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Ring infrastructural landscapes. Rethinking the urban borders

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A conversation with Nicolò Bassetti

[SS] If I compare Gianfranco Rosi's and your approach to the landscape of the GRA, I can grasp a common aspect, namely that the GRA is the means and not the aim of your inquiry. Rosi programmatically wants to de-contextualise his perspective from the GRA because his goal is to let stories come to light and, therefore, the GRA becomes just a narrative pretext. As a matter of fact, in his afterword to your book, Rosi clearly says: "I didn't want to tell the uncertainties and the social and town planning contradictions of the GRA. My intent was to evoke the light stroke and poetic quality which join the characters living in the movie".

In your case, as well, the discovery on foot of the GRA occurs through an analytical look focused not much on the road infrastructure, rather on what is around it and the people living there. Did you get how those inhabitants of the fringe look at their everyday places, where the ring road inevitably is the prevalent element?

[NB] *Since I chose Gianfranco Rosi for this work, I already knew that he would have a different approach from mine, so it was an intentional choice because I wanted that, in the project of narrative workshop, different styles merged on the same narrative line. Which is*

important since **the fact that the book has a different approach from the movie is part of a complementary idea of a plural narration.**

Coming to your question, my perception is that it is evident that the inhabitants of those places have a sense of belonging to the same community, and, we can say, the thing comes from a sense of freedom from the rules, or maybe from a sense of abandon, as well. There is a mix: there are people who freely chose that place, people who found themselves there by chance, there are those who want to escape or simply walks through it. Therefore, somehow, that place is like a square, a place where unexpected meetings often occur, in a different way from the everyday life of a common centre, where that is harder to happen.

The probability to meet people unlike from you is higher in those places. There is even a trend to go there exactly because you can find opportunities. So, in that sense, it is a real node.

[SS] When a researcher conducts inquiries focused on the city and highlights, through a new perspective, places or phenomena apparently not relevant, it becomes inevitable to ask about the reasons underlying an intellectual operation of that kind. According to you, what can we learn from the study of those places?

[NB] *I started this project driven by a personal need coming from my interests and my profession as a landscape architect intrigued by contemporary landscapes. I was and I am less interested in the pedagogical aspect. I try not to judge what I see, even if it is obvious that when I describe a situation I am judging it, somehow. **My attention has always been turned to safeguard the dignity of what I was observing.** That is the cornerstone which I tried to work on, by seeking to involve in my project also the movie-maker, the person who wrote the book with me (Sapo Matteucci nda), the photographers who came with me. **The sense of this work is deeply antiscientific, but not in opposition to the scientific nature, rather in overlapping to that.** We wanted to find another way to tell stories, in which starting from little everyday gestures might be a form of narration, of understanding of places and their identities, ambitions, needs, dreams, fears, namely everything forming the identity of a territory. What I noticed by going in this direction is the big clash between that kind of listening, which is very hard and demanding, and the fact that many of those places, which are often the results of crushing failures, are on the contrary the outcome of top-down policies, where a judging and assertive idea – sometimes demagogical or ideological – is present. **People decide to live as they like, by disregarding from impositions in a way that is inversely proportional to the number of impositions.** For instance, the 'Corviale' or the 'Laurentino 38' are failures not because the project is wrong, but because they have caught in no way the needs, the fears and the wishes of the people who live there. Those places do not represent those people. In those places realised through abusive actions, there is a sense of belonging that is much higher than the one in those places designed and imposed by private or public policies.*

That does not mean that I judge positively that phenomenon, rather my opinion is that such a spontaneous character compensates for faults of top-down planning, in which designers proved to lack in listening.

[SS] Both in the book and the movie, you and Rosi approach those landscapes through a positive perspective and try to come to light the humanity of the people who live there. In

your intentions, is there – maybe undercover – also a will of denunciation of some wrong choices, which contributed to form those marginal landscapes?

[NB] *There is not any denunciation or charge. **There is a will to engage in observing and, particularly, in listening, which I think is an unavoidable need to reweave and recompose the fragments of Rome fringes.** The aim was not to side with ideologically. That is not because of a cowardice, rather a choice of method. Some areas along the ring road in Rome have an extraordinary quality because they were transformed in an instinctive way by the inhabitants. There are public green areas that have completely been filled by abusive vegetable gardens, but the vitality that arose there is so important for the balance of those places that it clearly gives the idea of the sense of appropriation of a place by an inhabitant. The matter of legality or illegality is the less important problem. Actually, we have documented situations of evident degradation, as well. That is to say that **everything depends on the level of participation of the inhabitants to an idea of future.***

[SS] What would those places be, today, if the ones who had the responsibility to build our cities during the economic boom, had acted in a more forward-looking way, instead of imposing a standardised pattern, which contributed to the gradual degradation of the suburban landscape? Would we look through a different perspective at the existential conditions of the people who live there?

