

EXCESS SPACE

STUDIO URBAN ASSEMBLAGES
FALL 2019



CONTENTS



03

THE STUDIO



05

PERIPHERY



12

SCARCITY



12

RE-CENTERING



22

PLANNING



30

METHODOLOGY

THE STUDIO

Urban Assemblages is a research by design studio linked to the Laboratory of Urbanism, Infrastructure, and Ecologies (LoUIsE). The studio starts from two convictions: (i) the capacity of cities to cast light on our present and (near)future; (ii) the need to start a socio-economic and ecological transition in them as the premise for a sustainable future anywhere else. To be able to accompany such transition, the studio invites spatial designers to move beyond the object-centered legacy of urbanism and towards a systemic understanding of cities. This requires seizing up flows, actors and places into their proposals of urban transformation. Cities are indeed woven into material and energy flows and stocks, and depend upon specific technical and socio-economic processes of production and consumption (1).

To explore how we can partake in those processes as spatial designers becomes urgent in the turbulent and unstable times we inhabit, with the Earth system being pushed into the Anthropocene. How to incorporate the unsteady assemblages those flows and actors trigger (or are the result of) into the design of physical places? And how can we render those same assemblages more sustainable, eventually more 'circular' (2)? Can circularity indeed become the next normative framework for the way we systemically 'redesign' cities and the processes that get articulated in them?

These and yet more questions for all those willing to explore the operative potential of a systemic approach to urban design.

Nadia Casabella + Benoit Burquel

(1) This approach is known as Urban Metabolism (UM), clearly defined by Kennedy and fellow scholars as "the sum total of the technical and socio-economic processes that occur in cities, resulting in growth, production of energy and elimination of waste." (in Kennedy, C., Cuddihy, J., & Engel-Yan, J. (2007). "The changing metabolism of cities". *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, 11(2), 43-59).

(2) A Circular Economy (CE) "is regenerative and waste-free by design, where materials are indefinitely cycled at high quality, all energy is derived from renewable or otherwise sustainable sources, and natural and human capital are structurally supported rather than degraded through economic activities" (webpage of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation).

Gratosoglio against the backdrop of Milano Agricultural Park (photo by Enrico Togni, 2010)



PERIPHERY

We are in the southern edge of Milan. Initially, the area was occupied by agricultural villages between the river Lambro and the Via dei Missaglia —the ancient Roman road connecting Milan to Pavia. Beyond this road, a vast agricultural field existed, with farmsteads regularly punctuating it. This ancient agricultural land is still kept off new urbanization within the confines of the Milano Agricultural Parc, a protected farmland area.

From the early sixties on, out of the joint initiative of the IACPM (Autonomous Institute of Popular Houses of Milan) and the Municipality of Milan, this area was fully urbanized. Three large housing estates (or *quartiere* in Italian) were erected there: Chiesa Rossa, Missaglia, and Gratosoglio. The construction of those estates intended to alleviate the housing shortage Europe was confronted to after WWII. In the case of Milan, this shortage was exacerbated by the massive migration of workers coming from the southern regions of Italy to work in the northern industries.

Despite all the good ambitions behind this massive state endeavor,

positions were in no small part critical. While some were fascinated by the modern outlook and the new world it seemed to inaugurate, others simply saw in those housing estates an efficient way to eradicate the slums, and yet the majority looked at them with unrest.

Chiesa Rossa was built between 1960-1966, following a design competition. Two main roads separate three large blocks that are intertwined by a network of local roads. The 5 story-high slabs are interspersed with the 9 story-high isolated towers. A civic center is the focal point of the district, and all facilities cluster around it, from commercial to cultural or religious ones. Various school buildings and a swimming pool complete the offer of public services. Since 2004, the line M2 of the Milan underground network ends there.

