

## **“Locus qui Apud Montes” The Redesign of a Degraded Urban Edge in Pimonte**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates some aspects relating to the urban form and design, as part of the international debate on its new instances of urban regeneration and environmental sustainability. Particularly, the theme regards the re-design of degraded urban edges in those towns strongly linked with landscape. The dissertation regards an experimental study of urban and landscape renewal presented for a research project proposed by University of Maryland and RAS Foundation. Its objective is to regenerate degraded urban areas of the “Vesuvian District of Culture & Tourism” of the Campania region, in Italy. In this context, there was a design workshop to prepare projects to be propose to local authorities.

The team from the school of Architecture of Bari, composed by A. Petruccioli (scientific coordinator), G. F. Rociola (design coordinator), V. Cantore, P. De Pasquale, F. Erriquez, D. Fallacara (students), studied the town of *Pimonte*, severely hit by an earthquake about thirty years ago. Its most representative place is the *San Michele Arcangelo* which surrounding area, as a result of that disastrous event, gradually became a marginalized area, transformed in a dump with illegal buildings. These aspects were considered in the design proposal, characterized by an urban fabric with housing, public buildings, a square and a park. This project attempts to recover the original centrality of the church of *San Michele Arcangelo* in the urban structure, strengthening at the same time the link between the town and the agricultural landscape of the *Lattari mountains*.

The study aims to provide a methodological contribution for urban and architectural design in the degraded and fragmented built peripheries, according to an approach that considers the project as a critical synthesis of the characteristics of the place, updated in continuity with the “invariants” and the “traces” of the settlement development processes, through their critical interpretation.

**KEYWORDS:** per-urban, urban renewal, architectural and urban design, urban landscape

### **1 INTRODUCTION**

The current scenario of the disciplinary research on urban project focuses on the resolution of the conflict between the peripheral areas, always in search of their full identity, and the marginal urban areas, or interstitial spaces located before or inside brownfields around the big cities. These peri-urban areas, which M. R. G. Conzen (1960) defines *fringe belts*, connect the different “morphologies of transition” of the urban structure of the periphery, in its changing structure, from which flow the major social problems and security, in addition to architectural and urban planning issues. These areas are in constant wait of “being” city. Although these issues are discussed long since in the international architectural debate, the paradigm of the suburbs is associated mainly with the fringe belts of big cities, the ones that most

reverberating the effects that urban development in the last decades has caused on the characters of the forma Urbis and the economic and social fabric. There are, however, especially in Italy, territories identified by a dense settlement pattern constituted by small urban nuclei that, in their mutual relations, composes a polycentric system whose syncopated development processes generate serious degradation phenomena, even in this case concentrated in areas of transition between the “consolidated city” and the countryside. These are potential places of urbanity considered only for the property speculation, contrary to their importance for the chance to be a space of mediation between the city and the countryside.

*Pimonte* is part of this specific “territorial type”, located north of the *Sorrento Peninsula*, near Naples. It’s a “three-headed” urban nucleus developed along one of the valleys of *Lattari mountains*, directed towards the *Tyrrhenian coast*. Its characteristic and its unresolved morphological issues synthesize the most general condition of the entire territory of the so-called *Piana Vesuviana*, a coastal plain where the bulimic building activity since the second half of the twentieth century has dissolved the rural areas until it reaches the urban centers of mid-valley at the foot of the *Lattari mountains*. The “urban landscape” identity of *Pimonte* is currently compromised by degradation phenomena along the edge between the well-established urban fabric and the natural park of *Faito Mount*, with precious terraced fields where they grow lemons, tomatoes and other vegetables. It has the typical contradictions of a large suburban area where are concentrate the problems of spatial and building isolation, caused by degradation phenomena described.

