

Rome and the Campagna Romana

Short story of an urban invasion

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Story of an urban invasion

The progressive consumption of land in Rome both in the most external and marginal areas has been consolidating since the second post-war period, thus leading to the gradual polarization and functional specializations with variable density of the urban countryside. In fact, the definitive urban invasion of the Campagna Romana dates back to that period, and was an heritage of the ancient Roman Suburb, with the progressive dissolution of its organic structure inhabited by an exceptional patrimony, unique example in the world for its goods and environmental structures. It is no coincidence that some German scholars of the end of the last century spoke about Vernichtung Roms, to identify the destruction of the original features of the Campagna Romana and, therefore, the loss of the assets that were present there (Cederna, 2011). This gradual but pressing dematerialization of the borders between Rome and its countryside has its roots at the beginning of the twentieth century. A first timid step was the application of the Luzzatti law n.254 of 1903, which marked the beginning of the construction of cheap houses for lower classes in the south-eastern area, together with a still reduced growth and negligible expansion of the city, which left the Agro Romano area mainly intact. The next invasive approach was eight years later when: the great land property contributed to the peopling of the Agro area. In these years, the urban expansion undergoes a sudden acceleration: the city map drawn up in 1911 shows a city five times larger than that on the Chart of the General Estate Directorate of 1866 “(Palazzo, 2009).

In 1911, in fact, not only the law no.248 on how the buildings of “rural villages” had to be built was approved but also a special decree, authorizing the construction outside the limits of the Town Plan of 1909, allowed the construction of suburbs in state-owned lands of an area already reduced by the implementation of the first extra-moenia neighbourhoods. The real run-up to

build in the Agro and Suburbio area started during the first post-war period, when not only the construction of rural villages and agricultural colonization centres continued, but also the construction of populous official working-class suburbs started during the Fascist period as a result of the housing crisis, due to the strong population growth and to the economic change, linked to the spread of the tertiary sector in the affluent areas of the city. The 1931 Town Plan will not give any importance to the integrity of the patrimony represented by the Campagna Romana, nor to the organic relationship with the centres belonging to the vast area of the Agro. The new settlement models made up of centres or 'rosary beads' will be used to cancel the border between city and countryside in a urban-rural continuum well represented by the II Industrial Zone of Rome set in 1941 in an area of 1500 hectares because of: "The local concentration of urban sub-working class mixed with the agricultural class, the persistent land centralization in the hands of a few people, the strong productive vocation recalled by the presence of the Aniene river and the Rome-Tivoli railway" (Palazzo, 2009).

The Second World War will only temporarily stop this expansion that in the post-war period will accelerate the overbuilding of the urban outskirts towards the Campagna Romana, still made up of big land properties and with intact historical-natural characteristics. The extraordinary expansion of these settlements, for an expected population of five million people, should have followed the 'satellite' design of large autonomous residential units, also far from the historical center, and of the Eastern Directional System (SDO).

This was the proposal of the 1962 Town Plan, which remained only a general reference for about forty years, without being able to direct the consumption of urban and extra-urban land towards an adequate and forward-looking planning. This land consumption followed the pressure of heterogeneous forces and purposes which led to a chaotic settlement, reified in different phases: the first one in the 50s-60s, with the public interventions of INA-Casa, bridgeheads of the post-war suburbs, and then with the proliferation of spontaneous settlements and with the public intervention ex-lege 167 that in the '70-'80 led to the construction of large Zone Plans; finally, with a private initiative that imposed an almost monopolistic real estate policy on the Roman market, based on Big Builders 'Yards and on the mass production of mini-houses (Quilici, 2009).

The urban explosion of Rome, from the mid-60s until the mid-80s, led to the confused growth of the inhabited and largely unlawful area, allowed by the low incisiveness of the public intervention. This started, at the same time, some interventions of the first Plan for the Economic and Popular Building Industry (PEEP) in the Casilina and Tor Sapienza area, whose buildings had a different intervention level than the existing plan: "for the considerable availability of services and creation of new infrastructures [...] capable of generating new individual and collective housing conditions (Fedeli, 2009). The construction of self-sufficient houses will lead to a clear topographical and 'leopard skin' area, composed of empty and full spaces, which still today characterizes the Campagna Romana with numerous buildings. The 2003 Town Plan, therefore, has abandoned the dualistic program of SDO, while the 2008 PRG planned the construction of new centres in peripheral areas, in an attempt to absorb the peri-urban spaces composed by purely residential buildings.

All this followed the usual logic of urban densification that, from the dispersion, pursues the compactness of settlements. The data about this huge urban growth of Rome was presented by the third edition of the Report by the Institute for Environmental Research - ISPRA 2016: in 2015 the exploited surface of the province of Rome exceeded 70,000 hectares, first in Italy; while at city level it was once again first of the country, with an exploited area of 31.458 hectares, i.e. an increase of about 24%, from 2012, when the used surface amounted to 31.064 hectares. The forecasts for 2030, year of expected realization of 2008 PRG forecasts, are certainly not reassuring, since an increase in land consumption is expected, up to 33,959 hectares (26.42%). The 2017 press release by ISPRA stated that the hypothetic scenario from 2012 to 2030 will be characterized by an increase in land consumption of 2,895 hectares (161 per year, i.e. 3 sm per minute, equivalent to +9,32%). It should be enough to think that, in just one year (between 2015 and 2016), the transformation of soils in Rome amounted to 54 hectares, the highest among the large metropolitan cities of Italy.

Thus, the spatial integrity of the Campagna Romana that surrounded in silence the Urbs Aeterna was reduced in large interstitial spaces composed of rural areas, in many cases exploited by the agricultural mechanization, when not completely ignored by the production processes, in a fragmentary nature causing degradation and vulnerability. The General Town Plan of 2008 tried to remedy to the settlement dispersion through an ecological network for the requalification and valorisation of the urban interstitial spaces (Spagnoli, Ferrari, 2012). The area where this ecological network was created is the Agro Romano, essential part of an “environmental and agricultural system” through which a new idea of urban sustainability could born.

To this end, the Municipality of Rome has promoted archaeological parks, protected natural areas, agricultural parks, and has increased non-market oriented activities, which we could define as amateurish and urban agricultural (AU), such as vegetable gardens, residential areas, shared gardens, farms, institutional gardens, informal vegetable gardens. These all possibilities to encourage the land maintenance and protection through a multifunctional idea of primary activity and a new model of agricultural and rural development based on new and different functions entrusted to agriculture and rural areas, and perceived as fundamental from the contemporary society (CREA, 2015). Therefore, the municipal and supra-municipal town planning choices will be considered as necessary to enhance the system of open and agricultural areas belonging to the Agro Romano, whose secular memory continues to remind the need for an urban development promoting its countryside.

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