Gratosoglio was realized in two phases. The first one spanned from 1962 to 1965 and started with the construction of fifty two 9-story slabs (of variable length between 50 and 90 meters) arranged at 45° to Via dei Missaglia, and counting 21,000 dwellings altogether. Their construction relied on prefabrication

techniques that were imported from the *Grand Ensemble* projects in France, but used for the first time in Italy. A decade later (1972), the district was completed with the construction of the eight white towers, 16 story-high, designed, like the slabs, by the BBPR architecture studio.

Missaglia was built in the period between 1968 and 1972, straddling between the two construction phases of Gratosoglio. Its composition is linear, made of 9 story-high slabs that are parallel to each other, and integrating a single basic module of apartments of three or four rooms. They serve to delimit a series of private, green central spaces, under which the underground parking spaces are situated. The buildings are accessed by a network of covered pedestrian streets that cross the slabs and help to knit together the ensemble 1,200 dwellings big.

Like in Gratosoglio, a prefabrication system was adopted for the construction to reduce costs. Public services, located on the edge of the settlement, include two commercial areas, two public green areas, a large school complex,

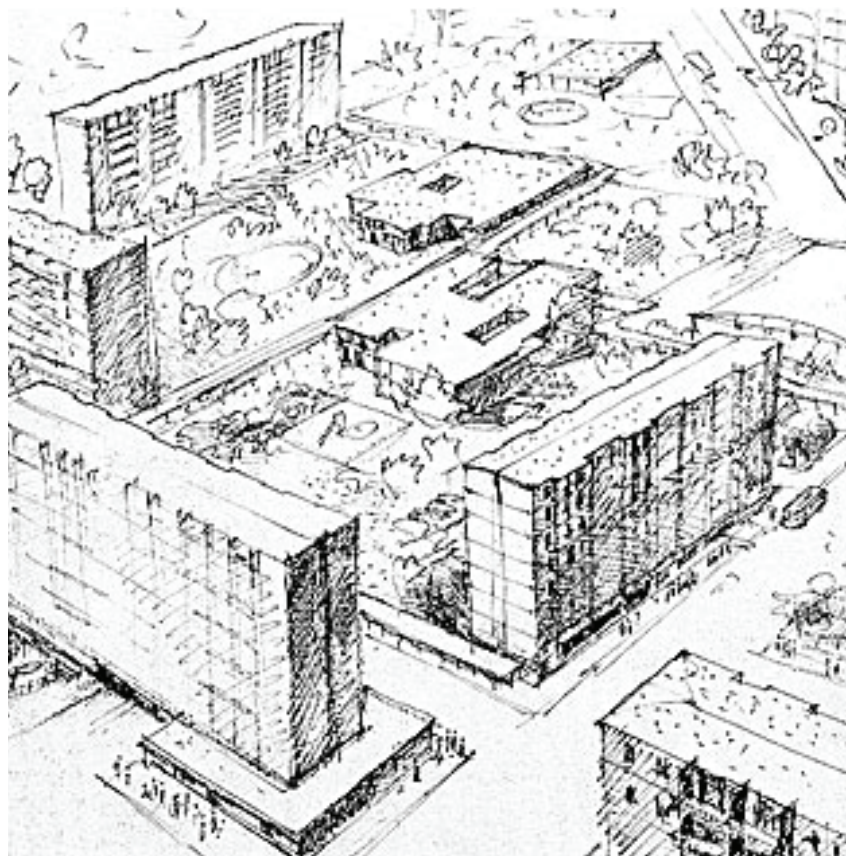
and some smaller school buildings. The schools were equipped with swimming pools, gyms, school canteens, and laboratories. Its position between the Chiesa Rossa and Gratosoglio districts consolidated the Via dei Missaglia as an urban artery and backbone for new urbanization.

In the beginning, the life in the three districts was hard: the roads had not yet been completed, and there was mud everywhere; the public connections with the center of Milan were precarious, uncomfortable and infrequent; and the services, starting from the food shops, did not meet the needs of the population.