In relation to this, the project presented can be considered as a kind of “morphological synthesis” of a cognitive-analytic process aimed at understanding the structure of the “anthropic organism” at different scales. The method, in part related to the theories of Saverio Muratori and Gianfranco Caniggia, analyzes the phenomena of the territory as a process that gradually builds the systems of relations between man and his environment, identifying the significant steps that help define, in their interaction, the characteristics of the place, changing over time and common to different homogeneous geographical-cultural areas. The project, in this case, is a potential part of the process, a “possible transformation” which assumes the qualifying elements of the previous phases to connect the historical urban structure with its contemporary critical interpretation. Starting from this point of view, other integrated elements of “design speculation” are used for the “expressive fabric” of the project, so to try to operate a symbiosis between continuity and critical update (Purini, 2000), finding a new coherent “image” of the city in transformation (Giannini, 1995).

The approach described does not want reduce the many complexities involved in urban design, but it would like to set a direction of interpretive reading, a discernment of intent to an alternative modernity that operates according to principles of continuity with the existing city.

The urban area chosen for the project, in this sense, has proved suitable to summarize very well instances and problems exposed: the fringe belt at the edge of the old town, beyond its current degradation, contains the historical memory and cultural life of the community, both linked with possible relations with the mountains and terraced fields. The earthquake that devastated the Campania territory about forty years ago has left indelible traces in *Pimonte* around its most important place of worship, the church of *San Michele Arcangelo*, reverberating progressively its degrade at the entire southern suburban margin. Therefore the urban project presented is aimed to give a new identity, not only to the suburb, but to a whole settlement that in this area has condensed all the memory of collective belonging.

In connection with the analytical-design method described, the text that follows reflects the logical sequence of the design strategy adopted: *Pimonte*, in this case, is analyzed first as a node of the territorial organism to which it belongs, and then interpreted in its urban structure as a result “in development” of the transformative processes, defining the morphology and the issues of the project area.

## **2 PIMONTE : TERRITORIAL AND URBAN FEATURES**

The structure of *Pimonte* territory is a complex palimpsest in which different anthropogenic and landscape systems converge: the southern margin of the *Piana Vesuviana* to the north, the coastal strip of

Castellammare di Stabia to the west, the *Lattari mountains* to the east and south, with the *Faito Mount* that separates them, along the opposite side, from the *Sorrentine Peninsula* and the *Amalfi Coast*.

At the center of this polycentric territory is located the *Pendolo Mount*, which connects the coast with the inland foothills and the pass of the *Lattari mountains* toward the *Amalfi Coast*; this characteristic has polarized the development of settlements and infrastructures in the valley, defining the current conurbation which has progressively merged the different settlements. Among these, *Pimonte* is developed at the intersection of the routes that connect the coastal system of *Castellammare di Stabia* and *Piana Vesuviana* with the opposite side to *Agerola* and the *Amalfi Coast*. By analyzing the structure of *Pimonte* emerge the particular settlement conditions influenced by the presence of the two mountains, *Pendolo* and *Faito*. It is morphologically distinct from a double system of valleys: the main piedmont valley already mentioned and the corresponding secondary valleys connecting the main compluvium with two opposite ridges.



Figure 1: The “three-headed” urban nucleus of Pimonte and the analysis of the sub-nucleus of *Piazza* (ridge routes, in red, in relationship with valley routes, in brown)

