

The role of urban design in the process of regeneration of the suburbs: the case of the Puglia Region

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Abstract: - Forms of urban marginality and geographic factors have multiple localization, morphological and architectural features in common, but at the same time forms of use, social identities, environmental features (often ignored) may bring out differences that are not always discernible at a first glance. Starting from an analysis and a proposed classification of the suburbs in the Puglia Region, this paper investigates the role of urban design in different territorial suburban contexts, the framework of objectives in which the relevant urban plan is drawn up and used, and the potential capacity to affect the quality of built-up spaces, responding to the needs of the local community and of both single individuals and families.

Key-Words: - urban regeneration, urban design, suburbs, urban plan, local community, city centre versus peripheries

1 Main features of the suburbs in Puglia

When building taxonomies of social, as well as physical or economic phenomena, there is always a risk that they will be out of date before they are even finished. In the case of suburbs, physical, social and economic decline often modifies their forms, giving rise to different formal categories and classifications of the phenomena, ranging from the “workers” areas near the production plants of the 1950s and ’60s to the impromptu squatter villages of illegal immigrants in these last years of rapid, constant immigration flows to western nations.

As already pointed out by Aimaro Isola [1], it is difficult and perhaps misleading to claim that suburbs have specific features, reporting autonomous norms or disciplines, but it may be useful to use suburbs as a lens through which to observe the overall territory where we live, in order to derive from such an analysis proposals that can help to transform and improve the lifestyle in these areas.

This involves identifying spatial conditions that are inevitably linked to social and economic conditions, aiming to promote employment, for instance, and the ease of access to public services of less advantaged social classes (this now includes the condition of many young couples), retraining for out-of-work subjects to facilitate re-employment, etc.

Since, as is well known, the term suburb does not only refer to areas outside, at the margins or limits of the city but has taken on an essentially sociological, economic and political significance, the present endeavour to individuate macrocategories that can describe the main suburban forms present in the Puglia territory aims to delineate dynamic realities that are

probably in continual evolution, in order to simplify the analysis of phenomena in a given territorial context.

This may serve to identify possible designs for intervention, while acknowledging that the urban design process is always far more complex than simply that of design [2], integrating work of a largely physical character, the traditional field of application of urban planning and architecture, with processes and changes of a social and economic nature.

Referring mainly to interventions of physical type, that are the scope of the present work, we approach the case of the suburbs in the Puglia Region on the Adriatic Coast in the South of Italy, aggregating the most common types of suburbs in four principal categories, as described below and illustrated using examples of known regional cases.

1.1 Suburbs in the city centre

From the morphological standpoint, these are parts of the urban fabric now localized in central areas of the contemporary city that, for historical, social or urban planning reasons, are characterized by suburban conditions with regard to the main functional elements and important urban flows of the population. They generally have precise boundaries marked out by different urban forms.

They may be historical centres, like the old towns of Bari and Taranto, for instance, as well as districts built between the end of the 19th century and the start of the 20th like the Libertà district in Bari.



Fig. 1. Orthophoto map of the island of the old town of Taranto (2005)

From the socio-demographic standpoint, they often have a constantly declining resident population, as in the case of the Piaggio quarter (that has a resident population of 37 people over an urban surface covering about 10 ha.) in the municipality of Gravina in Puglia or the island where the old town is located in Taranto (with a population of about 2,197 people in 2001 as compared to about 4,000 residents in 1971) or the old town in Bari, that continues to lose inhabitants despite the regeneration projects financed by the “Urban” program (7,937 inhabitants in 1991 versus 5,515 inhabitants in 2001¹).

As regards economic aspects, they are often characterized by a lesser presence of activities (commercial or other) and a major bent toward tourism, this characteristic being common to all Europe nowadays in this type of urban fabric. In the case of the old town of Bari, instead, the “Urban” program for urban regeneration has yielded the best results in terms of both the works for conservative restoration and reclaiming of public spaces and of encouraging the return of numerous commercial activities, at first largely in the form of restaurants and other attractions for a mainly local or at most regional population.

Although the regeneration process of the old town started nearly fifteen years ago, in the central core of the old town there are still elements of physical and above all social decay, whereas buildings on the sea front areas are now worth high sums (up to 5,000.00 €/sq m. versus not more than 3,550.00 €/sq. m. in other areas).

