

SAVE US FROM QUANTITY

Official plans versus illegal realities

Rome is a metropolis on a vast surface: 129 000 ha, with an average of 2160 inhabitants per square kilometre. This means that the official Rome is a territory eleven times the surface of Paris. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the official organisation and planning of Rome is based on a series of extremely simple and abstract plans. One of the most simple plans is the scheme introduced by Mussolini in 1925. It focuses on connecting Rome and the sea by developing Rome along a north-south axis. E.U.R. is the only part that was realised of this plan.

Few revisions are made of these master plans, called the Piano Regolatore Generale (P.R.G.). The actual P.R.G. was made up in 1965 and has been revised only once in 1993. This P.R.G. is essentially a simple infrastructure scheme, an all-enfolding plan depending on a dense network of roads. The changes that were made complete the road network with an infrastructure of public transport and with a series of public parks in the periphery. Only fragments of this master plan can be realised as a parallel illegal development is blocking the realisation of the proposed network.

The site we studied in detail is largely characterised by these abusive developments. (fig.1) These illegal concentrations consist mainly of family units. Freestanding houses in which one family -parents, grandparents, children...- live on three or four levels. The families focus on their own house and on the parcel itself, everything outside their boundaries is neglected and left to the public domain. The private areas are maximized while the public domain is minimized. The public is simply a leftover area consisting mainly of shared access roads, treated in a minimal way - at first made out of sand or gravel, in a later phase asphalted from door to door.

The longer these illegal communities exist the more sophisticated and equipped they get. Finally they include illegal shops and "supermarkets" and even illegal industries attaching themselves to some of Rome's major infrastructures. As a result of this, traffic on motorways comes to a standstill because of the many parking spaces and entrances. At a certain stage in their development these abusive concentrations get so important as a habitat that the city of Rome can no longer ignore them and is obliged to legalize these "villages". Though the community recognizes the majority of these

villages, and changes its Piano Regolatore to the actual situation; at the same time Rome tries to counter this abusive planning. Urbanists and planners consider these spread out and low rise communities as peripheral, having no urban quality whatsoever. By realising parts of the official Roman scheme, Rome tries to impose an official mode of urbanity in its periphery. Every official plan in the periphery will be urban through density. Therefore every zone is labelled with a program, a density of inhabitants, a volumetric capacity and a minimum number of square meters reserved for public spaces. With this plan urbanists state that the minimal density for an urban environment is ground floor + seven levels. Beside this urban typology there is a need for a certain programmatic density. Every new community is provided with a basic programmatic kit: a school, a church with a sports field and if possible a library. On a smaller scale the envisaged programmatic density turns most ground floors into services and shops, especially on the main accesses. The imposed density is a quantitative, measurable concept. Density, and through density urbanity, is simply created in a volumetric way by stacking square meters and by standard combinations of different programs.

The counterweight of this volumetric concept is found in a summer event in the same area. In the middle of the fields, in the Hippodromo Cappannelle, thousands of people gather for a yearly dance. The enormous concentration of people creates for a few weeks a feeling of urbanity never to be found in the official Roman peripheral density. It's an uncontrollable, temporary density, leaving no trace as the event stops. Yet it is organised and like the square-meter-density it is measurable and quantitative.

Both situations are exemplary for Rome's periphery. The quantity of urban ingredients is present in Rome but there is hardly any interaction between these ingredients. This is reflected in the structure of the periphery: a structure of isolated legal and abusive areas. Two parallel developments of which the fragments collide with each other, leaving vast areas of fringes and wasteland. At first glance Rome does not work as a metropolis.

Everyday life

A closer analysis reveals a completely different metropolitan system. It reflects an urbanity in which the concept of density moves to what the French philosopher Jean Atalli calls "la densité comme mesure d'une perception urbaine." Density as an urban perception is not just quantitative, but relational. It is an interaction between

perspective, volume, in-between-space, different types of program only liable by the space they share, different uses, social aspects,...

In the Roman periphery we looked for dense or potentially dense places by studying every day life, by trying to find out how the area is used by its inhabitants. How do people get to work, where do they meet, where does one take one's cappuccino, what happens in the week-ends or at night, who lives where,....? Maps like a personal territory map, show how and where relatively independent actions are concentrated. It reveals density as it reveals where, in using the city, different rhythms of everyday life collide. These maps identify for example fallow land, places with a specific characteristic, trajectories, infrastructures,... as dense or potentially dense places in the Roman periphery

Huge areas of the periphery are fallow land. These area's are not agricultural, they are no cultivated, they are not parks, they 're simply being reserved for possible future use. One of the most stunning examples of fallow land is the university site. The site, Tor Vergata, is a 500 ha open terrain bordered by the motorway to Napels and the G.R.A., the Roman ring road. The P.R.G. reserved the site for the university. The university occupies but a small fraction of the site, the major part is left as an enormous wasteland. As a result of the city's policy to reserve maximum area's for minimal programs, the university is cut from the urban life around it. It is an isolated entity with hardly any relation with the nearby illegal communities: no passages, no student bars or restaurants, no bookshops or copy services,...

Because the university is not using the major part of its site, large parts are being taken illegally, transformed into passages, villages, gardens,... To prevent this the university plans the most outrageous and unnecessary projects, going from a theatre for thousands of people to the largest botanical garden in Europe. The university reserves its property by imposing programs that consolidate its isolation. By doing so the possible urban perception of the site is reduced and even blocked.

