

Civic peri-urban: repositioning peri-urban urbanization in new forms of inter-generational co-ownership.

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Abstract

The essay investigates the regenerative potential of peri-urban areas by examining the relationship between in-between spaces and civic uses, moving beyond functionalist perspectives toward an ecocentric and collective understanding of space. Reinterpreted as practices of "living uses," collective uses emerge as a lever for establishing metropolitan eco-public networks and reconstructing a public fabric of rights and relationships. Detached from proprietary and extractive logics, the peri-urban is framed as a plural civic space of care and co-production, where common goods are held in diffuse ownership and constitute a form of spatial capital. Through regulated and inclusive practices, a process of "re-landscaping" is envisioned—reassembling existing elements into qualitative relationships—thus countering the commodification of space and advancing access to fundamental rights in both urban and peri-urban contexts.

1. Introduction

Peri-urban territories are complex socio-spatial configurations that challenge the dichotomous theoretical categories of urban and rural inherited from classical urban theory. They represent the local-scale outcome of spatial restructuring processes in which decentralization, deconcentrating, and territorial dispersion are organically intertwined. These phenomena are observable both in the distribution of built functions and densities, as well as in demographic dynamics and extractive processes that subordinate these areas to infrastructures functional to urban performance. This results in spaces where long-term co-evolutionary processes (i.e., landscape) are absent, with specific identities having been dissolved within a few decades, and where the ecological context becomes a tool of the present's transience.

The complex peri-urban geography reflects the emergence of a multipolar spatial organization, where residual space is both a frontier to be shielded from further urbanization and a porous "ecotone" open to new forms of use and sociality. Resisting the externalization processes and extractive urban dynamics implies a reorientation toward redistributing rights, aiming to establish a negotiation space where urbanity is capable of recognizing an ecological context beyond the contingencies of present-day needs. It is an open process with local communities to overcome hierarchical and anthropocentric visions, seeking to build an intergenerational co-ownership rooted in socio-ecological relationships, as also affirmed by Article 9 of the Italian Constitution. This article links the protection of the environment, biodiversity, and ecosystems to the rights of future generations.

This calls for a paradigmatic shift away from the individualistic conception of space, anthropic pressure, and ecological fragmentation, toward new collective rights based on the recognition of shared practices and living uses, capable of overcoming the dualism between city and nature, society and ecology conceived as separate spheres. The reference is to the tradition of civic uses, which, in their original form, share the functional character (space of performance) with the peri-urban fringe. Current legislation replaces this functional nature with the valorization of ecological-environmental protection, in which intergenerational co-ownership is inspired by values of territorial inclusivity (Mangone, 2022).

2. Threshold Territory: Rethinking the Urban-Rural Continuum

For a long time, the city was defined in opposition to the countryside, through a sharp dichotomy that identified spatial and social boundaries as clearly distinct. However, contemporary processes have radically transformed this configuration, making it increasingly difficult to establish where the city ends and where what was once

considered “other” begins.

Recent transformations have dissolved traditional boundaries between urban and rural, center and periphery, local and global scale, giving rise to hybrid, fragmented, operational, and interconnected landscapes—often elusive and hard to define (Brenner, 2014).

It is not just the city that changes, but the very way we conceptualize the urban: no longer as a bounded and delimited spatial entity, but as a set of relations and logics that extend beyond classical morphology. In this context, not everything is urban, but everything is driven by the urban (Brenner, 2009). The city as we knew it dissolves—along with its natural outside—into a complex and multiscalar system of heterogeneous territories, connected through flows, infrastructures, and functions distributed discontinuously (Soja, 2007).

A new urban dimension emerges, a diffuse and polycentric organism that unfolds through diversified forms, roles, and landscapes. Urbanization shifts from the metropolitan model toward regional and planetary processes, reflecting global dynamics but materializing locally in in-between contexts: blurred, liminal territories where urban expansion absorbs and transforms rural space, reducing the city-countryside divide to an increasingly tenuous threshold.

The peri-urban space takes shape as a dynamic and unstable threshold, a hybrid field in which the dichotomies between urban and rural dissolve. In this complex landscape, a geography of *atopos* emerges—marked by the absence of formal coherence, stable historical ties, and durable future projections—resulting in a precarious, present-oriented dimension (Formato, 2012).

This is a space where the “technical activation” of norms flattens the territory, endowing it with a reality of its own akin to that of a commodity (Capone, 2020), producing spatial forms often detached from any intentional planning (Koolhaas, 2006).

