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## **A multi-disciplinary conversation about urban transformation in Turin: the case of Mirafiori Sud**

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# A multi-disciplinary conversation about urban transformation in Turin The case of Mirafiori Sud

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This blogpost reports on one of these conversations, which Alessandro Pisano, political science student at the University of Turin, and I had with regards to the transforming neighbourhood of Mirafiori Sud. Why did we both focus on this peripheral area? How did we approach the study of its transformation? What are our analyses of the impact of local urban greening and food production projects?

## Learning from the periphery

During my fieldwork in Turin I had the opportunity to exchange thoughts with several researchers investigating same areas and projects but from a different disciplinary angle. Despite the dissimilar research questions and methodologies, such exchanges always enriched my understanding of the context and benefitted my analysis.

Urban peripheries are often researched as emblematic entry points for the study of a city and its future challenges. In Turin, peripheral areas are particularly telling of the city's history, demographic trends and socio-cultural transformations. Until the 1980s, most Turinese peripheries were the beating heart of the city as it was were industrial activities were located. Therefore the economy of the city and the employment of most of its inhabitants revolved around these areas.

The industrial crisis and closure of the majority of the city plants severely affected the local economy and the working class's living conditions, which in most cases were already fragile. To attempt tackling consequent issues of poverty and marginalization, the municipality of Turin developed over the years several urban regeneration plans, involving both urbanistic restructuring as well as the promotion of social activities, through the mobilization of various associations. Among these, the central project *Periferie* (1997 – 2005) and its “urban recovery programs” (<https://www.comune.torino.it/rigenerazioneurbana/en/>) are particularly telling of the type of interventions and vision which characterised such plans, namely an idea of redevelopment focused on strengthening social relations and community building.

The reasons that brought the two authors to explore peripheral areas and their transformations are quite different. Alessandro Pisano investigates urban regeneration policies and projects to gain insights about their inclusiveness and related perceptions by the local population. He links these with issues of gentrification by looking into their relation to the rent gap. The rent gap is a concept used in geography and aimed at identifying the difference between the potential and current value of a given neighbourhood. Value is used here in a broad sense and is referred in the literature as rental income and property value but more generally also as financial, competitive potential or economic opportunities. In Turin, the link between urban regeneration and the potential value of different areas has become quite visible: neighbourhoods closer to the centre and with a financially attractive potential have undergone a faster transformation (for example, in terms of building and infrastructural renovation, development of economic activities, nightlife) but also a more exclusive one, less functional to the needs of local inhabitants. Pisano main research question is: how much can the rent gap affect the results of territorial regeneration?

Maria Vasile arrived to the same areas through her ethnography within food related initiatives. She got increasingly interested in the networks that these were part of and in understanding how the projects contributed to define urban regeneration in practice. In her research she explores the friction between different visions of regenerations and sustainability in these local projects.

# SUBURBS PROJECT

## The heart of the city

**The Suburbs Project** is a proposal for the global development of the territory of Torino, which recognizes the value and identity of each part of the city and aims to overcome the distance between centre and suburbs.

**The socio-economic aspects of the project**

A urban regeneration project, which will make it possible to improve the economic quality of life in peripheral areas and to create a dynamic urban economy, which increases the value of local resources through investment in economic activities and the creation of jobs.

A the necessity of an identity and a sense of belonging, by introducing changes about economic activities and urban morphology in specific areas of urban interest.

**The Laboratory**

The implementation of the Suburbs Project is agreed with the district

administration, Communities and a collaborative project a coordinated group of operators with different skills creates a working group, or Laboratory, gathering together associations, academic entities, strategic service providers, voluntary groups, and local residents. The Laboratory meets on a regular basis, and suggestions, on the basis of which a draft programme is prepared, which the City Council and Communities will take into consideration in their subsequent regeneration plans in order to take final decisions.

The Laboratory also monitors the concrete implementation of the projects and of development initiatives.

**Integrated planning**

The Suburbs Project does not operate in silos, but is integrated with other initiatives in

addition to an integrated an integrated urban planning, with areas that are change in housing, common areas or public space change citizens' behavior and the possibilities of increasing the urban opportunities. A model of urban regeneration which affects a neighbourhood in the overall quality of the territory, breaking the barriers of interaction between one area and another was defined by the coordinated action of operators of the social services, cultural operators and political offices, with the active participation of the residents themselves and with the support of community relations tools.

The Suburbs Project is made up of different institutions, financed by the European Union, the Italian Government, the Piedmont Regional Council and also other the Torino City Council budget. The results

Other areas are gathering Neighbourhood Councils and social Management actions, and new large urban projects. The first one (Area)



Description of the project Periferie. Retrieved on December 11 2020 at: <http://www.comune.torino.it/>

## Mirafiori Sud and its transformations

The area of *Mirafiori Sud* represents the quintessential industrial neighbourhood. Since its inauguration in 1939, the FIAT car factory was at the centre of its redevelopment from a rural area to an urbanized and production pillar of the city. After World War II, the plant was at the centre of the Italian economic boom and Turinese demographic transformation, attracting millions of workers from all over Italy.

