

Background and Field Overview

How would you define the field of urban and suburban studies? What are its key areas of focus?

I would define the field of urban and suburban studies in an intertwined and reverse perspective. As a matter of fact, nowadays it is impossible to define urban studies without taking in consideration the role of suburbanization phenomena, and their associated social, cultural, and economic processes. Suburban areas are an experimental research field in which to investigate and “verify” the patterns of peri-urban areas and the Twentieth century intermediate belt, the urban fringe located as a buffer between the compact, historic cores and the urban sprawl. The first ones are usually marked by strong dynamics of spatial and land use transformation, while the second corresponds to the stagnation of housing or productive settlements, a high spatial stability but pushed by the impending need to respond to the ecological transition. These areas embed different functions and building densities: transportation infrastructures, residential buildings, unauthorized low-density settlements, old rural nuclei, commercial and logistics areas, sometimes underused and in decline. Even the property of areas is highly fragmented, with the presence of public ownership generally on large infrastructures and big housing developments. Territorial amenities and services appear to be lacking in quantity as well as in quality, because even when various functions are contiguous, they are sectorial and present an introverted topology. In a landscape ecology perspective, all these suburban areas are components of the ecological condition of an ecotone, a varied space where different ecosystems encounter and where fragmentation of spatial continuity results in an increased porosity, with natural systems still largely infiltrating interstitial areas in waiting conditions.

That is why, even given all its criticalities, suburban still represent the game changing field where urban studies need to be pointed to nowadays, to start conceiving an urban growth model differing from that from which these areas originated, based on sustainable use of territorial resources and stronger social and spatial accessibility to them.

What initially drew you to study urban and suburban environments?

During my PhD, I investigated the role of cultural events on re-branding post-industrial cities settlements. While analysing London 2012 Olympic Games case study, I expanded my research interpreting the role played by the choice to regenerate peri-urban patterns and declining former industrial areas, instead of pursuing an urban growth paradigm. While conducting this research, I started investigating parallel cases in the Eastern parts of Naples, working as an architect and an urban planner on the regeneration project of a series of early Twenty century industrial archaeology sites, through the enhancement of public uses in new parks and amenities for neighbouring communities.

Shortly after, I participated in two international research projects calls for funding, later funded by the European Commission: Horizon 2020 research “REPAiR. REsource Management in Peri-urban Areas”, Urbact III research “sub>urban. Reinventing the fringe”. Both these projects were stimulated by the Directorate General for Regional Policy “Cities of Tomorrow” report (European Commission, 2011), which put a spotlight on wider interpretation of cities and on urban-rural interplay as the most fragile condition for urban sprawl and extensive land consumption, due to its fragmented urban patterns, but also for the absence of unified local governments and planning systems. Both projects investigated this fragmented character as a specific spatial configuration which could also offer the opportunity to make city and its countryside interact and

allow hybrid strategies where resources and qualities of urban and rural habitats can create *on demand* pacts for sustainable use and development.

What do you see as the most pressing issues facing urban and suburban areas today?

Nowadays urban and suburban areas are in crisis because they are often inadequate to respond to the contemporary challenges of environmental sustainability and spatial justice.

In the last fifty years, on the one hand the environmental crisis, caused by linear growth models, on the other the crisis of current welfare models, produced unjust and unsustainable socio-technical systems in our living environments. These issues cannot be addressed in a sectorial way, one by one, but they need to be integrated in the transformation of today urban policies and planning, employing structural transitions that are not exclusively technological, as they include changes in institutions and governance systems, as in users' practices and lifestyles, to overcome the limits of exclusively technocratic models.

Every action implemented has territorialized costs (of resource extraction and waste disposal, for instance), in a socio-ecological perspective: where and on whom do the waste of the processes fall (most exposed populations/territories) even within sustainable development processes? And how can this "waste" become a resource again?

Urban Development and Planning

What are the major forces driving urban and suburban development patterns today?

Two opposite and equally strong forces interact in the suburban areas: on the one hand, suburbanization phenomenon is related to the need to accommodate a still quite significant percentage of urban growth, mostly in terms of residential areas or productive/logistics plants, with related infrastructures and networks of mobility; on the other hand, the same phenomenon does not present itself with said characteristics of urban growth as a merely condition of addition which takes place in urban voids, but more often as a phenomenon accompanied to regeneration processes, recovering declining urban areas, i.e. underused, abandoned areas, via the building of new development and functions in place of old settlements which have recently lost their meaning and role due to global changing in economies and investments or to local changing in place appeal and living behaviours.

While the first forces respond to a paradigm of traditional urban growth via expansion, which was highly dissipative in terms of resources and land consumption, the second seem to work in the direction of sustainable development, trying to overcome the urban growth dilemma and taking the opportunity of reusing the spatial capital, through the management of existing stock of material and resources, and their possible radical transformation through design.