On a smaller scale comparable situations can be found in the legal constructions. As these communities are conceived by simply positioning volumes, the open space between the volumes is often neglected. Public space consists mainly of enormous seas of asphalt or green fringes that take up the irregular borders of the sites. Although left-over they are used intensively as meeting point. Their use is constituted by their accessibility for cars and vespas, by car movements, by turning circles, by the

position of waste containers, by bus stops, by ambulant commerce,... Just like the fallow land these open spaces are the elements where quantities of people, programs, volumes, ... intermingle in an urban density.

The same goes for certain very specific places in the periphery. As the environment, both legal and illegal, is quite homogeneous, certain spaces stand out by their exceptional characteristics. For example, the underpasses of the motorway are public spaces; they are cool meeting places in an area where shaded public spaces are rare. Other points distinguish themselves through, what we called, "the golden combination". (fig.2) Throughout the site several combinations are made of a bus stop, a newspaper stand, a bar and a waste container. These points are more urban than the morphologically urban boulevards or the typologically dense housing slabs because of the concentration of daily actions: drinking coffee, waiting for the bus, reading, throwing waste,...

A third potential focus of urban perception is constituted by infrastructure. Quite evident some major infrastructures attract different programs. More specific to the Roman periphery though is the role of different trajectories. As the area is physically built as isolated islets, it only works if the whole area is criss-crossed by trajectories. Paths using motorway bridges to reach the commercial centre, roads crossing fields to get to the metro- and bus station, shortcuts through the university-site, ... (fig.3) These connections assemble a diversity of people and a diversity of rhythms and uses, in contradiction with the homogeneous character of both legal and illegal concentrations. Studying everyday life, the ensemble of personal territories explains that the periphery of Rome is not an archipelago, it does not work as a collection of islets held together by infrastructure. Its urbanity moves in between the masses, in between the quantities of surface and of people. This urbanity reveals itself as an interaction between an urban form and the way this urban form is used. In that way Cinecitta Est is not dense. Cinecitta looks dense, it has a dense form but it misses a qualitative complexity. The territory maps show that the complex urban perception we are looking for is not necessarily geographically determined. By examining the way the urban form is used it becomes clear that elements in different area's may work as one dense and complex system. That is why infrastructure, trajectories en fallow land are valuable urban spaces.

Design answers

uapS consists of a team of designers. Our analysis is focused on design and on creating design-tools. It means that we're not interested in dissecting the Roman periphery in a scientific way in order to understand and describe every component of this environment. Scientific completeness is not our main purpose. To us analysis is a design-tool, a research instrument to enable us to determine how to intervene in an evolution, how to tune different logics into one qualitative process.

Every situation demands a specific procedure to help us discover the characteristics, the potentials and the uniqueness of a certain situation. In Rome we tried to examine how urban complexity and urban perception can be stimulated in some places and introduced into other. We tried to imagine how specific needs and projects could be linked by introducing the concept of density.

We consider analysis as an approach and not as a prescribed formula. Therefore the study in Rome will never result in the definition of a general typology nor in general conclusions ... Every periphery is different and has its own design-issues. If there is continuity in this research, it is the optimistic, even naïve reading of the environment, a reading done without any presumptions, without any pre-established theories.

The major link between analysis and design is the diagram. The diagram is an image - a plan, a photo, a map,...- in which one characteristic or quality is enlarged. The diagram is an image - a plan, a photo, a map,...- in which one characteristic or quality is enlarged.

As we work with diagrams of the every day life in the Roman periphery, in stead of with an overall plan for its future development it is possible to study different interventions in the area on different scales. One intervention being independent from the other. In some areas a new element is introduced between two existing situations. In this way we combined the spontaneous trajectory between Cinecitta Est and the metro- and bus station Ananiga with the need to create new parking space for the station. We wanted to replace the envisaged parking building with a project that might introduce density in-between Cinecitta Est and Ananiga. We soon found out that introducing density means working with open ends. It means taking into account what we called a programmatic elasticity. Dense complexity is a slow evolution that can not be fixed a priori. Working with density means avoiding prescribed formula's and limiting conditions and thus introducing elasticity.

We introduced a large mineral surface, partly planted with trees. (fig.4) The surface functions at the same time as a shady promenade and as a parking. Its dimensions are exaggerated so it might become a car-connection, it might take up a bus line, it might very well attract ambulant commerce, it might even give access to possible future developments between Cinecitta Est and Ananiga. It might stimulate future developments without fixing an image of the future at this moment.

In other area's we intensify the existing density. In that way we intensify the way the motorway works as a boulevard. At this moment its function as a major road is blocked in such a way that Rome's plans to make the traffic more fluent by doubling the motorway is made impossible. We propose to double the infrastructure in such a way that one part of the motorway is slow and might be used intensively as boulevard, while the other part is a rapid lane. This rapid part encompasses the existing shops what prevents them from spreading out.

In a last category we simply leave certain area's as they are. There is no need, at this moment, to intensify the density in these areas. They work perfectly as villages, as small-scaled isolated area's.

Density is a conscious strategy, only used in specific area's and specific situations.

To us density is linked to a degree of urbanity. It is an immeasurable scale of urbanity. Rome taught us that density is not exclusively quantitative. It is not a question of measurable concentrations. Density is a relational subject connecting volumes, programs, attitudes, perspectives, people,... in an uncontrollable way.

Figures

1. Rome as an archipelago of official and abusive developments
2. People on their way to the supermarket
3. Rebus urbanity
4. Diagrams for the parking surface