are threatened by bathing establishments and beach tourism. At the margins of urbanization, the agricultural areas which still survive show the geometrical regular pattern resulting from roman times and reclamation. The landscape is characterized by rows of trees, fields, olive groves and mixed crops.

The main matrix of the current urban landscape is formed by the early XXth century coastal avenue, stretching from Viareggio to Marina di Carrara, the ports of Viareggio and Marina di Carrara, the “mother cities” (Carrara, Massa, Seravezza, Pietrasanta and Camaiore), the Aurelia and the Sarzanese roads, beaches and marines (Viareggio, Lido di Camaiore, Marina di Pietrasanta, Massa and Carrara) and the wide avenues sea-mountains.

The coastal avenue was created to achieve an extended linear city; exalted by Futurism, cars could shoot along this axis in the midst of grand hotels, walks and villas. Today this avenue has become a main road dividing the sea from the town, although in some places it loses its strength due to promenades built in imitation of the Viareggio one.

Over time ports have been enlarged, Forte dei Marmi wharf for loading marble has been transformed into a walk as well as in the other resorts; consequently currents and the perception of the sea have been modified by this visual boundary from the beach, threatening the view of the entire coastal area.

Such nuclei, roads and avenues have created a sort of ‘armour’ within which urbanization took place, also due to motorways, Variante Aurelia and railways.

The first chessboard expansion, around the shores and the sea followed the model of the linear town on a regional scale and of the garden town on a local scale. Then the expansion continued inland past infrastructural areas, with low density housing and tending to lose shape and erode agricultural land.



Figure 5 | Complexity of the landscape mosaic between urban margin and agricultural areas next to infrastructure road (Variante Aurelia Viareggio).

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