In the late '80s, thanks to the spread of satellite maps, we found ourselves faced with a situation that was expected, but of which designers and planners did not know the exact extent. The phenomenon of an urban sprawl, which moreover, had been since growing, was starting to be recognized. Italy, with a few exceptions, is now showing a strong delay in the field of anti-sprawl regulations, in most parts of Europe new buildings are constructed, in fact, (by law), on brownfields on already urbanized areas.¹

Parallel to this phenomenon, an instrumental use of an urban sprawl as a template (something to study but up against which you have no power of transformation) has pushed architects in recent years towards a greater self-referentiality. Architecture has become the leader in image, formal invention and ostentation of technology, becoming increasingly distant from city construction. Architects’ refuge in artistry and in the “signature” as an affirmation of a personal language development has produced more effective constructions in terms of communication and consensus both on a level of social utility and civil and cultural roles. This movement away from the specific discipline has increasingly reduced the sense of responsibility; planning issues such as collective housing projects or the definition of public space have received less and less interest from designers and even less from the publishing industry. Proof of this the overwhelming

¹ Since 2001 in England, a national law exists that requires that 70% of new developments be built on brownfields; the Ken Livingstone’s City of London - as recently recalled Richard Rogers - has grown in population by 1 million in 10 years not using a single hectare of remaining free soil (greenfield)
number of projects published in the last twenty years, few regarding residence, public spaces and yet a lot about museums, expos and single family houses. Today because of the global financial crisis, or perhaps thanks to it, there is a trend reversal. Architecture re-vamps its practical being which addresses necessary issues or ones of social urgency or need, so we go back to thinking of the project also in terms of problem solving, besides as in terms of aesthetics or of communicative impact. The scenario is changing: the difficult economic conditions, uncertainty about jobs and professions, cultural homogenization and the questioning of the global star system of architecture\(^2\) suggests an alternative to the naturalized sprawl and to the relative cultural and social impoverishment that has resulted from it. If we suppose that in the coming years architects cannot escape the role of privileged speaker of urban transformations and that architecture must return to affect the growth processes of the city, then we must figure out how this will happen. After numerous incursions into the world of the arts, science and sociology, architecture today has the duty to return to affect the processes of transformation of cities. Establishing the rules of urban design, an instrument now implementing many transformative practices, will be the first ground of comparison with town-planning. In fact, today there is indeed a cultural and disciplinary vacuum in all of the intermediate stages between urban planning and architectural design. It is from this point that it is necessary to start again.

1. The crux of density and the housing issue

The first value to reflect upon is density. In recent years - as mentioned - a continuous and unbalanced consumption of land and a paradoxical - compared to this strong building activity - and progressive increase in emergency housing by the middle and low class has been registered.\(^3\)

Targeted social housing in a consolidated city may mark a turnaround. On the one hand, a signal against the continued use of agricultural land through the use of urban brownfields (ex-factories and second-hand warehouses, unused railway areas, unfinished lots and spaces); on the other hand, a tool to revitalize the city center through increased social and functional diversity (mixité) and the introduction of really “necessary” housing, unlinked to exclusively speculative transactions. Architecture must create proximity. Density makes possible the recovery of sequences of spaces, work on conjunction, on the in-between, on urban porosity, as it is fashionable to say today. The city must begin to produce (or shrink) a density of settlements likely to foster relationships,

\(^2\) Serious self-criticism in the world of architecture is still lacking, meanwhile the non-architects’ attack is harsh and sometimes prejudiced. In this regard please see: F. T. Cecchi: F. La Cecchi, Contro l’architettura, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2008, N. A. Salinger: No alle Archistar. Il Manifesto contro le avanguardie, Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, Firenze 2009

\(^3\) That segment of the population – which continues to grow – is not poor enough to qualify for the list for public housing and not wealthy enough to pay a mortgage in order to buy a house on the open market. In this regard please see: G. Cauda, Dalla Casa all’abitare, in F. Garofalo, L’Italia cerca casa, Electa, Milano 2008
ensuring overlapping of functions and human activities, the coexistence of different social and cultural categories in the same places.

