

Neglected landscapes and brownfields: new urban and territorial spaces for new communities

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Abstract

Changes are being seen in the morphological and functional relationships that regulate the urban and territorial structure, and therefore in the way of thinking about the city. To prevent homogenization with the wider world, local territories seem dedicated to reworking their own identities by referring not to physical forms, but rather, and especially, to functional relationships. The organizational dynamics that have marked the network of functional relationships in some areas of Italy such as the Veneto and Marche Regions in recent decades are emblematic and are being replicated in various forms and ways in other territories as well as national and European areas. The new power of functional, physical, and virtual networks seems to open new realms of meaning and to address the relationships between city, society, and economics in a new way. Deindustrialization contributes to delineating these new scenarios and offers the city a large supply of disused sites, which should adapt to the urgent needs of territorial rebalancing, entering as important nodes in the network of networks and responding to the different demands for land use. In the most internal and marginal areas, the theme of decommissioning is rather different. These areas are not affected by the typical phenomena of deindustrialization, but by decommissioning residential areas due to serious natural dynamics. For these areas, vast new meaning can be planned, anchored in re-naturalization or the reinsertion of new urban and territorial reinforcement. These are new spaces dedicated to the collective identification of renewed local communities.

Keywords: urban regeneration, landscape, community.

1 | The decommissioning phenomenon

The term "brownfield" almost always refers to industrial areas that have abandoned their original use and, after having been environmentally renewed and recovered, can be used for other central roles in cities undergoing change. We examine some relevant case studies in the following pages. However, in this essay, the cases of decommissioned industrial areas are compared with other changes in land use that have occurred due to different governance choices for the area of study or due to the effect of significant natural events, which are often not adequately or preventively considered. This makes it temporarily impossible to maintain the original usage of the area.

In most of the cases investigated, agricultural, industrial, touristic, and residential decommissioning is present as a series of discontinuous elements with respect to the sequence of settlement fabrics, historical urban centres, and the hills denoting the agrarian landscapes of Italy (Fig. 1).

In the case studies presented below, different types of decommissioning can be seen, with different approaches to planning the reconversion. A common denominator in the different experiences is the fact that it is difficult to achieve the desired results if the building intervention is not accompanied by a community project aimed in part at regenerating the identity of a place and its socio-economic relationships.



Figure 1 | Tullio Pericoli, *Verso Destra* (2011)
Source: Pericoli T. (2013) *I Paesaggi*, Adelphi, Milan.

An initial group includes industrial areas in urban areas that, due to their inappropriate location or the economic crisis in the production sector, were definitively decommissioned in expectation of an overall regeneration of the area in question. This sort of area is often located near the old periphery of the city, which now forms part of the settlements in the peri-urban area. The area now aspires to become a full part of the city and considers the industrial settlement as an extraneous body. The usual choice is to reuse these areas for urban parks, which sometimes have themes but are often designed for a wider, extended acceptance. On the one hand, they improve environmental conditions and the life of inhabitants, favouring the development of outdoor recreational and cultural activities, which are often directly connected with the urban greenery and with the standard areas of the city. On the other hand, they tend to mark an undefined and indefinable urban border with a green belt that is morphologically very clear. This type of open space obviously increases the flexibility and resilience of the city and the new users are inhabitants from the most interior neighbourhoods who suffer from the asphyxia of restricted residential areas without greenery or the possibility of enjoying public spaces. These areas also become places to meet and to recognize new communities (Sargolini 2009).

A second group includes areas that were formerly dedicated to mass tourism¹ (Fig. 2). These are fragments of cities and tracts of territory that have been degraded due to the pressure of mass tourist movement (with particular reference to seaside tourism). These territorial areas were long the sites of an ideal, material dream, whose suggestive representation arouses the fascination of mass tours in search of the experiences illustrated in aesthetic media images. These are artificial landscapes, oversized in volume and the availability of residences, which have often entailed a lost connection with the territory and the consequent loss of identity due to the violent break with a non-touristic past. This phenomenon has fed the income of position through territorial transformations, exasperatingly consuming ecologically important lands via a significant increase in fixed building capital. This has failed, however, in the last decade with growing attention to tourism aware of the natural and cultural value of the places. Many great touristic residences are now being decommissioned and transformed, especially in coastal areas, but also in mountain basins used for winter sports. In the most virtuous cases, important participatory paths are being developed with the support of local communities to define new spaces for recreation and free time in favour of inhabitants and tourists.