In these once marginal spaces, strategic functions consolidate, demographic gradients re-balance, and lifestyles between center and periphery converge. Peri-urbanization and the hyper-urbanization of flows contribute to the decline of space as an ordering category, increasingly replaced by networked and relational logics (Amin & Thrift, 2002).

Low-density expansions, topological fractures, and infrastructural discontinuities compose a dispersed mosaic stretching beyond the established city limits. This is neither simple suburbanization nor the classic middle-class residential periphery (Fasciano, 2003), but rather a liminal territory where rural, natural, and urban components overlap in continuous tension (Errington, 1994). These zones, described by Mininni (2005) as the “third territory,” form a “bridge space” (Ferretto et al., 2013) between urban density and the rarefaction of agricultural landscapes—an emerging figure in the ongoing regionalization of the urban.

Such spaces function as urban ecotones: gradual transitions between different settlement systems that lack clear continuity. These are threshold spaces in a flexible and permeable continuum, where spatial transformations respond to polycentric dynamics, no longer legible through binary categories (Simon et al., 2006). Koolhaas (2006) describes this as a formless proliferation, where urban design dissolves into the casual addition, into the unintentional assemblage of heterogeneous fragments. The result is a landscape where action blurs with outcome, hierarchy with accumulation.

The peri-urban thus becomes symptomatic of a new multipolar territorial organization, in which urban functions tend to decentralize and redistribute unevenly. It is within these territories that extended urbanization (Wandl et al., 2014) begins to unfold—a fragmented spatial configuration that overlays agricultural landscapes, deeply altering their functions.

The privatization of land, the transformation of collective usage rights into exclusive ones, and the enclosure of common resources (Harvey, 2003) act as accumulation by dispossession devices, reshaping forms of living and production. This produces a stark discrepancy between quantitative growth and socio-environmental quality, between urban development and ecological sustainability.

The absence of a coherent institutional framework—one that often continues to classify these areas as merely agricultural—hinders access to services and limits spatial quality, preventing these territories from expressing their potential as sites for alternative living models and emerging practices. Demographic changes, evolving occupational patterns, the conversion of productive activities, and the increasing role of market logics produce a constantly reconfiguring space, where the urban-rural divide loses its analytical relevance (Webster, 2002).

Resource pressure and intensive infrastructuring create growing competition in land use, accelerating territorial marginalization. The scarcity of essential services, lack of public transportation, and dependence on private mobility (Rojas-Caldelas et al., 2008) make these territories structurally subordinate to urban systems. At the same time, they absorb informality and leftovers, hosting residual functions unwanted or unsustainable in the core city (e.g., landfills, recycling centers, shopping malls, peripheral industrial sites).

Here, soil degradation, biodiversity loss, and the breakdown of ecological networks become tangible indicators of an environmental crisis triggered by unregulated urban expansion (Allen, 2006).

Yet peri-urban spatiality is not a void to be filled nor a mere byproduct of urban growth. Rather, it is a space constituted through complex relations—marked by overlapping attachments, by centripetal and centrifugal forces, and by forms of specialization that make it a territory with uncertain vocation (Pareglio, Pozzi, 2013). While some configurations resemble uniform sprawl, others appear as cellular fabrics or linear development corridors along major infrastructures (Simon et al., 2006). In all cases, peri-urban areas are shaped by forces that render them unstable, unequal, and layered.

From this perspective, peri-urbanization dynamics are not simply spatial phenomena but interpretive keys for understanding contemporary territorial restructuring and its social, economic, and ecological implications.

These transitional zones between city and countryside are now actual territorial devices that reflect the evolution of the post-metropolis, where urban space dissolves into networks, flows, and functional fragmentation (Simon et al., 2006). Borders no longer delimit—they articulate, defining new thresholds of interaction among interconnected territories.

Peri-urban areas thus emerge as territorial figures dense with ambiguity—not reducible to traditional spatial categories, but rather to be interrogated for their capacity to shape new geographies of dwelling. Any project must begin with the recognition of their hybrid, ecotonal, and unstable nature.

3. Mapping the Peri-Urban

The peri-urban is configured as a space dense with fragments, the result of stratified sedimentations and transformations, reflecting one of the most emblematic structural conditions of contemporary territories. It expresses, often in ambiguous and unresolved forms, the social, economic, and functional discontinuities that traverse postmodern urban geographies, highlighting the crisis of traditional categories such as centre and periphery.