The attracting component of the city is undergoing profound change. The independence of the inhabitants in terms technological equipment and the ability to communicate directly from home is the cause of the dissemination of the inhabitants in the area, more so than the mass motorization of the ‘60s, more than any process of the outsourcing of work that was in progress since the ‘80s. The search for a renewed relationship with nature and refuge in “home-life” rather than “social-life” separates and further deconstructs human settlements. At this point, the city seems superfluous. Yet in recent years, a renewed need for cities has been recorded, confirmed by the continuous increase in urban populations. Cities must increase the quality and the “necessity” of what it offers: it will then be essential to focus on a level of density that favors spatial quality and sociability. Therefore, we are faced with a real change of values. The new values are centered on the quality of public space, landscape and architecture.

2. The reinvention of public space

The future of contemporary cities gambles on the three terms. In a consolidated city the potential of open spaces is “activated” through single relevant projects relevant (Auditorium, Mercati Generali a Roma-General Markets in Rome), or is the same open space in the form of a structural element of urban landscape, perhaps reusing abandoned infrastructures (High Line in
New York). Through these transformations, or “regenerations” that culminate in events (the Olympics, a city of culture, fairs, festivals, biennials, etc.), but that try to transform “functional” opportunities in new attractions (the new headquarter campus of Bocconi University in Milan, the bridge over Grand Canal in Venice), cities - through their centers - are placed in competition in the international cultural-tourism market, offering as an potential their urban, empty, interstitial spaces, or spaces that are to be transformed. How can we activate similar processes of regeneration in the unstructured outskirts of Rome?

We must first return to focus on the quality of public space, which is truly missing in the urban sprawl. If the compact city was historically based upon a hierarchical sequence of public spaces, the urban sprawl is a sequence (and extremely dilated) of private fences. The historic city, continuous and defined in its physical and social functioning, was a single body, a compact system marked by certain clearly established gaps. The public space practically disappears in the city sprawl in the face of, paradoxically, a huge amount of land designated for infrastructure. What is missing is the hierarchy of spaces, differentiation and overlapping of activities that are all concentrated in mono-functional districts. The territory takes on strong homogenous features and the places become ever increasing similar amongst themselves. It is not only a physical fact, but also a social one: the city sprawl is the city of individuals, a private place, how can one still think of a public space in this context?

Public space and infrastructure of roads should be designed together and require a rethinking of the com-
mon paths, of road sections, of margins. A master plan for “linear” public spaces in the city could initiate a first regeneration process also through a reflection on the containment of vehicular traffic. The social and environmental costs of commuting are no longer sustainable by people forced to endure congestion as a permanent condition and the home – even more so the neighborhood – is seen as an oasis, a refuge isolated from urban congestion.

3. **In the direction of the city-landscape?**

The renewed interest in the issues of form and urban design now cannot ignore the theme of landscape. Rome is a city that has grown irregularly, certain parts separately, a city in which a void still prevails as it did not have this growth historically, it had no physical strength to contain a broad distribution throughout the territory. In ancient times the Pontine Marshes were a huge swamp land lacking free historic villages. The town then developed in enclaves (on the hills) and large arteries of traffic (in the valleys). Even today, the growth of the city confirms this original predisposition, supporting the primary element in its topography of urban morphology. The expansion of settlements also suffered a great acceleration since the early 1900s, when the first neighborhoods built “not-according to plan”, as the purchase of areas evidently cost less. Since then, the policy of “coalesced areas”, or rather, the use of new settlements as bridgeheads for the future development of the city, became a habit. It was like this for the townships (the temporary ones and the second generation ones), INCIS quarters, before the law 167/62, but also for Area Plans. The illegal settlements will also have an important role in this type of urban development and city planning also contracted the “plan as you go” will eventually fall into the same pattern: one purchases (or receive as compensation for previous rights to build) farmland because it is cheaper, the empty spaces are saturated before reusing areas already compromised and thus coalesce the settlements. Yet in the pulverization of the galaxy outskirts of Rome, vacancy still prevails, and it is precisely open space which is the element most highly characteristic and qualifying of this area that is so extensive, where the only structural element is at the bottom of the GRA. Sprawl, economic crisis, difficulties of administrators and the public opinion to realize that settled sprawls are a problem so serious makes the current situation unstable; how do we come out of this impasse (em-passe)? Is there is a possible urban model? Perhaps the city-landscape, a city that acquires the features of the landscape maintaining its urban properties (density, structure, intersection between systems). The landscape is obviously no longer that of Alinari, but it is also not the one set by the European Landscape