For this reason, the social classes that had inhabited these areas for centuries have been driven out in a classic gentrification process [3], resulting in a loss of

territorial identity and a denaturation of the typical customs and habits.



Fig. 2. Orthophoto map of the old town of Bari (2005)

1.2 The suburbs of the “167”, of residential expansion and of the satellite quarters

From the morphological point of view, these are distinct areas of the consolidated city, located well away from the more valuable estate areas and districts with a greater environmental, historical and architectural value. They were built during the boom of rationalist urban planning, characterized by functional separatism that labelled these districts as the residences of the less well-off classes and particular categories (factory workers, the unemployed or low income brackets unable to buy or rent a home).

They may have a coherent urban design and architectural form if they were the fruit of a single planning drive but more often appear “unfinished”, with blurred borders if they were built in stages by different institutions (Institute for Popular Housing, municipal Offices for Council Housing, building Cooperatives, etc.).

They may have a good design quality or be archetypes of standardized construction works, built purely with an eye to their function without considering architectural quality. They are almost always afflicted by the consequences of unfunctionality, mitigated in the better cases by the presence of services that can satisfy some limited needs of the residents, but unable to link these districts to the true city or to generate flows from it that could prevent it from turning into a ghetto.

The socio-demographic profile is almost always the mirror of the time of construction and inhabitation. In fact, often as soon as the buildings are finished many

¹ Data obtained from the Ufficio Statistico Comunale, 2004, Bari Statistica 1997-2002, publication edited by the Bari Municipality.

young couples come to inhabit them, together with large numbers of new young inhabitants aged between 0 and 14 years, whereas over time the presence of young people diminishes as these inhabitants age.

This is evident in the data for the Enzitetto quarter (now renamed San Pio) in Bari (built in the first half of the 1980s).

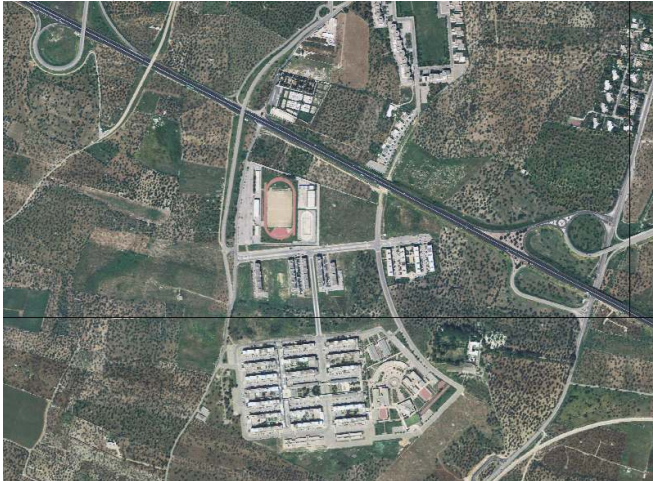


Fig. 3. Orthophoto map of Enzitetto Quarter in Bari. The well defined architectural form of the quarter cannot offset its isolation due to being located far from the city centre, the sign of an attempt to keep out “undesirables”.

From the economic standpoint, they are often characterized by high unemployment indexes, as in the case of Enzitetto quarter (43% of the working age population, according to the ISTAT 2001 Survey of Populations and Housing).

Another important problem in this type of suburbs is their unfunctionality, being mostly residential and lacking in other economic activities and often also in public services (i.e. dormitory quarters), that have remained stipulated on the urban plans, now dated, but never been instituted.

1.3 The do-it-yourself suburbs

These do-it-yourself suburbs are squatters quarters that have multiplied in Puglia, especially near urban centres with a strong tourist appeal, and are mainly used as second, holiday homes. Such zones are often characterized by serious physical decay that is exacerbated by the lack of services and urbanization facilities, which the municipalities are unable to create since the quarters are entirely lacking in licenses to build and therefore in theory do not exist.

Lesina, Cagnano Varano, Porto Cesareo are all municipalities in the provinces of Foggia and Lecce that feature communities of this type.