In an attempt to interpret the tensions that run through these territories — between demolitions and reconstructions, abandonments and reuses — it is useful to recall the two opposing tendencies described by Bernardo Secchi in *Prima lezione di urbanistica* (2000), which can also be applied to peri-urban spaces. On the one hand, there is a position that seeks to re-establish clear boundaries, separating the city from what is perceived as an indistinct background, restoring order and form, tracing historical arrangements or containment policies. On the other, there is an interpretation that rejects any clear boundary, conceiving space as part of an urban continuum

in which every attempt at formal distinction proves artificial. Both interpretations, however, according to Secchi, reflect a deeper difficulty that we could interpret as the inability to construct interpretative grammar capable of capturing the specificities of the peri-urban as an interstitial territory, structurally hybrid and in constant redefinition.

Minnini (2013) proposes reading the peri-urban space through the categories of transcalarity and proximity, with particular attention to open space, understood as a fundamental element in the emancipation process from modernist models and in the re-foundation of the contemporary city, fragmented and plural. This approach invites us to free urban design from sectoral logics, recognising the landscape as a new infrastructure capable of ensuring greater freedom of movement and autonomy in constructing an individual habitat, while embedding it within a collective idea of territory.

In the Piano Paesaggistico Territoriale Regionale (PPTR) of Puglia, the peri-urban is recognised as the space where recent transformations most visibly reveal the criticalities generated by the contemporary city. These are areas that must be removed from the logic of randomness, from the unlimited availability for use and consumption, and from the dissipation of symbols and resources, to be reinterpreted through an attribution of meanings arising from experience, restoring their role in the ongoing transition. These are spaces to be made useful again, starting from a pact that re-establishes symbolic, alimentary, recreational, hygienic, and experiential exchanges between city and countryside in a multilevel perspective. This vision is based on a strategy of agroubanisme inspired by Alberto Magnaghi's theories on self-sustainable regional development.

The definition of the field of existence of the peri-urban takes shape through an anthropo-geographical interpretation that constructs a taxonomy of settlement morphologies, positioned between city and countryside, and understood as active components of this pact. The labels *campagna abitata*, *campagna urbanizzata*, *campagna del ristretto*, and *campagna profonda* express the intention to name things in order to understand their problems. In these contexts, one finds loosely woven fabrics such as public peripheries or allotments lacking a clear relationship with the street; formations in an uncertain state, often artisanal or residential, destined to remain incomplete; linear settlements that urbanise extra-urban roadways; large-scale tourist platforms and dispersed coastal landscapes tied to seasonal use of second homes.

In the *Linee guida per le aree della dispersione insediativa e per le aree del periurbano* (DiCEM, 2004), developed in 2024 by the Campania Region in collaboration with the Dipartimento delle Culture Europee e del Mediterraneo (DiCEM), the peri-urban space is described as an "orphan of landscape." This definition underscores the inability of such territories to continue representing the cultural and symbolic values that once structured the relationships between space and society. From this, emerges the urgency to elaborate new imaginaries capable of interpreting ongoing transformations and reflecting the culture of our time.

This is a territoriality largely generated by the unintended outcomes of planning — a "territoriality without authorship" that now calls to be rethought and reconfigured through a renewed urban and landscape project. From this perspective, the peri-urban is interpreted as a strategic resource for the city and its inhabitants, particularly where it is managed by active forms of agriculture and by new rural actors who live and produce in the *campagna di prossimità*, contributing to the challenges of ecological transition.

In these *Linee guida*, the peri-urban is conceived as a spatial device interposed between the urban periphery, scattered settlements, and adjacent rural spaces: a condition of thirdness — neither city nor countryside — outlining a landscape proposition for the contemporary condition. In this view, a different critical geography is affirmed, one capable of including the hybridised territories of the *agroubano*. This is a space that once again becomes available for renegotiating the relationship between city and countryside through the valorisation of open proximity spaces, generated by agriculture which, as in Campania, has not been marginalised with respect to urban fringes, but rather retains a strong productive capacity and a potential regenerative function.