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4 in regard to these topics please see the substantial text of: W. Toci, I. Insolera, D. Morandi, Avanti c’è posto. Storie e progetti del trasporto pubblico a Roma, Donzelli, Roma 2008

Convention, especially in the Italian translation of the text. Today, the inner-vision and the inner-edge of emptiness (spaces) prevails over full (spaces). Inner vision is not only subjective, but the fact that one lives inside the urban sprawl means that there is no public use of such urban sprawl. In a city-landscape made up of empty spaces more than full ones, the internal margin of these empty gaps become fundamental. The Roman landscape, consisting of developed enclaves and large archaeological areas that reach right into the consolidated city, can have this theme as an identifying and founding element for its future urban planning: empty spaces will be the connecting and structural element of the city-landscape.

4. Densification and thinning, two aspects of the same strategy

If emptiness is identified, preserved, and “redefined” through targeted thinning, the city will once again, in some way, “grow on itself”, as has always historically occurred. The new Town Plan of Rome introduces mechanisms that facilitate renovation within the fiber of the city, but also within in the consolidated city, replacement of degraded areas or particularly saturated with constructions of poor quality. The demolition and reconstruction interventions may have different objectives: to strengthen, prioritize, structure, create intersections between systems, but also diversify, thin, free, even re-naturalize.

If we do not want to nostalgically re-propose a compact city made of fabric and the urban scene (a model that works very well in the business of large retailers, let’s think of outlets), nor do we want to accept the as a pure status quo the destruction of the city and its relative social deconstruction, perhaps the “public” city produced by the large operations of 167 is one of the first places at which to start and upon which act in the near future. The city built according to the Area Plans has very low density, slightly higher than an illegal city, a lack of services (often the ones originally planned are not achieved), a major problem of social integration, open spaces between buildings that are indistinct and without any order and a limited typological variety of housing. However, it is almost always a city with a strong structure, a system of infrastructures that is actually oversized, a correct measurement of standards for the population. The introduction of new types of buildings, the redesign of the connective urban quota through diversification of vegetable or mineral fields (parterres), a different programmatic identity for various open spaces, the introduction of land and services capable of mediating between residents and

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7 refers to the calculation of the “surface” density, FAR (Floor Area Ratio), corresponding to “It = index use planning (or land building index) of the planners, or the maximum achievable gross floor area per sqm territorial. In regard to these topics please see L. Reale, Densità, città, residenza, tecniche di densificazione e strategia antisprawl, Gangemi, Roma 2008

6 Passaggio designates a certain portion of territory, as perceived by the people, whose character derives from the natural factors and /or humans and from relation between them.
Figure 5. Xaveer De Geyter, Urban network for the Flemish Diamond sprawl area, Belgium (from: X. De Geyter, After-sprawl, NAi Publishers/De Singel, Rotterdam 2002)

Figure 6. Study for an atlas of density in Rome (from: L. Reale, Densità, città, residenza. Tecniche di densificazione e strategie anti-sprawl, Gangemi, Roma 2008)
landscape (vegetable gardens, playgrounds, gardens), are all operations of densification, mending, infill, which can revitalize these neighborhoods.

The flaws of the sprawl are instead that of being weak and monotonous, but also very prone to this transformation.\(^8\) In a city of settlements spontaneous in nature (the ex-zone or ex-plan), the possible interventions are both ones of demolition and selective densification. The targeted thinning will make space for services and places for socializing, meeting, temporary activities and events. Densification could become a means to more clearly define the margin of an enclave to strengthen a road axis perhaps turning it into public "linear" space, in order to finally introduce a sudden attractive polarity within a uniform and repetitive tissue.

Through urban design – which the NPRG of Rome established as a direct implementational tool,\(^9\) but for which it does not dictate the rules - these strategies will be implemented, trying systems different from those suitable for historic cities: in the deconstructed outskirts densification and diversification will be sought rather than the functional stratification. The urban project, as much as it is guided by complex procedures and connected to variables other than the architectural project (time, flexibility, participation, etc...) cannot evade the issues of architectural inspection, of the morphological configuration, of the control of open spaces. It is this tool that architects should concentrate its forces on if they want to begin influencing urban transformations in the coming years.

\(^8\) In regards to this please see: Xaveer De Geyter, After Sprawl, NAI Publisher, Rotterdam 2002

\(^9\) Art. 16 of the NTA in Rome's NPRG