The case of Lesina was recently the object of a Territorial Reclaiming plan. It seems to be the most far-reaching, involving the creation of about 2000 inhabitation units in a zone with a very high naturalist value in view of the flora, fauna and marine

environment. The community lacks any network or public services of any kind.



Fig. 4. The Torre Mileto community in the municipal territory of Lesina in the single strip of land between the homonymous lake and the Adriatic sea

1.4 Territorial suburbs

Finally, a phenomenon that has been little investigated up to now and is only outlined herein, because a thorough analysis would require too much space and is anyway partly outside the scope of the present work, is urban areas of a prevalently historical character, but not only.

These are located in depressed areas from the economic standpoint but often have a great environmental value. They are peripheral to the economic life of the region, like the municipalities of the sub-Appennine Daunia, in Puglia, and some central areas of the Salento in the provinces of Brindisi and Lecce.

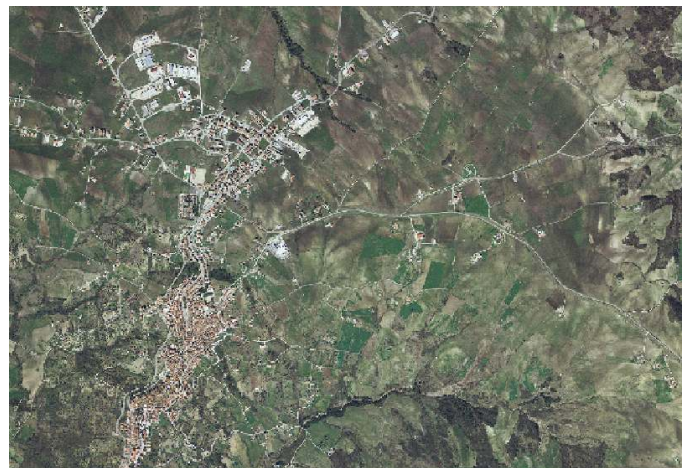


Fig. 5. An abandoned village in the mountains of The “Daunia” area in Puglia Region.

2 The significance of the urban plan nowadays in regeneration process

In suburbs like the ones we describe, it is extremely important that the urban plan be seen as the fruit of a profitable exchange and interaction among different disciplines and social instances, including the

knowledge sector best defined as “urban design” – that mainly addresses the physical-functional conformation of medium-sized urban areas and aims to ensure the morphological-functional quality of the outcomes [4] – and the social demands for a new identity.

This is particularly true in those areas where the pre-existing urban structure has disappeared or been transformed, or never existed at all. There is a demand for a vital, coherent and safe urban environment [5] where each inhabitant can feel at home, know and recognize the places, creating their domestic environment and helping to forge “a socialized sense of individuality” [6].

That this is the right path to follow has already been demonstrated by the outcomes of significant urban requalification experiences conducted in many different places in recent years.

For example, the vast urban regeneration operation carried out in Turin in the mid-1990s yielded efficacious results thanks to the close integration among the actions aiming to produce overall urban quality and social policies aiming to promote social cohesion, above all in the most vulnerable situations.

In the design approach, spatial organization was determined according to rules serving to make an inclusive use of public spaces and the opportunities they generate, by means of stimulating participation and partnership activities during the drawing-up of the final plans that would then be implemented. An even greater impact was obtained with the activities carried out by the *Urban Task Force* guided by Richard Rogers, in which urban design took on a connotation that had a far greater bearing than just the physical-morphological status [7].

The *Urban Task Force* is convinced that high quality urban design – provided it is accompanied by investments in the health, education, social services, safety and employment sectors – can help to build new civic relations within which the institutions can act more efficaciously [8]. The meaning of urban design has thus gradually been transformed, increasing in complexity, interpreting quality urban space not just as the sum of single elements but as the outcome of a design process that combines attention to the physical configuration and functional organization of the spaces with a consideration of the impact of the design on the behaviour and forms of use of the users [8].

This integrated approach to the issues of urban regeneration has been practised more in general, especially in Italy, in the special policies for complex planning. Nowadays there is a strong need to relaunch wider-ranging strategies to avoid the risks – already manifest in some experiences – of reductive, sectorial interpretations strictly confined to the financial resources available. It is necessary to move away from the view that complex design is purely of a special,

“extraordinary” nature and to launch a new phase of “ordinary” planning and design focused on the regeneration processes of the city.