Between 1951 and 1961 the city population passed from 719 thousands to 1,025 millions of inhabitants. In the 1970s the *Mirafiori* FIAT plant employed around 70 thousand people. Such changes resulted in the transformation of the area also in terms of fast housing development and the emergence of many social problems linked to the difficult living and working conditions and later, with the crisis, lack of employment.

*Mirafiori Sud* was also an emblematic Italian case for what concerns workers organizing, political activity and sociality more generally. Among these, the events of 1969 (<https://libcom.org/history/organising-fiat-1969>) and 1980 (<https://libcom.org/history/1980-defeat-fiat-marco-revelli>) are particularly telling of the workers struggles and their efforts to advance better working conditions, resist to massive dismissals and promote a culture of solidarity. Despite the crisis and scaling back of the industry, this important heritage is key to understanding the history of the area and the ways in which work, social organizing and the role of institutions transformed over time.

Despite the urban regenerations plans of 1990s, today the neighbourhood is in a process of depopulation and still faces issues of unemployment. As discussed in the research of Alessandro Pisano, *Mirafiori Sud* is still generally regarded as unattractive from an urban marketing perspective as it is far from the city centre and has few tourist attractions. According to Pisano, this is actually playing a positive role in terms of the inclusiveness of ongoing local urban regeneration projects. In contrast to areas where regeneration is nested with gentrification, most of the projects in *Mirafiori Sud* remain targeted to the local population and developed to strengthen local communities. From an anthropological perspective, the picture is more nuanced: Maria Vasile examines the projects she investigated both in terms of regeneration narratives and cohesive experiences as well as welfare transformation and the promotion of more standardized ways of practicing the right to the city.



(<https://espresso.repubblica.it/plus/articoli/2015/10/15/news/mirafiori-2015-cosi-il-quartiere-operaio-di-torino-riprende-vita-1.233728#gallery-slider=undefined>)

Housing in Mirafiori and part of the FIAT plant. Retrieved on December 11 2020 at:

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## Greening projects: environmental restoration and a new sociality

Greening projects represent an important aspect of the regeneration efforts of the last years in *Mirafiori Sud*. Among other, the neighbourhood includes a vast green frontier which divides the city from the nearby towns and agricultural fields. In the industrial period, the development of this green public area was neglected and it was partly used as dumpster by factories. Today it is an area where several projects of environmental regeneration and urban agriculture experimentation are taking place such as the European project *ProGireg* (<https://progireg.eu/>) and the urban gardening initiative *Orti Generali* (<https://www.ortigenerali.it/>).

*Orti Generali* resulted from the conversion of a large agricultural area and part of a public park into individual allotments that can be rented by the city inhabitants. In addition to the development of such urban allotments, *Orti Generali* also provides a series of activities, such as training courses and collective gardening sessions, giving a considerable importance to volunteering. Both authors studied this project, identifying similar points particularly worth analyzing in relation to urban transformation. Among these, the emphasis on voluntary work and the jeopardizing of other ways of using this space such as the activities of unauthorized gardeners cultivating in the area since several decades.

A general tendency to focus on volunteering as a new form of (unpaid) labour is particularly tangible in Italy and often criticized, especially in the context of high unemployment. According to several of the researches' respondents, unemployment however is not the only challenge present in the periphery. The lack of spaces for socializing was often presented as a problem as well as a possible starting point for further socio-economic revival. Volunteering was experienced as an opportunity to create a network of acquaintances (even for possible future employment), a way for acquiring new skills and counteract forms of isolation typical of many post-industrial suburbs. While the authors do not analyse these positions here (and work around it along different theoretical reasonings), these elements are important to unpack the local meanings of volunteering and they are also telling of the changing sociality in the area. Urban transformation is indeed accompanied by a change in social experiences (the way these are set up, the actors that are involved in their organization, the role of external institutions, to name a few) and expectations of the local population, but most importantly a new morality that is reproduced through such social initiatives.

The case of unauthorized gardeners, also analysed by both authors, is telling about some of the limitations to the inclusiveness and extended sociality of these regeneration processes. The practices of unauthorized gardeners have a long history linked to the industrial past of the area as many of them used to be factory workers, for whom gardening was always a mean for self-subsistence and for compensating alienating working hours in the factory. While projects such as *Orti Generali* tried to dialogue with them - and proposed them to remain while adapting to the new rules of the project - not all wanted to adapt and were de facto expelled from these areas. Their case is an interesting entry point to study urban transformation dynamics on the ground and the way in which these processes include silenced clashes with what was there before. The idea of promoting greening and sustainability can in fact be advanced in multiple ways and the careful observation of the ways in which this unpack on the ground reveals all of its complexity and moral aspects.



Urban garden at Orti Generali, Parco Piemonte, August 2 2019. Photo by Maria Vasile

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