This oro-hydrographic scheme has strongly influenced the development of the urban organism, helping to define specific spontaneous approaches of settlement transformations, starting from the territorial routes: the most ancient ridge and valley routes that link the *Vesuvian coast* with the *Amalfi Coast* converge at the point of crossing of the *Lattari mountains*, building over time a pole around which the settlement system “three-headed” of *Pimonte* is grew, structured in relation to the three churches located in strategic points of the valley routes. This system consists of three sub-nuclei, of which the most important is called *Piazza*, developed at the intersection between the routes of the ridge and valley. Its network of radial routes, branching off from the main square towards the mountains of *Pendolo* and *Faito*, are the result of this specific orographic condition, in relation to which the settlement scheme has logically followed the natural slope of the land. The other two urban sub-nuclei, *Tralia* to the west and *Franche* to the east, represent the limits of the *Pimonte* conurbation, completing the tri-polar system. In the first one the urban fabric is organized in relation to a central matrix route that follows one of the secondary valleys of the *Faito Mount*. The “planning building” routes and their pseudo-orthogonal orientation contribute to organize the urban scheme. The sub-nucleus of *Franche* was developed starting from the intersection between the route that connects *Pimonte* to *Gragnano* and the ridge surmounting the compluvium of the *Vernotico stream*, near the church of *San Nicola*. *Franche* is located in a central position with respect to the two landmarks that served as defensive garrisons during the Middle Ages: the *Pimonte Castel* to the north-west – then used as a monastery called *Belvedere*; the church of the *Madonna*

*del Pino* to the south-east, in the place where stood the *Castrum Pini*, a fortified citadel built by the people of Amalfi.

### 3 THE PROJECT PLACE IN RELATION TO THE SETTLEMENT AND ITS URBAN AND SPATIAL FEATURES

#### 3.1 The physical-perceptual features

The territorial centrality of *Pimonte* is found mainly in the urban hierarchy of the sub-nucleus of *Piazza*. It's organized according to the radial routes originating from the square at the center of the urban core, that is the low point of convergence of the ridge and valley routes. The upstream religious complex with a church dedicated to the Archangel Michael is the anti-pole of the above-mentioned urban core, located along the "pass route" that connects the valley to the *Amalfi Coast*. Its cultural and historical importance still live in local traditions, making it one of the most important places of worship in the inland of *Stabia*. The project area, around this place, is a bumpy plan insinuated between the urban edge to the north and the slope leading up to the *Faito Mount*. The soil is supported by retaining walls and reaches the highest point in correspondence at a building fabric of housing that closes the entire area to the south. The western part is instead defined by one of the "planning building" routes. The morphology of the area is strongly influenced by the heterogeneity of its margins: to the east they include the church of *San Michele Arcangelo* and chapel of *Sant'Anna*; to the north there is an inhomogeneous residential building fabric; the western edge is characterized by unlawful buildings and junk yards; the south margin finally is identified both by the escarpment that forms the basement of the social housing and by a large perspective toward the landscape and woods of *Faito Mount*. The relationship that links the city to the landscape becomes the crucial perceptive element of identity of the place in which the church represents an urban highlight between the valley bottom of the *Pendolo Mount* and the natural park of the *Lattari mountains*, characterized by terraced gardens that come into spatial relationship with the project area. These two mountains, beyond a physical limit to urban development, they represent the visual margins that best characterize the project area, those who most identify the *genius loci* of the city.



Figure 2: Pimonte between Faito Mount and Pendolo Mount. The project area and the church

#### 3.2 Between identity and degradation

The degradation of the project area derives from decades of neglect caused by the 1980 earthquake that seriously damaged the religious complex, depriving it of its original features and giving rise to consequent collateral damages, express by illegal buildings and junk yards incompatible with the story and the vocations of this place. As described above, the heart of the *fringe belt* is the church of *San*

*Michele Arcangelo* and the adjoining chapel of *Sant'Anna*, whose importance as a place of collective identity is constantly threatened by social marginalization phenomena, also expressed by the lack of urban relationships among the urban core, the upstream housing, and isolated houses. The area of intervention, potentially able to relate the city with the mountains, it is unfortunately only a space devoid of identity. The characteristics and the problems described are the background to the potentiality that this place may be able to express, as the relationship upstream-downstream, as the strategic location of the church at the intersection between the valley route and the pass route towards the natural park, as the vocation of the area for public functions and accommodation, perfectly coherent with the central role that the church will must necessarily find after the restoration. Among the aspects of the landscape to be exploited, one of the most important is the system of agricultural terracings on the northern slope of *Faito*, expression of a centuries-old tradition that must be preserved to safeguard the cultural and civil-historical patrimony, testimony of the fruitful relationship between the man and his environment.