A third group pertains to those industrial areas that, under the impetus of special financing for weak, marginal areas, arose in areas that were not properly dedicated to industry due to the location's physical and morphological conformation or the functional relationships with large distribution ways. This refers in particular to the hill and foothill areas where, due to particular political circumstances, industrial areas have developed that have been very important for the local economies of the towns involved. In particular, following the economic recession of the last decade, without management autonomy and the ability to support themselves, many of these production plants have unexpectedly collapsed.

¹ Novelli S. (2016) *La forma turistica della contemporaneità: dal luogo del desiderio al territorio della sostenibilità*. Doctoral thesis in Architecture. Advisor: Prof. Massimo Sargolini.



Figure 2 | The Alpe Bianca hotel complex in the Tornetti neighbourhood in the municipality of Viù (TO).
Source: Author's archive.

One can therefore see spaces that were once functionally organized around a production system in multiple working parts and components and which are now completely abandoned. The social network and collective organization was also often structured around the production system, capable of stimulating ways of life and behaviours of the entire community of urban towns and villages. In these cases, the transformation entails a radical rethinking of the site's use and the development of a new cultural gamble for the resident communities, considering the proximity of many of these areas to particularly important natural and cultural capital. This means developing a new formal and morphological sense of the areas in question, identifying them as well with a new cultural and social role.

A fourth group includes old production or residential areas that were suddenly created in rural and semi-natural areas close to waterways that have, over time, laid claim to the space where they belong, perhaps seriously damaging goods and inhabitants. The flooding of residences and other spaces near waterways is, unfortunately, sadly known. In the same geographical condition are former extraction areas that, for reasons of production and processing (near water for cleansing) and due to the richness in the underlying aggregates were located near waterways. Waterway meanders and courses were therefore transformed into areas for extraction and processing, thereby favouring the development of latent dangers. The decommissioning of large gravel extraction and processing facilities has freed important spaces close to waterways, favouring the rebirth of thick river vegetation and the re-establishment of bio-connections vital for regional and national ecological networks in coherence with the Natura 2000 Network (Cinquini et al., 2006). It should not be forgotten that the waterways, with their riverbank forest systems, are exceptional tools to favour the consolidation of green networks. These allow animals, plants, and humans² to pass through and become connective elements between the large natural heart of mountain areas (site of river sources) and the vastness of the extended marina (site of river outlets) (Fig.3).

A last, fifth group pertains to temporarily or permanently disused residential and production areas following particularly strong seismic events. Unfortunately, these conditions are experienced in many European geographical areas and are particularly persistent in Italy. One need only recall the most striking and devastating seismic events capable of causing destruction, loss of life, and the forced need of abandonment. Recalling the sad events of the past, even in the presence of forms of complete or partial reconstruction, there are many cases where the meaning and original role of these ancient settlements have been lost. It is often difficult to regenerate the service system, considering the decreasing number of possible users, even following the migratory effects sparked by the fear of earthquakes. The contributions of the Italian government to reconstruct these temporarily decommissioned areas often tends to create simple ghost towns and cities where the housing is at best completely restored, but the life of the town is now dead. The new use of these spaces imposes brave, sometimes difficult choices that could even lead to delineating the non-reconstruction of some portions of collapsed living spaces. One should also consider the excess of settlements in many inhabited centres in mountain areas and the need to develop public spaces, or spaces for public use, associated with appropriately associated services, of the bordering areas. The aim is also to attract new resident communities (Osti 2006). In this sense, the SNAI (Italian National Strategy for Internal Areas), which Italy is trying to spread throughout the first 60 pilot areas (about three

² Caprodossi R. (2016). *Le infrastrutture verdi per la riorganizzazione della città e del territorio*. Doctoral thesis in Architecture. Advisor: Prof. Massimo Sargolini.