The theoretical perimetral definition structured by the Linee guida per le aree della dispersione insediativa e per le aree del periurbano considers several territorial and demographic factors that define a transition zone between city and countryside, represented by a “geometric band” surrounding urbanised areas. The thickness of this band varies according to the municipal population: 100 metres for municipalities with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants; 200 metres for those between 2,000 and 15,000; and 500 metres for those with more than 15,000 inhabitants. Urbanised areas exclude surfaces smaller than 5 hectares for municipalities under 2,000 inhabitants; 25 hectares for those between 2,000–15,000; and 50 hectares for those above 15,000. These exclusions derive from the fact that such areas do not present sufficient significance in generating the peri-urban.

Thus, in this study, the peri-urban area of Campania is represented by: a 100-metre transition band for municipalities with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants; a 200-metre band for municipalities with between 2,000 and 15,000; and a 500-metre band for municipalities with more than 15,000 inhabitants.

Prior to the study developed for the Linee guida, a further investigation was conducted within the preliminary studies for the Piano Paesaggistico Territoriale Regionale della Campania by the Dipartimento di Architettura (DiARC) of the University of Naples “Federico II” (Attademo et al., 2022). This study, carried out at the regional scale, introduces a set of composite indices that can be replicated in other contexts and applied at more local scales to deepen territorial specificities.

The mapping of peri-urban space is based on three main indicators: the density gradient, anthropic pressure, and ecosystem fragmentation.

The density gradient is the initial indicator, useful for excluding extreme situations by distinguishing what is unequivocally urban from what falls within areas of high ecological value or biodiversity reserves. This indicator allows for the identification of significant thresholds, isolating portions of territory with characteristics attributable to the rural.

Anthropic pressure (Angelini et al., 2018) represents the level of disturbance exerted by human activities on non-urbanised biotopes, within the physiographic landscape units. It is assessed by considering the “biotope constraint,” that is, the intensity of disturbance due to proximity to anthropised environments such as intensive agricultural areas, quarries, fallow lands, industrial zones, brownfields, and other artificialised spaces. This index also captures the diversity of land uses typical of peri-urban contexts.

Ecosystem fragmentation describes the process of progressive reduction and isolation of natural and semi-natural environments, largely driven by urban expansion and the growth of infrastructural networks. This phenomenon negatively impacts ecological continuity, reducing the size of patches unaltered by artificial elements and fragmenting them into smaller and more isolated units. Evaluation is conducted using the effective mesh density index (Seff) proposed by Jaeger (2000), which measures the density of ecologically functional meshes interrupted by infrastructural barriers and land artificialisation.

The combined analysis of these three indices, through cartographic overlay techniques, enables a synthetic and integrated representation of the peri-urban interface, highlighting both its criticalities and its potential in terms of ecological and design-based reconfiguration.

4. A New Peri-Urban Civic Space

Exploring the nexus between the peri-urban and civic uses requires a shift away from a utilitarian-functional perspective toward one of meaning—repositioning peri-urban urbanization within a framework of shared land, understood as co-owned in its modes of use and across species, intergenerational in scope, and transcending the temporality of utility. This connection can be critically examined by contrasting the distinctive traits of the peri-urban fringe—as a space of performances—with some fundamental aspects of civic use.

Civic and collective uses, reinterpreted as categories of use of goods functional to the enjoyment of fundamental rights, act as triggers for systemic regeneration processes through spatial concretizations capable of recovering “living uses” (Capone, 2016). These practices reveal the regenerative potential of peri-urban areas and support the formation of eco-public networks at the metropolitan scale as incubators of new urban civic spaces (Formato, 2021).

As contemporary spaces where dichotomies and binaries thin out in extractive processes, in-between territories absorb the full extent of individualism, reflecting the prevailing climate of exaggerated exaltation of private property. This tends to “realize a society entirely governed by private law, one that does not admit exceptions to the primacy of the market, not even for the collective rights of the constitutional state” (Capone, 2016: 622). In this setting, solidarity is replaced by competition over scarce and inadequate resources (Bauman, 2005)—a hallmark of neoliberal society that acts through the decontextualization of relational meaning and territorial specificity.