In Puglia Region this is being set in motion thanks to the approval of a regional law (Regional Law n.21 of 29 July 2008, Norms for urban regeneration) that promotes regeneration of parts of cities and urban systems in coherence with municipal and inter-municipal strategies aiming to improve the urban, housing, socio-economic, environmental and cultural conditions of the resident communities.

This has been achieved by adopting interventional tools that were decided upon with the collaborative involvement of the inhabitants and the public and private subjects concerned.

Moreover, in conformity with the above norms, in the new form of municipal plan the operative component (in Puglia denominated “programmatic”) makes it possible to manage an integrated approach to the issues of urban regeneration in the context of the “ordinary” planning procedures.

In pursuing these goals, a fundamental role is played by the already mentioned “design knowledge” [4] and in particular by the use of criteria and rules serving to develop planning solutions responding to the behaviours and social requirements of the users.

In this perspective, and bearing in mind the peculiar characters of the suburbs described above, some actions can be identified that define the main constitutive points of the design, metarules covering the design criteria and methodologies to which greater details will then be added, tailored to the specific context [9].

Therefore, “redesign of the city and territory” is seen as a system of relations, a system that can reconnect full and empty spaces, built-up areas and open spaces, public and private spaces, a complex system in which natural elements and artificial elements are fully integrated.

The integration between natural and artificial elements is another cardinal point of the plan, that assigns a priority role to natural components and, in general, to urban green areas in “structuring the community organization”, as well as to activating ecological-environmental rebalancing processes.

According to [1], to restore signs of identity to the territorial contexts where the suburbs are located, it is necessary to consolidate the geometry of the urban routes; retrieve the historical traces; build polar nodes for urban interconnections; mark out axial systems; enhance the tracks of the water courses as a basis for creating a linear urban landscape; interpret the local geographic signs; highlight the conformation of the terrain.

The role of the “road networks structuring the community” can be decisive, in the sense of a road

network that can guarantee maximum accessibility to the community for both vehicles and pedestrians.

According to [1], the road networks architecture can take on new meanings as well as recover ancient roles, attributing dialogic values to the networks; delineating sequences and marking hierarchies; building itineraries along roads and squares and so reinterpreting traditional spaces, absorbing episodic interventions in the relational spaces; reconnecting residual spaces within the urban weave, integrating the “difficult” elements in the network architecture; developing new interconnections to create unusual pathways.

Another metarule is to take the community density as the quality control parameter of urban quality. From this standpoint densification and community redistribution operations must lead to the creation of new poles and/or reinforcement of existing ones and, in general, to hierarchical structuring of the built-up areas. However, urban densification operations require less consumption of the terrain and also offer greater possibilities of safeguarding contexts that feature particularly fragile and sensitive environmental elements.

To improve contemporary communities, residences, production areas and services, new images need to be designed when planning public services [1]; new urban geometries built, proceeding by analogy, citation and sense shift; densification using intrusive fragments; planning the image of the residence by designing new relations with green belts and public spaces; reinterpreting the themes of the consolidated city by investigating the landscape elements and aspects; recovering abandoned buildings by assigning them new functions with forms that are well integrated in the context; opening out work places to the urban lifestyle; transforming the buildings into complex landscapes that can interact with the places, creating new territorial identities.

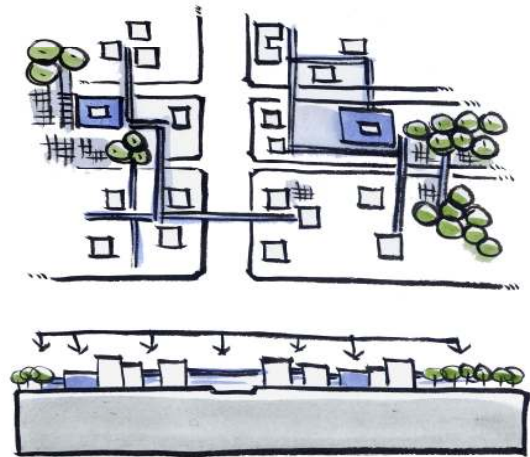
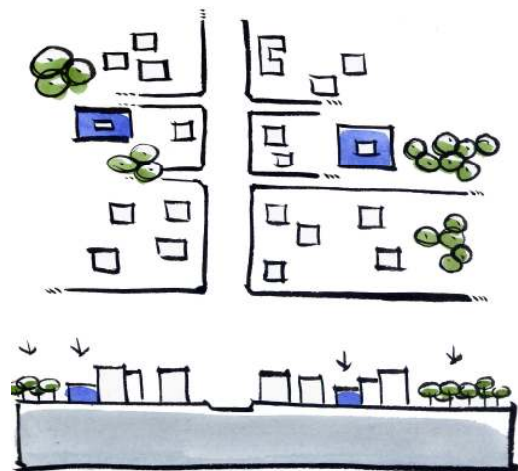