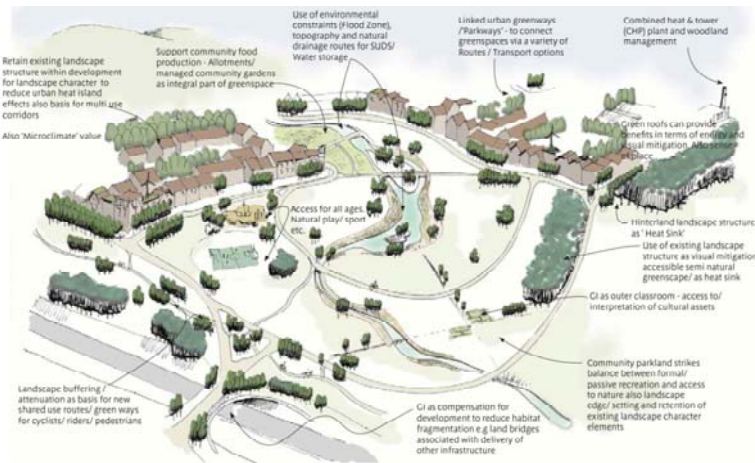


Figure 3 | The green network (infrastructure) structure: multi-functionality and benefits
Source: Gale A. (2009). Green Infrastructure Guidance. Natural England

per region) in the inland Alpine and Apennine areas, could be an approach to watch with interest and to be reproduced in the regeneration of areas that are disused and abandoned due to seismic events.

2 | Case studies and examples of decommissioning

In this part, reversion and transformation experiences and practices related to brownfields and neglected landscapes are selected.

In the first group related to industrial areas in urban areas, examples include the former Elettrocarbonium in Ascoli Piceno, the former Falck industry in Milan, the Bagnoli factory in Naples (Fig.4), the Carapelli industry and the former Novoli FIAT factory in Florence, the Fiat-Lingotto area in Turin, the former slaughterhouse in the Testaccio neighbourhood and the former general market in Rome, and the former Snia-Viscosa factory in Varedo (Fig.5). If in most cases it has been difficult to implement a renovation and reversion plan, there are also excellent, innovative examples in which technology and recovery come together. In Milan, for example, thanks to students at area universities and on occasion of the annual meeting of European cities participating in the urban renewal project *My Neighbourhood*, the project "Quarto Gardening" recently began in the Quarto Oggiaro area, which transformed a nondescript unused sand pit into a child-friendly green garden. The "Quarto Gardening" project falls under the wider European program *My Neighbourhood—My City*, which, in addition to Milan, also involves the cities of Birmingham, Lisbon, and Aalborg in Denmark. The program works with citizens to develop associations and schools in the chosen areas, new services aimed at connecting people, ideas, and resources to favour the intelligent use of technologies and improve the quality of life, thereby favouring new processes of social inclusion. Another example is Bologna, where the City has decided to include the renovation of 31 decommissioned areas of the city in future projects (the new City Operational Plan establishes 27 new renovation projects dedicated to disused areas). Other examples of renewal in which renovation/culture/innovation is to be pursued include: the MUMAC in Binasco in Milan, in which a building used as a parts warehouse for Gruppo Cimballi, a manufacturer of coffee machines for bars, was transformed into a museum to exhibit the company's products; the Centrale Antonio Pitter in Malnisio, Pordenone, where what was once a hydroelectric plant (closed in 1988) was transformed into a science centre.

The second group includes examples of seaside and winter sports tourism. Reference can be made to European areas for seaside tourism such as Malaga or Ibiza, or the Adriatic coast in Italy. Rimini, Riccione, Vasto, Alba Adriatica, Silvi Marina, Vasto Marina, and Lido di Camaiore contain tourist areas close to elements of high landscape/environmental value or in very panoramic areas. They were built between the 1950s and 1990s on the wave of uncontrolled development that did not consider the common good, the protection and enhancement of local resources, and the definition of relationships with the history of the place. These areas have become increasingly unpleasant and their gradual decommissioning due to changes in the tourism market are likely. One should also note cases in which the presence of large incomplete structures in valuable contexts gives rise to real "ecomonsters".



Figure 4 | Bagnoli area in Naples
Source: Wikimedia commons.



Figure 5 | Former Snia-Viscosa factory in Varedo
Source: Wikimedia commons.