The erosion of identity traits—understood as values sedimented over time—allows us to observe space as a medium for uncovering customary practices that have historically characterized the collective use of land and resources (Capone, 2020). However, the concept of identity often ties civic use and even temporary enjoyment to select groups of “original communities” and “claimants, falling within, and naturally residing in a specific territory” (Di Genio, 2019). Thus, considering the peri-urban as a space devoid of long-term processes (landscape), or rather as a space where such processes have been dissolved within decades, necessitates a focus on the “practice of use” (Capone, 2016). This practice breaks free from the “straitjacket of exclusive ownership,” dissolves the individualistic approach to spatial use, and allows us to “extend the notion of civic uses in the more general form of collective uses, with their recognition in specific usage regulations—of buildings and urban spaces—restoring collective access to goods functional to the exercise of fundamental rights” (Capone, 2016). This perspective emerges when civic uses are viewed as a “convenient expression” extending the legal institution to the entire territory, not only to agricultural and forested areas.

It is therefore necessary not to consider civic uses strictly as a legal institution (as established by Law 1766/1927), which excludes a large number of “living uses”—new forms of collective usage that demand a constitutionally oriented generalization within the very notion of civic use, extending such usage to urban or quasi-urban areas. Moreover, civic and collective uses represent social and fundamental rights—personal, individual, collective, and diffuse—which benefit both the individual and the community (Di Genio, 2019). They are connected to environmental protection (Judgment 156/1995) and landscape preservation (Judgment 310/2006), as well as to the preservation of such uses and the democratic principle of participation in decision-making processes, as expressions of a collective capital that ties land ownership to the community (Di Genio, 2019).

Thus, it is essential to approach this institution from the perspective of “collective rights” (rights of use and enjoyment) that “belong to a community of inhabitants, or to an undifferentiated collective of citizens residing in a given locality” (Capone, 2016). A community of inhabitants is understood as a “plural and complex social reality, constituted through acts of care and the reproduction of common goods” (Capone, 2020).

These collective rights, as a category encompassing both ancient and more recent uses, enable the conceptual generalization and spatial extension of the content of civic uses through specific usage regulations—bringing back to the fore public life and the social function of goods, their public destination, and space itself (solidarity, subsidiarity, and the free development of the individual and social formations).

What emerges is a counterpoint that shifts the understanding of civic use away from its original economic-productive configuration—now superseded by ecological-environmental protection (Mangone, 2022)—and toward a notion of “practice of use” that is not resolved in exclusive ownership, that breaks with the individualistic approach to spatial use, and that challenges processes of spatial irrelevance. It allows for both a conceptual generalization and a spatial extension of the notion/institution of civic use into its broader form of collective uses and their formal recognition.

The resulting project is a space with diffuse ownership of goods, moving beyond identity-based belonging and instead ensuring accessibility, inclusivity, impartiality, and usability—countering the exclusive use driven by the “proprietary-exclusionary paradigm” (Capone, 2016). The aim is to promote “plastic and open communities” (Capone, 2020), rooted in the territory through acts of care and relational production—communities that consider goods within their ecological context and beyond the provisional nature of the present. This perspective overcomes the modernist logic of spatial reproduction, in which “space becomes real only through transformation and commodification” (Viganò, 2023), and instead proposes a form of “spatial capital” understood as a “stock of collective resources.” This capital transcends utilitarian and functional dimensions, becoming a collective heritage that accumulates and develops over time as the result of multiple and heterogeneous intentions, held in both intimate and collective dimensions.

The collective use of space constructs relational networks through a doubly creative action: the production of common goods and the generation of their reference communities (Capone, 2020). It allows for a shift from “self-assertive values” (competition, expansion, domination) to “ecocentric values” based on interdependence: from hierarchies to networks (Capra, 2001). This outlines a project of peri-urban “re-landscaping” through spatial practices that counter the “speculative supremacy of the conceived” (Capone, 2020), invoking the social function of space as established by the Constitution. It envisions a peri-urban territory no longer available for extractive processes, but one in which quantitative dimensions have already been exhausted and must now be reassembled into qualitative relations.

This closure becomes an opening toward regenerative potential—configuring metropolitan-scale eco-public networks as incubators of new urban civic spaces (Formato, 2021), and an assemblage of spatial concretizations capable of recovering “living uses” (Capone, 2016: 621). Rebuilding a public fabric of civic and collective rights, practices, and spaces enables the connection between landscape protection (Judgment 310/2006) and the democratic principle of participatory decision-making. It expresses a form of collective capital that ties land ownership to the community (Di Genio, 2019) and removes peri-urban landscapes from any further permanent development or degradation. This “re-landscaping” process transforms already-consumed quantities into new qualitative assemblages through spatial practices that counter the “speculative supremacy of the conceived,” ensuring that “technical activation” (Capone, 2020) of regulations does not flatten space into a consumable commodity.

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