Figure 6. The first drawing shows the results of growth of a city designed just to satisfy urban planning standards, in the sense of providing the minimum surfaces that must be devoted to services, inserted in the urban fabric without any morphogenetic logic. The second illustrates the results that can be obtained by integrating the services at different scales, fostering high level mobility, physical and relational continuity, and reinterpreting preexisting constructions (Rotondo, Selicato, 2010; from signs reprocessed since Gabellini, 2001).

The issue of “functional mixité”, in the sense of a multiplicity of possible and desirable uses that can encourage different forms and levels of social exchanges, is equally decisive. It is fostered by the way the open spaces, built-up urban weave, type of community and forms of aggregation of the building cores are able to forge mutual relations. But functional mixité must also be translated into physical forms that can make the community spaces more attractive and vital, and be perceived as such by pedestrians [10]. In this sense, not only does the way the buildings relate to the open spaces have a great importance, but also the elements characterizing variations among the facades at eye level.

Moreover, since in the contemporary city the plan for empty spaces seems to be more relevant and urgent than that of the already built-up areas, the forms, significance and community role of the urban scenes where the actors interplay, dialogue and meet need to be reconsidered.

3 The role of urban design in the suburbs of Puglia

3.1 Premises

In Puglia, in these last five years the Region has taken the issue of urban regeneration and, in particular, of requalifying the suburbs, together with improving private and public residential supply, as one of the

fundamental regional policies, devoting resources, innovating the legislative picture, following the correct implementation of the policies by means of close monitoring. The regional picture is starting to develop rapidly, and many degraded areas are beginning to undergo requalification. Naturally there is still a great deal to do, after nearly fifty years of urban planning in which the issue of urban regeneration was entirely ignored. In any case, the ongoing regional dynamics seem very promising and likely to give this regeneration process a lasting, decisive character.

Despite the positive aspects, as in all experiences the results do not always live up to the expectations and the backwardness of the cultural background does not always make it possible to fully enjoy the fruits of what has been invested. In fact, some of the financed regeneration projects not only did not appear to be able to improve the socio-economic conditions but also, from the design point of view, were not coherent with the metarules upon which the scientific community seems to be universally agreed. For this reason, individuating the possible roles of urban design in the different suburban categories we have outlined, despite the limits pointed out above of such a taxonomy and their consequent generalization, may be useful as a means of distinguishing efficacious criteria and actions serving to guide future works.

Therefore, we now attempt to illustrate, for each macrocategory identified in a significant southern Italian context, the possible roles to be assigned to urban design in projects for regenerating these places as contemporary living areas.

3.2 Suburbs in the city centre

These are the suburbs where requalification operations are most strongly concentrated. If they are in the old town the most common intervention is restoration. Instead, if they are consolidated areas built in the 20th century, apart from a few cases for which restoration continues to be the only intervention method, other types of building and urban restructuring are admissible and in this case it is meaningful to talk of urban design. However, in both cases the role of the few remaining open spaces in this type of contexts seems to be fundamental in this ample and highly differentiated category, adopting them as essential linking and integrating elements giving a sense of urban design.

In these cases, among the metarules described above, recovering the signs of identity is vital. According to the territorial contexts where the suburbs are located, it is important to consolidate the geometries of the urban routes; retrieve the historical traces; build poles at the urban interconnection nodes; mark axial systems; enhance the lines of the water courses as a means of ensuring linear urban landscapes.