[NB] *What we can perceive at a first sight by driving on the ring road in Rome at the imposed speed is, as Renato Nicolini said, a situation of censure, which makes us stay on the surface. Our problem is not any more to live in a place, but to move from a place to another as fast as possible. The sensation is that if we stop or reduce the speed, we can immediately catch not the degradation, but the missed opportunities. We can see a beauty that has not become what it could have become. There are empty spaces, both in the inner and outer areas of the GRA, characterised by high-quality landscapes, which we can see only if you go through them. I think that the perception of what represents the bad character along the GRA, is the result of a superficial approach and an idea of speed that does not help us to understand. But, **also in a failure, it is possible to grasp an opportunity, which let us think that a place could change and become something else.** After all, Romans are amazing in transforming something built for a specific use in something completely different.*

[SS] An architect, due to his education, looks at those landscapes through a modifying approach projected to the future. It is not by chance that Renato Nicolini finished his essay with a proposal pushing to replace the standardised pattern of the GRA with a new one. What is the time perspective through which a landscape architect, a writer, a urban explorer observes those landscapes? What is there beyond the descriptive aspect of the current situation?

[NB] *The attempt was to pay great attention to the details of everyday life, which are the ones that give a place an identity. **What I tried to do was to never have the problem to understand and trace back what I was observing to a logic. Therefore, the aim was not to judge, but to listen to.** One of the possible ways to do that is learning to lose ourselves, which is not easy today in a world that gives us a lot of reference points and does not give us the possibility to lose ourselves any longer.*

[SS] It is not the first time that areas around ring roads become places for explorations of psycho-geographic kind, narrative routes, object of socio-cultural analysis. If we think about the works by Sinclair on the London Orbital, by McGuirk on the Rodoanel in Sao Paulo, by Biondillo and Monina on the tangential roads of Milan, by you and Matteucci on the GRA in Rome, and the movie “Sacro GRA” by Rosi, we can agree it is not by chance that many writers, journalists and moviemakers have inquired the sociological perspective of those marginal landscapes. Does that mean that there is something beyond the specific features of the places? Is there also anything symbolic and psychological that fatally attracts the interest of men in those physical elements that separate an inside from an outside?

[NB] *There is evidently a need, which is represented by a part of the urban community. **The sensation is that there is really a question behind, a big question of identity of places, in which people do not identify themselves because of the way some settlements were designed and imposed.** People need a new formulation of the story, a new way of narration in order to feel themselves with rights of citizenship of those places. Telling what happens is not like telling what it should happen. It is a need felt by the urban communities growing blindly perhaps and that cling as concretions along those ring roads, which were built for other reasons, namely to relieve congestion and make the viability more rational, have produced almost the opposite effect. The GRA produces city and it will reach a level of maximum capacity soon, by becoming like a common traffic congested boulevard. The problem will exist until someone understands that all this has to be faced in another way, namely by thinking that those areas are part of the city and not places exclusively for mobility. **The places along the GRA give the idea to be an incomplete city or a transitional landscape, weak and temporary because it is not the result of needs, but it refers to market logics.***

[SS] You stated that, when you drove on the GRA, your emotions disappeared and you had the sensation that the road hides something, rather than tell. Therefore, there is an evident divergence in our approach to those landscapes according to the way we pass through them. At a high speed, on the road, we are part of the indifference and self-referentiality through which the car crosses the space, whilst on foot, at the speed of a pedestrian, we are more ready to listen to those places. However, that divergence does not have a solution. According to you, is there the possibility that a road infrastructure might be an element revealing a reality, instead of being a form of censure of the contradictions of a city (Nicolini 2005)?