This infrastructural lack was partly compensated by a dynamic associative world and the solidarity between families, organizing collective care and food supply in the form of prepared meals. The large green spaces and roundabouts served as meeting places for the kids of the neighborhood.

The 70s crisis changed all of it and the vitality of the early years turned into a widespread deterioration of the social fabric and to its marginalization from the rest of the city.

One of the original designs for Gratosoglio (BBPR, 1962)



Chiesa Rossa district, Children playing soccer in the middle of the street
(photo by Sergio Cossu, 1966)



SCARCITY

In a time of many monetary crises and cutback in public services, the idea that cities can have something in 'excess' or in an amount that would be more than necessary, like space, becomes extremely attractive... and perhaps a bit arrogant: as if normal restraints could turn suddenly into an asset.

Indeed, 'excess' appears a puzzling notion in today's world. Everything we do seems born out of the opposite idea, that of scarcity. Our entire economic system is built around the assumption that production factor inputs (i.e., capital, labor, and land) are limited.

Recent economic theories, from Doughnut Economics to Blue Economy to Circular Economy, highlight the dangers of the limits availability of resources, of the planetary boundaries we operate in –and the far-reaching implications for economic growth when we would take these boundaries into account. Urban design and planning exist

because of the need to rationally allocate space and resources by growing well-being and reducing negative externalities in a highly capital intensive activity like urbanization is. And architecture as a discipline is equally built around the same postulates: being austere with space and material means while rising comfort and beauty.

'Excess' space is what these post-war housing estates have plenty. The rapid population growth governing their existence resulted in an 'excessive' urbanization, and consequently in a surplus of public space, whether dedicated to streets or amenities.

This 'excess' does not mean though that it is readily available or accessible to anyone. The access to it is deep-rooted in a diverse, contingent, and often contradictory set of regulations, practices, and physical artifacts. They ultimately filter out who and how one would have the right to

use those places. Neither does it mean that all 'excess' space displays the same characteristics. A strong heterogeneity of 'excess' spaces exists within our study area. This heightened diversity will demand a high degree of accuracy to explain their existence as well as an adapted strategy if we are to transform it.



Parking area in Gratosoglio (photo by Pierlugi Navoni, circa 1975)





RE-CENTERING

At first glance, we can distinguish many sorts of 'excess' space in the study area. Herewith a first, nonexhaustive selection.

... the over-dimensioned space of the road, the consequence of a strict application of a car-based mobility paradigm.

"Il faut tuer la rue-corridor!" wrote Le Corbusier in 1925 at the same time as he acquired a new car, a VOISIN, probably under the aegis of his godfather, Gabriel Voisin. The architect learned by himself the difficulties of driving in the narrow spaces of the historic city. He is bored: the streets of the past are no longer adapted to the technologies of the present. And yet it is still far from the traffic jams that are today the way to manage the (in) mobility in our cities. He decides to put pedestrians out of the way, to limit their movement to vast gardens, separated from the roads. He draws his Plan Voisin: the first lesson of tabula rasa planning, but also of a

city without streets, populated by isolated towers and surrounded by large voids, and where cafés, shops, places of rest ... are "no longer this mouldiness that gnaws the side walks" (the French quotation says, "il ne sont plus cette moisissure qui ronge les trottoirs") but are reported on the roof terraces.

Le Corbusier, architect-artist-urbanist, tries to understand the irruption of a great era, radically different from the one before and wants to participate in its shaping. We inherited this open city, functional, very apparent in the area that concerns us here. But today we face another great era, also characterized by significant challenges (environmental, technological, migratory, socio-economic ...).

Once again we should invent a new state of mind but also define the conditions necessary to start a real, sustainable transition in the way of building and living our cities,

Gratosoglio, the first day of school, waiting in front of the school entrance, located in a shop (photo by Sergio Cossu, 1966)



of moving ourselves and our stuff through them. What if we would give up a fraction of the total road space?

... the vacant space of abandoned structures and landscapes.