## **4 THE PROJECT AND THE CRITICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE SETTLEMENT PHENOMENA**

### **4.1 The general strategy and the research of a new “centrality”**

The project reflections propose a possible synthesis of the critical issues described and related to the urban marginality of the area in front of the church, whose degradation processes reflect the progressive isolation from the historical core. The consequent need to recover the cultural-historical memory, with the landscape value and the urban-social renewal, have led to develop a hypothesis of integrated design able to “re-weave” the interrupted urban fabric, to give physical and perceptive organicity at the area, useful in resolving its contradictions. The design scheme bases its “generative matrix” on guidelines and “urban traces” considered essential to re-configure an area without a clear *forma Urbis* and unable to establish logical connections between the existing urban fabric, the current land uses and the church of *San Michele Arcangelo*. In this sense the project attempts to connect different but interacting priorities, such as urban renewal and environmental - landscape renewal of the entire area; the inclusion of the church within the urban fabric; the connection of the different urban levels; the introduction of collective spaces and community services for integrating the cultural and tourist offer of the church; the enhancement of the relationship between the church and the landscape; the need to search continuity between the project and the features of the area.

### **4.2 The new churchyard as a space of relation between the church and the public buildings**

One of the most important problems faced was to think of a public space aimed to regaining the centrality of the church, making it a part of the city and at the same time a place for social gatherings with collective functions. One of the main principles adopted is related to the complying the morphological structure of the soil, using the flat part of the area for the square-churchyard, enclosed by an “architectural fence” containing public spaces and recreational and cultural facilities, in order to retrieve the historical-cultural value of the church by building a new system of urban relationships, spatial and functional.

As part of this strategy, the urban core of *Piazza* and the two radial routes, that connect it to the area of the church, have been “interjected” in the system, contributing to compose the space of the square-churchyard, including the east-west front of the church, the slope of the ground and the paths that pass through the area. The synergistic relationship between these elements has allowed us to define an enclosure comprising buildings that are in direct relationship with the church, thereby ensuring unity and organicity essential to an area currently lacking a clear morphological structure.

In addition to the church, a further nodal spatial element is the library, located at the end of the square-churchyard like connecting element with the second square, designed to organically bind the residential fabric at the city. A little auditorium, located in front of the chapel of *Sant'Anna*, hierarchizes the final part of the “fence”. A serial system of spaces for cultural and recreational activities builds finally the northern edge of the square, joined to the exhibition building which mediates the change in direction between the northern urban facade and the churchyard in connection with the church.



Figure 3: The master plan: 1) square-churchyard with public buildings; 2) terraced houses-garden; 3) terraced square; 4) green park

### 4.3 The terracing’s with houses-garden, the second square, the green park

The southern and western margins of the project area are those least defined morphologically: the first one is characterized by an escarpment that rises to the *Faito Mount*, serving as a basis for existing social housing that separates the project area by cultivated terracing’s more south; along the second margin are concentrated the majority of illegal buildings and junk yards. According to these particular conditions, united with settlement transformations, the strategy is centered on the reconfiguration of the relationship among the *Lattari mountains*, the terracing’s and the city, focusing attention on the landscape aspect. In connection therewith the morphology of the terracing’s, representing the consistency with the structure and the slope of the ground, is used as a “project factor” for its reinterpretation, through the critical synthesis of two possible functions, agricultural and residential. The first is linked to the tradition of the small private garden widespread among communities living around the *Lattari Mountains*; the second aims to reconstruct the per-urban area around the churchyard, restoring the urban centrality of the religious complex. Continuing the same strategies that men, for thousands of years, adopted to transform a portion of land for agricultural purposes, otherwise unsuitable for productive activities, it has been identified the contour lines that structure the southern slope of *Faito Mount* as far as the church of *San Michele Arcangelo*. Considering these as traces of the project scheme, the strategy defines a system consisting of four terracing’s, comprising an urban fabric of patio houses whose roofs are used as a vegetable garden, ensuring the connection with the features and the landscape of the place. The introduction of the “patio house” type also allows to experiment new housing solutions that reinterpret some of the features of the ancient “rural domes type” diffuse in the *ager stabianus* and later become the “foundation type” of the further urban transformations.