These include: Carloforte on San Pietro Island off the coast of Sardinia (Fig.6); the Palmaria ecomonster in front of the village of Portovenere (Fig.7); Consonno "Toy Village" (or so called "Lombard Disneyland", "Brianzola Las Vegas"), an ancient medieval village that was razed in 1962 to give way to an eccentric tourist destination (Fig.8); and the abandoned village of Coghinas in the Province of Sassari, which hosted the employees that worked in Enel's nearby hydroelectric plant. In the latter areas, the abandonment process is now definitively complete. For areas related to mountain tourism, there are many examples in the Apennines, Alpines, and Alpine foothills where tourist resorts and villages built in the 1960s/1970s to host large tourist fluxes are today degraded and abandoned. Examples include: the small towns of Sassotetto, Frontignano, Bolognola in Macerata, Terminillo in Rieti, Abetone in Tuscany, Montecampione in Valcamonica, Entova–Scerscen in Chiesa Valmalenco, the Alpe Bianca hotel complex in the municipality of Viù (TO), and others still³.

With regard to the third group, many industrial areas arose in inappropriate areas and are today abandoned, in recession, and depopulated. In this case, the problems do not extend just to the individual site, but form the centre of a network related to the presence of production activities (social fabric, economy, etc.). Some of the numerous examples of industrial areas and settlements arising in the 1970s following impressive subsidies include the city of Fabriano in the Marche Region, which is emblematic for the socio-cultural and productive transition it experienced for several years. From the second half of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first, thanks to the Merloni family's investments in the industrial field, Fabriano created a strong production complex, which grew and spread in subsequent

³ For the Regions of Lombardy and Piedmont, censuses have been made of abandoned ski resorts. For more information, see http://www.zainoinspalla.it/varie/censimento_impianti_abbandonati.asp

years, assuring the city a state of well-being and socio-economic stability. Fabriano has for many years been a unique production model, which has found strength in uniting the rural context and industry.



Figure 6 | Former Snia-Viscosa factory in Varedo
Source: Wikimedia commons.



Figure 7 | Palmaria ecomonster in front of the village of Portovenere
Source: Wikimedia commons.



Figure 8 | Consonno "Toy Village"
Source: Wikimedia commons.

Recently designated as "city of action", it was a specific laboratory of the Italy of industrial districts in which economic development and social cohesion have often walked in step (Fig.9). Starting in 2008,

however, the industrial system in Fabriano began to feel the effects of the global recession due to the increase in labour costs, the decrease in consumption, and delocalization processes. Family incomes fell dramatically and the social fabric slowly unravelled, giving way to depopulation and abandonment. Today Fabriano is forced to reinvent a new future based not only on the reuse of abandoned areas and new relationships with the network of urban green areas and the large surrounding natural protected areas, but also on redefining new social relationships and a new community identity. The key words of this challenge seem to be "culture" and "creativity". With this willingness and this approach, Fabriano entered the network of UNESCO Creative Cities in 2013.

In the fourth group, the most meaningful case in the European context is certainly the renovation of the Emscher River system, which flows through the former Ruhr mining area (Fig.10). Starting in the 1990s, it was the object of a process to renaturalize river systems and regenerate urban settlements. Industrial archaeological areas were reused mainly for public enjoyment and free time. There are also many examples in Italy, including the former Vitali steelworks in Turin, which has experienced a progressive reconversion process to create a post-industrial urban park of about 456,000 m².

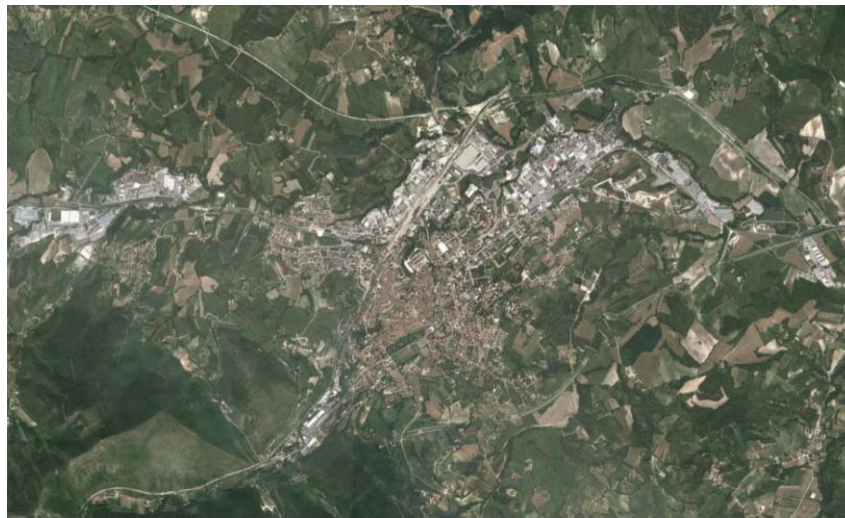


Figure 9 | Aerial view of the city of Fabriano and its strong production complex.
Source: Google Maps service.