Even if underused, residual space might be considered a normal affair in cities, something that allows certain flexibility to accommodate for growing business and migrations. Their 'excess' can quickly become the tipping point for abandonment and dereliction. If the over-designed and over-programmed urban space might kill city makers creativity, on the opposite side, too much of underused space can become an unsurmountable threshold, a too daunting enterprise for the same city makers who are willing to re-adapt it. Complex problems of pollution, or of deficient access to basic services might render more difficult the possibilities for reuse. Yet the 'excess' space can become the building stone of another possible city, built in the ruins of

the welfare project that managed a high index of social ascension and economic equality in Europe (OECD, 2011). It did this by offering a so far unknown material comfort (e.g., central heating, nearby schools, or parks) but above all, by giving access to an array of consumerist possibilities. Indeed, the combined effect of higher salaries and lower housing prices left a surplus that was spent on new, mass-produced consumer goods. What if we would get rid of part of this mass consumption legacy by demolishing or by rezoning some of its physical remnants?

... the immense space of shifting cycles (both of productive and reproductive functions).

Cities are subject to frenetic cycles of urban obsolescence, affecting both their productive and reproductive functions. Those cycles are followed by new investments aimed at generating rapid returns and building the foundations of

the crises to come. The well-oiled model rests on the assumption that the renovation of the existing built legacy requires eviction to work correctly. This means that any new round of investment involves the dispossession of the previous occupants.

To alter this pernicious dynamic, the generation of new models of living and working together (from co-housing to commons or mutualization) is imperative. Particularly so when we look into the linkages between housing affordability, access to the city, and displacement, amplified by the competition with new rent-seekers. Similarly, the ties between work and inclusion need revision. Keeping an eye on the new paths the economy will take will spare us from dumping a whole generation into redundancy, as well as to giving up the spaces that we will need to develop future activities. Mark Brearley invented a beautiful motto to admonish this evolution: cities were eating

themselves up! Cities were getting rid of the industries that were creating the jobs and feeding their citizens –literally so! What if we would picture new ways in which value is realized via the production of urban spaces?

... the eruptive space of new appropriations (like the small garden allotments that occupy every unused corner on the map).

From the beginning on, these new housing estates were looked at warily, either under a hostile light or with fascination. In the first case, they were considered as an alienating urban form and a threat to life as we knew it in the small, popular quarters. In the second, precisely because of their location ‘outside’ the city, they were prone to giving rise to new ways of life, intertwined to a big extent with the new socialization possibilities the access to waged labor offered. Today, peripheries still evoke a vacant or at least ill-defined space



Gratosoglio, two youngsters run to the tram (photo by Uliano Lucas, 1971)



compared to what happens in the center of cities. Cities tend to be orderly, and the land rent logic pulls the top-end functions towards their core, while the smelly and dirty stuff, but also the space for improvisation and innovation, is pulled towards the periphery.

Garden allotments can be considered one of those small revolutionary spaces falling outside the overwhelming capitalist logic, allowing a life next to the food industry, deeply governed by corporate interests. What if we let ourselves indulge into testing and experimenting, like the 19th century anarchists (our urbanist ancestors) suggested?

... the transmuted space of social and gender emancipation.

The spatial and discursive marginalization of large housing estates, located outside cities and even outside societies, was looked at as a privileged place for women and other marginalized groups to

emancipate and to move beyond culturally constructed identities and imposed limits. These estates would eventually allow women to invent themselves by detaching womanhood from motherhood, or to join waged labor as a possibility of self-fulfillment instead or next to the traditional caring roles women had played, or to help understanding sexuality beyond the straight, heterosexual relationship.