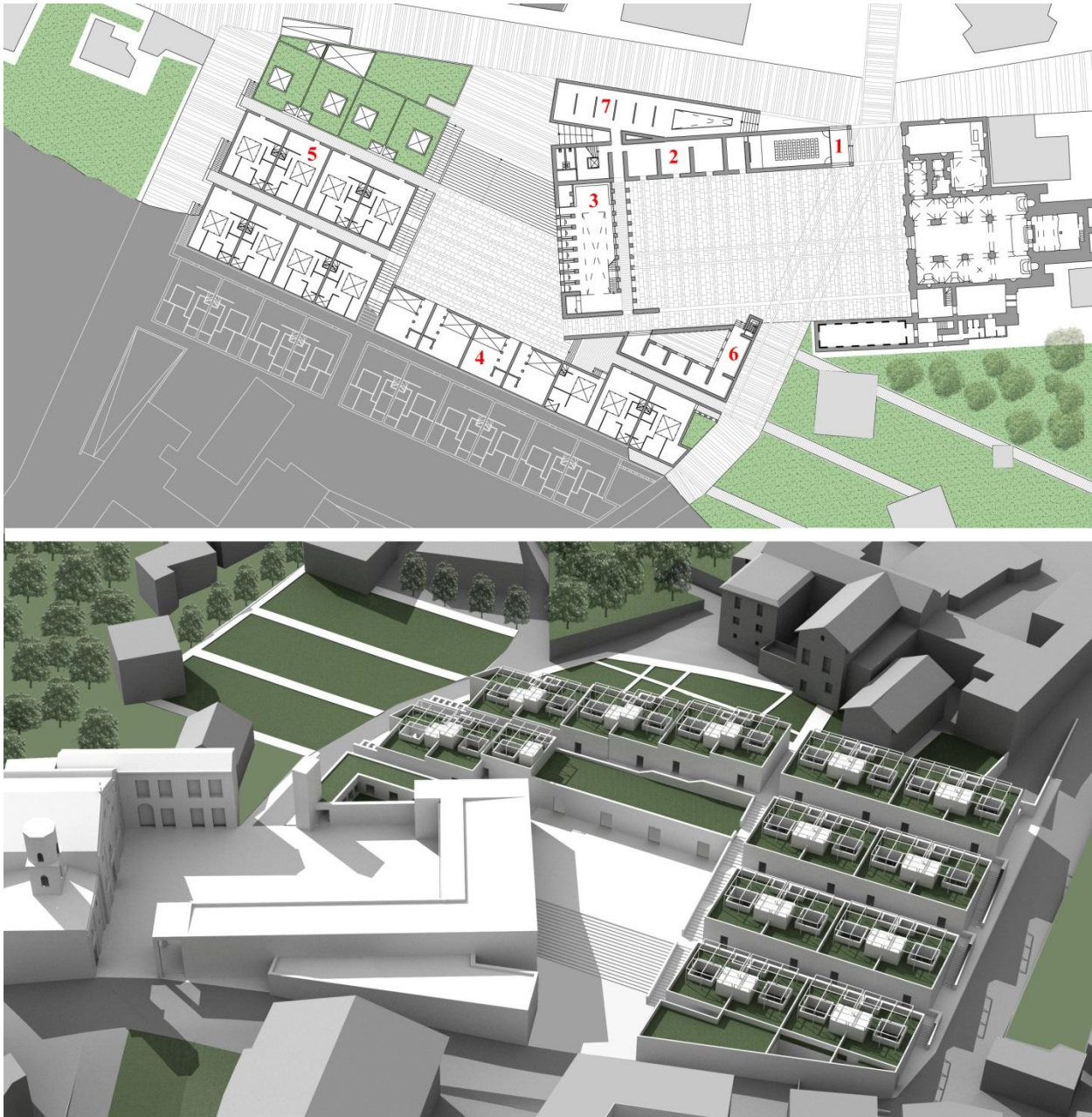


Figure 4: plan at the ground floor and general view: 1) auditorium; 2) public spaces; 3) library; 4) public places; 5) terraced houses-garden with patio; 6) tourist centre; 7) exhibition building

In this way they are synthesized three issues of experimental design: the merger of the agricultural function of the terracing's and the need to link the residential fabric; the regard and the renewal of cultural memory of the rustic Roman villas of the *ager stabianus*. A system of ramps pass through the terracing's and connects the routes of the building fabric giving access to the patio houses, allowing it to reach the existing social housing upstream. The relationship between the terracing's and the urban front along the main valley route is also guaranteed by a second flight of steps designed in relation to the second path that connects the urban core to the project area. The square consists of two floors that communicate with the square-churchyard through two gates.

## 5 MATERIAL AND LINGUISTIC ASPECTS

The link of continuity between the structure of the place - with its identity - and its projective interpretation, is also expressed by the use of local materials such as tuff called *nocerino*, the *Vesuvian stone* and the chestnut wood. The tuff, in particular, characterizes all elevation walls of the buildings surrounding the square, the terracing's and the houses-garden with patio; the outdoor paving's, consistent with the tradition of the territorial context, they are built of stone from Vesuvius. The long and smooth trunks of chestnut, coming from the *Faito Mount*, are used as *brise soleil* elements of the façades on the square - churchyard and as pergolas for the residences. "Linguistic" research of the façades tries to find new interpretative relations between the features of the "ordinary buildings" and their geographical-cultural area. In particular, it has sought to combine the "expressive economy" of those simple buildings with the need to give the nodal character of public place to the squares, through a critical update. The public buildings that surround the square - churchyard, in this sense, are unified by a facade "wraparound" and continues, that in its homogeneity highlights the hierarchically relevant parties, such as the auditorium, the city gate, the library, the tower. The secondary square, connected to the patio houses, deduces from these - and from the terracing's that build the surrounding mountainous landscape - the "tectonic simplification" expressed by the "elementary" relations among fence, flooring and roofing.