Figure 10 | Renovation of the former Ruhr industrial area in the Emscher basin. Landschaftspark, Duisburg north.
Source: Author's archive.

The last group regards a little-known aspect of decommissioning, precisely because it is viewed as degeneration and/or destruction rather than decommissioning due to explicit abandonment. This is the reconstruction, even through new forms of use, after a large natural destructive event. This relates to those cases in which some territories are faced with reconstructing parts of the city or even entire cities due to unexpected, catastrophic events. Many events have been experienced in Italy over time. These include the Sarno–Quindici flood of 1998, the strong earthquakes in Irpinia in 1980, Friuli Venezia Giulia 1976, Marche-Umbria 1997, Molise 2002, L'Aquila 2009, Finale Emilia 2012, the landslide in Vajont, the flooding of the Tanaro River and the low Piedmont tract of the Po River of 1994, and also the latest earthquakes in central Italy on 24 August, 26 October and 30 October 2016 (Fig 11, 12). It is desirable

that in the last case an intervention program is implemented that considers the successes and failures of the past, which will allow interventions to guarantee the permanence of settlements and the communities that live in, manage, and maintain these territories.



Figure 11 | Pescara del Tronto (AP) after the earthquake on 24 August 2016.
Source: Wikimedia commons.



Figure 12 | Camerino (MC) after the earthquakes on 26 October and 30 October 2016.
Source: Wikimedia commons.

Conclusions

The theoretical framework and selection of examples presented in this contribution highlight an extraordinary variety of cases which present some common characteristics as well as some marked differences in the type of decommissioning.

The most important common criticalities in the cases presented are the sense of territorial uprooting for the communities and inconsistencies between the residential and productive functions that develop in both the places and the characteristics of the places themselves. All of this serves as a basis for abandoning the area, subject to decommissioning the function practiced there. Over time, a process of non-recognition by the local communities is generated by abandoning work places and disfiguring places high in environmental and landscape value with structures and sometimes extended settlements. These were built on the wave of uncontrolled development inattentive of the common good, conservation, and enhancement of local resources and the defining relationships with the history of the place.

It is clear that special planning is required to reuse sites and decommissioned or abandoned areas and that it should constantly consider the processes of establishing new activities and communities where the

intervention takes place. At the heart of the ability of local communities to build development strategies to act on their own land there is a process of “community construction” without which exercising this form of planning would not be possible. If in fact the community interacts, recognizes, and relates to its living environment and with natural dynamics, it can effectively play the role of territorial actor and activate a long-term process of development based on the enhancement of characteristics, resources, identity, and specific territorial endowments. To do so, it is necessary to develop “social links” and a degree of community empowerment. The latter is manifested both in “critical awareness”, i.e., in the knowledge of territorial resources, institutions, and the means of activating government choices, and in “control and knowledge”, intended as the capacity of the community to act and influence decisions and processes for change.

The attempts at recovery, regeneration, and enhancement are therefore presented as real processes of cultural, social, and environmental renewal. In this sense, our reflection can open new paths of research in identifying adequate planning and design tools capable of containing general strategic frameworks and effective point-like actions in an interactive, proactive connection. In other words, the “urban-planning tactics and strategies” binomial, according to which the development of long-term designs and locally based techniques are developed side-by-side, necessarily brings into play local subjects and actors for the concrete activation of regeneration and development projects for abandoned landscapes.

Finally, we are once again faced with a real cultural challenge in which the capacity to stimulate transformations and innovations is directly proportional to the ability to act on the culture and sensibility of interested actors and communities (Sargolini, 2015). This is made possible by presenting choices aimed in part at socio-economic development based on the territory’s strong points (natural/cultural excellence, food and agricultural products, traditions and know-how, tourism, energy) and in part on rebalancing and rationalizing the services offered to allow the community to enjoy a high quality of life, strengthening the link with the places and increasing their territorial attractiveness.

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