But they also gave room to other styles of emancipation based on reciprocity, on 'being with others' and making things together, based on the creation of 'inclusive' spaces for a wider community (of women, of uprooted people) willing to imagine alternatives to the exclusionary and exclusive society. What if we would still cheer the dream of the city as a springboard of emancipation? 'Excess' space was the result of the welfare state rapid expansion. The same state is now confronted to the scarcity of means that followed the many capitalist crises across

the 21st century. Crises that have been particularly severe in cities. In some of them or their districts, total abandonment reigns and even very basic forms of service provision are left to loose, self-organized social efforts.

Disinvestment, the 'leading and bleeding edge' of austerity policies, is at the root of the territorial fragility of these districts. On the other hand, the same disinvestment has triggered plenty of ongoing self-initiated practices and social innovation there or elsewhere (e.g., new sharing platforms, new real estate models, new local economies, or new forms of solidarity).

Even though such practices risk becoming a kind of compensatory or diversionary urbanism (Tonkiss, 2013), they should also be seen as an opportunity to rethink the sources of urban value beyond a capitalist logic, re-centering the city around places whose capacities are usually overlooked. The risk being, as Mayer notes, that such forms of

"self-management, self-realization and all kinds of unconventional or insurgent creativity ... [loose] the radical edge they used to entail in the context of the overbearing Keynesian welfare state —in today's neoliberal urbanism they have been usurped as essential ingredients of sub-local regeneration programs." (2013, 12)

When Jane Jacobs wrote that cities were places of excess and inefficiency, the scandal was served, since cities were seen as efficient machines in commerce and manufacturing. They made above all good economic sense (Marshall, 1990:25). She also said that "cities are an immense laboratory of trial and error, failures and success in their construction and design." We must be willing to adhere to this experimentation, and ask ourselves what form of urban development could start a positive cycle for all those who live in the "excess", disregarded space left behind by economic recession and political retreat.

Slums in Milan (photo by Federico Patallani, 1946)





W1: 30/09	FRAMING
W2: 07/10	FRAMING
W3: 14/10	INQUIRING
W4: 21/10	INQUIRING
W5: 28/10	DISPLAYING
W6: 04/11	WORKSHOP @MILAN
W7: 11/11	THE WAY 2 GET THERE
W8: 18/11	THE WAY 2 GET THERE
W9: 25/11	THE WAY 2 GET THERE
W10: 02/12	DEMONSTRATION
W11: 09/12	DEMONSTRATION
W12: 16/12	GREEN LIGHT
W15: 06/01	JURY

PLANNING

The planning of the design studio is organized in a series of deadlines. Compliance with these deadlines is key to a relaxed evolution of the semester. It also assures a correct sharing of findings among the studio participants. Below follows a complete description of these deadlines.

FRAMING: Students choose a topic or area and formulate their first hypothesis/research question by exposing it to the rest. The format is free, but the presentation should contain all elements necessary to a correct understanding of the students' choice and its underpinning reasons. Students are encouraged to showcase the information they gather, be it in the form of a quote, a picture, an audio recording, etc. A compelling and critical research question is the best guarantee of entering into a positive, creative direction.

INQUIRING: We see design as an informed process of inquiry, more often than not collectively driven.

We invite students to a double inquiry: on the one hand, gather all kinds of information (from pictures to interviews to observation to reference projects to quantitative data...) to carry on their first hypothesis and refine their research questions. On the other, explore the spatial potencies of the research question (dimensions, relationship to public space, physical access, visibility, and aesthetics). A series of activities (watching a film, visiting a museum or reading a text) will be organized to accompany and feed students in their quest. A short position paper reflecting on the student's research should be submitted as part of the final evaluation.

About one month after the start of the design studio, students will share the insights they gained during the inquiry phase with the rest of the participants. The format is free, but the material displayed should suffice to state the type of architectural project they will develop in the following 6 weeks. We all should be

aware that the more we know about our specific question or hypothesis at this point, the easier will be to orient further progress. By way of example, the research delivered by students in previous years covered issues such as:

- . FLOWS and ACTORS involved in the treatment of e-waste in Brussels;
- . the future use of cars in the city (sharing, Uber, integrated into real estate developments, etc.);
- .the strategies developed by the big car manufacturers to keep ownership of the valuable, reusable materials cars are made of and mine them once cars' lifetime is over;
- .industrial installations of (an) aerobic treatment of organic waste inside cities; soil remediation techniques;
- . sustainable water management;
- . aquaponics using residual energy and water...