[NB] *Absolutely yes and, as a matter of fact, in my new projects I am searching for that kind of situations and contexts. For instance, the ancient Appia can be considered the first modern street. It is straight because it was a military street, it does not follow the orography, it has embankments, a dual carriageway, rest areas. Now, it is an open-air museum and there, surely, you can pass through all the possible contradictions. It depends whether an infrastructure is just an infrastructure or whether it allows a “contamination”. The ancient traces and routes generated hamlets and towns, but there was not originally a plan, rather simpler needs that led to concentrate people. **A compatible composition between a fragment and another can generate a stronger sense of community, if we compare it to the results of an ordinary urban planning.***

[SS] The movie gives an almost idealised perspective of the people who live around the GRA, as if they were citizens not yet involved by the conformism and individualism of the contemporary society. It seems they live a life in an atmosphere that is sometimes surreal, almost suspended. Nevertheless, the actor of picture romance stories, who in a scene drives on the GRA, proves that the ring road in Rome is a sort of infernal machine, which brutalises and uniforms anyone who comes within its orbit. Is it the unavoidable consequence of the anthropologic mutation caused by mass motorisation?

[NB] *I met many people who, though they live next to the GRA, do not have anything to do with it. They look at it with coolness, in the same way as when one lives along a river that is there for ages. For instance, the community of shepherds lives really close to the ring road, which is acoustically, visually and physically part of their everyday life. Nevertheless, they use the GRA only twice a year, when there is the transhumance by trucks. Therefore, the meaning of the GRA is almost irrelevant for them. The vehicular, railway and air traffic, which overlap in some spots along the GRA, are part of an ordinary landscape for them and they look at them as they look at clouds or a sunset. **It is as if the GRA has become a natural phenomenon on which men do not have any control.** We have built infrastructures that have generate concretions, scum - but opportunities, as well.*

[SS] You stated that the “Third Landscape Manifesto” by Gilles Clément was an important source of ideas and reflections for your work on the GRA. Was your reference to that manifesto an interpretation, with a more sociological accent, of ring infrastructural landscapes as “territories of refuge of diversity”?

Moreover, Clément underlines the suspended character of those landscapes because he asserts that they are spaces aspiring to become something. What does the landscape around GRA aspire to become, according to you?

[NB] *I agree more with the second statement. **I find extraordinary Clément’s intuition about the idea of transitional landscape as a place of opportunity.** I firmly believe in that. Soon or later, those opportunities will be caught or definitively lost. According to me, the first statement partially represents the reality. The landscapes along the GRA are surely “territories of refuge of diversity”, but that is not a sufficient definition to set them, because there exist places of great conformism there, as well. Other places were not accepted as*

they were designed and were amazingly contradicted, by recreating, therefore, a state of “anarchy” and re-appropriation of the space, which is typical of Roman people.

[SS] As for you, is a redemption possible for those landscapes? Are there good reasons to imagine them not as a psychological border where the city seems to finish, but as an acknowledged part of the metropolis?

[NB] *I have always seen this project on the GRA as a work of research of opportunities, exactly because we can often find opportunities within failures.*

*In the motivations Bertolucci gave us at the delivery of the Leone d'Oro at Venice Film Festival, he highlighted that, in a moment in which Italy needs to listen to itself, the movie “Sacro GRA” goes in that direction inasmuch as it depicted a real situation made of contemporary citizens who have needs, fears, ambitions. Those aspects have to become part of the project of the future city. **Politics has fortunately lost its aspect of ideological control. It has to become, at last, a service and, therefore, it is fundamental it can listen.***

[SS] Nevertheless, if we think that the trend, still today and in different parts of the world, is to plan and make ring roads with an uncritical and simplistic approach, the risk is that the same mistakes will be done and those landscapes will continue to be not considered as a part of the city.

[NB] *I think this kind of road infrastructures belongs to an obsolete way of thinking the urban mobility, but that risk you were talking about generates an even more urgent need of narration; not a narration on mistakes, rather on those becoming phenomena, in order to have a more complex narration, because when the ideology compulsorily goes against is inevitably oversimplified.*

If we think about the GRA as the new walls of Rome, we can also imagine it as a pensile garden, in the future. The future of the GRA can be fantastic exactly because it has a history. In Berlin they transformed a former military airport in a park where the hangars were kept together with the asphalt of the runway, where a big square is now. Citizens have appropriate themselves of that space and they use it for different activities.

The High Line in New York is already an icon of contemporary New York because it is a place “conquered” by the inhabitants through a process that involved them from the beginning.

It is important to tell the story that is around those road infrastructures, because a narration generates needs and if they change, the identity of the places changes, as well.