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Through the project for *Pimonte*, described in its procedural aspects and methodology, it is tried to provide additional interpretative key to sustainability, defined here according to a full architectural meaning, and concerning the relations that the project establishes with the urban structure and landscape, to redevelop an area where urban and historical centrality is hidden from decades of neglect. Through the strategy of inter-scalar physical and perceptual analysis it is attempted to elaborate design choices consistent with the transformation phenomena of the place, but at the same time introducing innovative elements of relationship among the city, the church and the landscape. The design process illustrated, therefore, represents one of the possible operational and pedagogical approaches to solve morphological and functional criticism that characterize the per-urban areas of the small cities, which due to their small size have most affected by the consequences related to the degradation and to illegal construction.

The design process above-mentioned is organic at the general context described in the introduction, that are the urban structures typical of the ridge-valley system of the Italian peninsula. As a synthesis in progress it is possible to indicate an hypothesis of design guide principles:

- *reading* of the place as an operation of *critical knowledge*;
- re-design of the boundary city-rural area to well define the urban shape as a territorial element;
- adoption of design strategy to affirming the collective value of the interpretation of the tradition;
- re-weave urban fabric and paths to connect logically the existing buildings with its new development;
- find new spatial and morphological relationship between urban structure and rural areas, according to a general coherence with the characters of the place and its identity.

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