What strategies have been most effective for revitalizing declining urban areas?

Working on revitalizing declining urban areas means to adopt an unconventional way of reading the territory, putting into tension the natural and historic values, but also the most chaotic forms of urbanization, reimagining this combination of identity characteristics.

This landscape-sensitive approach seems to define an open boundary, systematically relating protection with valorisation as the framework for long-term policies but also as a set of values for public engagement.

Urban planning and design can operate within this notion of landscape and act on the forms of the development, on the quality of life of people by identifying in the project the way to constitute over time new relationships where community needs to re-build a cultural imaginary: bringing infrastructures and public space as networks where they do not exist, as socio-technical articulations of multiple dimensions, to increase the overall sustainability, ecological continuity and social inclusion.

A key element is connecting cultural fragments: stories, micro-stories, spatial and social resources, to bring out identities (even weak or in evolution) and practices, as a contextual factor and attitude, which is especially typical in the way southern Europe territories deal with the project.

In the case of the Urbact III "Sub>Urban" network, I collaborated in the design of public engagement processes and temporary uses (e.g. civic walks, urban gardening) as regeneration tools to reimagine and transform a former military area into a public park within a medium size municipality of the metropolitan area of Naples, to increase the trust among communities toward institutions and regain a sense of belonging for abandoned places.

How can cities balance development pressures with preservation of historic architecture and neighborhoods?

It seems to me fundamental and urgent (with the profusion of resources that exist today, as in the Next-Eu Generation funding) to go and look again at territories that are in-between, looking with particular interest also at urban cores, highly exposed to new risks of forms of marginalization, arising on one hand from technocratic processes as in the case of large retrofit or recovery processes, on the other hand in museification/touristification cases, producing gentrification in existing inhabitant communities. I think this historic architecture and neighborhoods can actually learn from what has been tested on suburban areas in the last twenty years, bringing back traces and identities for an ecological transition capable of not losing inhabitants and liveability. The material and immaterial heritage of the territories represents not only an expression of local identities and a collective memory, but also a possibility of triggering processes and integrating the vision of the territory and the landscape as an interaction between ecological resources, immaterial and material heritage values and local communities.

Then this challenge to a sustainable transition will also be played out in small experiences, enhancing their incremental potential. An example in my home town Naples, is the Renewable Energy Community of San Giovanni a Teduccio neighbourhood, the Fondazione Famiglia di Maria third sector association, which has always been an educational community rooted in a difficult public housing settlements, with a role of daily care even in the absence of effective and extensive institutional welfare devices. On the 2022 Jane's Walk Event (one of the worldwide events inspired by Jane Jacobs life and thoughts, happening every May) that I organized to walk in the neighborhood with communities and students, Anna Riccardi, president of the Foundation, told us that, to address the growing issue of energy poverty, she developed the "energy community", with solar panels that allow energy to be produced for up to 40 families in the nearby post-earthquake ERP complexes. And today the space of the central courtyard of the Foundation, where we were welcomed and where they offered us a small refreshment, surrounded by roofs on which the reflections of the solar panels stand out, is already in itself a space for public use, amenity for the life of the neighborhood

that acts as a demonstrator of an idea of a sustainable and resilient community, open to others, to solidarity activities and education on legality, to inhabit the transition in a proactive way.

Sustainability and Resilience

What approaches to urban design and planning do you see as most effective for improving environmental sustainability? And how can cities become more resilient to climate change impacts and natural disasters?

The ecological transition agenda and even before that the 2030 Agenda, call for the planning and design of sustainable places, via a strategic project which can absorb the ecological culture and further develop the social dimension, that accompanies the ecological one, within a systemic perspective.

In particular, the spatial dimension is a place of relationship and of conflict, where the ecological and the social dimensions can find a synthesis. Therefore, urban and suburban studies as a field of knowledge capable of dealing with the spatial dimension, need to respond to this aim for synthesis. This proposition requires alliances with natural and environmental sciences and at the same time calls into play the need to explore data that is not always certain or predictable, in processes open to indeterminate data and to a multitude of social and economic factors.

In this perspective, reimagining urban and peri-urban metabolisms means working with a new planning material that concerns to investigate the spatial consequences of the relationships between life cycles and management of cities inputs-outputs (even waste flows). The redefinition of temporal sequences goes from a linear process of stock and land consumption to a virtuous circular and regenerative process.

This process coincides with the regeneration of wasted landscapes, called "wastescapes" in the Horizon 2020 research project REPAiR, interpreted both as a point of extreme spatial fragmentation, anthropic and environmental vulnerability, and as a resource for the triggering of territorial regeneration strategies (catalysts).