3.3 Suburbs of the “167”, of residential expansion and satellite quarters

In these suburbs, the large number of urban empty spaces (often areas not reaching standards and so abandoned) is often a major resource for densification and urban fabric repair operations in areas isolated from the rest of the city. These contexts are highly variable and differentiated, so they often require the application of different “metarules”.

The role of the roads network structure has a great importance, and must be defined so as to guarantee the maximum possible accessibility, for both vehicles and pedestrians. Densification and redistribution operations are equally essential and must lead to the creation of new poles and/or reinforcement of existing ones and, in general, of hierarchical structuring of the built-up areas. Another fundamental aspect is functional mixité, to encourage different forms and levels of social exchange.

3.4 Squatters suburbs

In these cases, in view of the delicacy of the territories affected by the phenomenon the best solution for these squatters areas is often demolition. Unfortunately, this is not always possible for reasons that can well be imagined, and so urban design can be a tool serving to mitigate the effects, although these will in any case remain severe.

Among ongoing experimentations there do not appear to be any significant examples of requalifying projects of any great efficacy in terms of quality, despite the fact that there a great number of proposed interventions. Notably, they all pay particular attention to gaining the consensus of the many actors concerned, as well as focusing principally on eliminating the main environmental damage factors.

In such cases, among the metarules described above, the most relevant is the role of the natural elements and in general of green spaces in “structuring possible community organization”, in addition to activating ecological-environmental rebalancing processes.

4 Some conclusive remarks

It must be stressed that this contribution addresses the “physical” aspects of requalification, although we are well aware that this is only one of the multiple aspects of the phenomenon, that must be considered in its entirety. Nevertheless, the “process” of urban design can provide useful tools for this purpose, provided that it is able to involve the multiple agents concerned. This analysis of the cases in Puglia allows us to draw some general conclusions.

The essential nature of the suburbs is that they are not constituted territories but dynamic, developing

spaces undergoing slow, or even rapid transformation. Moreover, the suburbs are territories that cannot be completely remodelled: the rhythms and spaces of change are not synchronous, and they can only be altered bit-by-bit, according to the degree of obsolescence of their different parts (uncultivated land, residual zones that can be bought up with public funds, partial urban renewal operations), or else according to political opportunity (planned transformation of a sector using public resources).

It is clear that in these circumstances the architectural and/or urban design cannot be omnicomprehensive, but will be discontinuous in time and space. Nor can this discontinuity be freed from the results of what may be occurring over a wider area and/or in different times, so the plan must contain the gene of anticipation.

A different design culture needs to be nurtured, that can assign leading roles to the inhabitants, civil servants, administrators and officials of the community technical structures. Despite our awareness of the limits of focusing just on “urban design” as a tool for dealing with an issue with such dense social and economic specific bearings, in this treatise we view such design as an ample, differentiated urban planning process, in the widest senses now widely acknowledged [2]; [11]; [12]; [13]; [14].

The actors responsible for its actuation must be able not only to plan but also and above all to solicit and capture all possible occasions for improving the city, patiently awaiting for the conditions for recreating and/or enhancing the overall public spaces to mature. Particular attention must therefore be paid to areas still available (these are particularly abundant in the suburbs of the “167”, of residential expansions, and satellite quarters) to prevent them from being subtracted from possible uses of interest to the whole community.

The public actors must also ensure that the inhabitants are allowed to participate in decision making and to proffer ideas and suggestions for the plans and implementation. They must make sure that the necessary resources are available, sometimes by carrying out small, even minimal interventions at a time. The administrators, in particular, must propose incentives and/or tax benefits to foster urban recovery and regeneration procedures.

These are the main reasons behind the success of the many ongoing reported experiences, as demonstrated by Colarossi [15] in the search for the “micro cities” (quarters) that make up the Roman metropolis.

Time therefore has a decisive role to play in the new culture of urban regeneration and it is essential to bear in mind that for the process to bear fruit, an image of the proposed city must be borne in mind, towards which to work, slowly if necessary, but continually [16]; [17].

The case of Puglia shows how the use of urban design as a tool for planning, implementing and managing suburban regeneration can provide a solution that is not limited to physical interventions but must develop through forms of recreating social identities, and on lasting economic bases that can enhance the patrimonial value of the actions promoted during the entire period of implementation of the design.

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