REFINING: Students review and revise the initial hypothesis/research question and define the project they

will develop until the end of the semester. The thicker the inquiry process will have been, the richer the design solutions will be (also on an architectural perspective). Format: conventional architectural material (scaled plans, models, collages, 3D renders...) that can still be assembled casually or projected in the classroom.

DISPLAYING: Students collect and organize the work so far developed within the design studio in a dossier (format DINA 4) and submit it for feedback at the start of the week. After the Project Week (04-08/11), a jury will respond to the dossier gathering the research-by-design group-work of the first 6 weeks; and (2) a short oral presentation of 10-15 minutes provided by every group. The graphic quality and the textual exactness of the contents will be strongly valued, and considered as a bias for a precise and engaged design research process.

THE WAY TO GET THERE: Spatial de-

sign should always incorporate a reflection about the process required to achieve our goals (e.g., ACTORS to approach, budget, societal or technological transitions required, the scale of the physical change, and the FLOWS therein involved). Students should continue working on their architectural documents while incorporating the first ideas related to the ACTORS and the FLOWS to involve, which they deem needed in the realization of their project.

DEMONSTRATION: Students present their projects by way of architectural documents and isolate the architectural and technological innovations that would be needed to realize their project. A group of experts will react to their proposals and provide prompt feedback.

GREEN LIGHT: Students present the entire work elaborated throughout the semester, and an external jury will assess the consistency of the story and the approach before the



Gratosoglio in the 1970s

FINAL JURY. This in-between moment is intended as the first test with externals, to identify possible flaws or betterments in the students' work.

FINAL JURY: Planned during the first week of after the Christmas holidays (please, do not book your eventual flights before confirmation of the jury date!).



Above: Public spaces in Gratosoglio by Cino Zucchi Architetti, 2002
Right: Civic center in Missaglia



UPCOMING EVENTS

03/10 + 04/10 Kick-Off @ULB Flagey

25/10 Charleroi: OVERSIZE workshop

04/11 - 08/11 Milan: workshop @ POLIMI

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25/10 Seminar 1: film @ULB Flagey

29/11 Seminar 2: text @ULB Flagey

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METHODOLOGY

Students can choose to work individually or in a group (up to 4 participants), until the end of the semester. Groups will be formed during the first design tutorial based on shared research interests.

Herewith follows a series of methodological recommendations to guide your work:

- . informed thinking: every hypothesis should be backed up by evidence of some sort;
- . iteration between analysis and design based on data interpretation instead of data inventory and replication. This means we prefer reasoning instead of displaying, argumentation instead of information, fabricating instead of recollecting, intentions instead of regulations...;
- . collaborative approach: we encourage co-creation inside the design studio, joint ownership, and collaboration throughout all stages of the design, and teamwork;
- . design research: use urban design as a probing tool to understand

the underlying reasons of the city's form and dynamics as well as an instrument to act and modify reality imaginatively;

- . clear and innovative communication: we encourage students to question the communication tools they have at their disposal, and to escape the dominance of planimetric representations in favor of alternative styles of making our work available to others (e.g. scripts, animated images, axonometric perspectives, soundscapes, collages, models...);
- . beautiful products: many times your work will be judged on the basis of a promise depicted on a piece of paper, and in the case of urban design, the stretched time between conception and realization can make stakeholders forget what the intentions of your proposal were in the first place. Therefore, both the end and intermediary deliverables of your design process should be shown in the most beautiful and intriguing bundle possible, making them 'memorable' in a broad sense of the word.

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. Text by Nadia Casabella



The construction of Gratosoglio with prefabricated systems.