The study of fragile, vulnerable, risk-prone landscapes is also aimed at strengthening urban resilience in local communities and stakeholders, not with lists of constraints, but as a driving force for sustainable development processes, centred on the reuse and recovery of publicly recognized local resources.

What role should green spaces and urban agriculture play in city planning?

In recent years, I worked in research groups on regional and municipal planning on the definition of a double-faced margins between urban and suburban areas, a flexible interface of open space interstices and natural areas. Here, territorial and urban planning should promote: on the one hand, landscape redefinition of the edges in the already urbanized areas, according to criteria of transformability that favour the location of new functions and settlements where the territory is polluted and compromised for good, integrating new facilities and public spaces; on the other, the design of green networks as a corridors and patches of public infrastructures and services, compatible with the enhancement and strengthening of existing agricultural activities in the peri-urban and rural areas.

This approach can repurpose residential settlements in the suburban areas, by promoting landscape-sensitive designs and strengthening their role of "inhabited settlements in green networks of public spaces,

then encouraging a progressive integration with non-residential functions, aimed at building a public infrastructure accessible to everyone.

In the Horizon 2020 research project REPAiR, collaborative Living Labs co-developed designs for these in-between areas, where the combination of waste flows from urban and agricultural activities (organic waste) treated in medium-size composting and biogas plants, recovered degraded open spaces and provided clean energy and compost to neighbouring communities in the suburban borders. The proposal provided an alternative to the building of big-size, industrial like plants to treat waste in the borders of the cities, interpreting suburban areas as operational landscapes where metabolic-aimed facilities could function in a close and interrelated relationship with local communities' habits and resources.

Social Equity and Community

How can urban planning and development address issues of social and racial equity?

Current mainstream strategies of sustainable development are rightly focused on resource efficiency and the optimization of the use of resources, but this perspective needs to be accompanied by an overall rethink of the current global economy, which is leaving categories behind, radically questioning human-nature relations based on needed changes in society and human activities. Particularly, I think that urban planning and design need to address all combination of interconnected societal structures, involving different social and environmental dimensions in minority communities in a perspective of Intersectionality. That is considering and intersecting *isms* that have contributed to, and are exacerbated by, environmental problems, leading to spatial and socio-economic differences, leaving minority groups out of decision making and of targeted sustainable development policies.

Overcoming the mere "technological approach", means to construct socio-ecological responses in planning based on the analysis of power relations and differences in everyone experiences, overlapping habits and patterns generated from various categories: education, culture, religion, (dis)ability, age, geographical place. As in every mapping activity, this collection of informed experiences in relation to the use of local and territorial resources, can build a collective learning and strengthen potential new processes of co-creation of sustainable and inclusive spaces among communities and other stakeholders, starting from public institutions.

What strategies have been effective for fostering diverse, inclusive communities in suburban areas? What approaches show promise for strengthening social cohesion in urban neighborhoods?

In my experience, recently innovative research might be found in the forms and tools of the urban plan and project, also considering in declining settlements and struggling communities the contrast between the ambition of the expected transformations and the capacity to manage resources. Therefore, the complexity of the starting conditions is often counterbalanced by a difficult sustainability of the modification scenarios, not only in economic terms, but also in terms of social and political sustainability where governance structures are unstable, as in the South of Italy cases I've much worked on. As experienced in past experiences with public administrations, the surplus of economic resources is not necessarily a guarantee for the triggering of effective processes. The experiences have then led me to pay ever greater attention to the

procedural dimension within which decisions can mature, in the construction of a setting where different and often conflicting subjects can find expression, but trying not to overlook the relevance and centrality of quality in urban design, especially as the architecture of public and relational space.

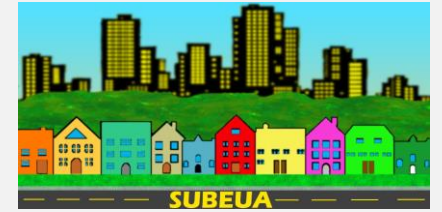
The idea is that of an urban plan as a producer of a plural vision of a network of subjects as an infrastructure of an incremental process.

For example in the design experience on the case of the Urban Recovery Plan of a former-NATO area (Bagnoli neighbourhood in Naples), has addressed the claiming of the object of a decades-long dispossession, in a process of listening and activating public sectors, citizens and associations.

The Plan accompanies the creation of a system of expectations, but the consistent start of temporary and social uses, the opening of public spaces and existing equipment, is faster than the plan itself: these areas play the role of prefiguration of the project, fostering the communities who live in the neighbourhood, who claim and assert the new use of recovered places. The vision, thus outlined, becomes the social and institutional cohesion on which to hinge the design in its technical and normative articulations.



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