



Luca Maria Francesco Fabris and Guido Granello
Department DASTU
Politecnico di Milano, Milan, Italy
lucamariafrancesco.fabris@polimi.it

Linear Shopping(e)scape: shopping the Italian way

Abstract

The paper first focuses on the history of the urban places devoted to the commerce in the towns of the Italian peninsula and analyses the change the quality and quantity of exchanges and shopping places brought before into at the urban scale and then into the territorial one. From the ancient villages Market Square, to the Market Streets that made the fortune of many Italian cities, then to the Market Roads invented during the Italian Boom of the '60s during last century to the Market Motorway that characterises the nowadays commerce and the shopping centres constellations: all this is the heritage that shaped the continuous, linear shopping landscape present in Lombardy and Friuli Venezia Giulia. The essay tries to individuate some hypothesis starting from this picture in motion, taking count that Italy, beside its cultural and natural landscape, has been always also a living shopping-scape.

Keywords: Italy – Lombardy – Friuli Venezia Giulia - Marketplace – Linear landscape

1 Commerce does landscape

What's a product without its background landscape? All around the world, Italian products reached people's imaginary thanks also to their relation with the beautiful and unique landscapes of regions like Tuscany, towns as Rome or the coastline surroundings of Amalfi, and we can go on with a long list of best places and relative well know local product...

In the same way, any product from Italy comes with all flavours originated by an incredible variety of landscapes and different climatic situations. From the northern Alps Mountains to its southern seas at the centre of Mediterranean, Italy offers a series of different typologies of goods that can satisfy any different taste. The same happens also along the West-East axis of the Boot, the Po Valley, a more than 500 kilometres continuous flat system that created a fluid market network based –till now- on a solid economy both based on a mix of industry and agriculture, on a great trade potential supported by good infrastructural connections and an interesting and wealthy lifestyle.

Inside a social and economical frame like this, in the last decades, the marketplaces moved from the city centres to colonize the open, flat landscape with new commercial malls and so-called “outlet villages” wounding more and more a territory hit by the presence of industrial areas and intensive agriculture.

The northern regions' landscape had been built with enormous fatigues during millennia, and strongly interconnected thanks to Roman Empire military and then commercial road system. Most part of the landscape we still experience in Northern Italy is based after the Roman design, in which the road, called “Via” as, in example, the “Via Postumia” (built in 148 b. C., connecting Genoa to Aquileia, passing through Piacenza, Mantua, Verona, Vicenza) is the continuous line that origins the subdivision in squared parcels of all the territory following mathematics, geometrics and also hydraulic principles. This handmade engineer work optimized the use of the main local constructing material resources and water, obtaining the best way to provide good productiveness to this land after the cutting down of the ancestral plain forest. This millenary road-based structure is visible also nowadays paying attention to any satellite image covering Northern Italy, as all the other interventions on this territory derived from that Roman grid pattern.

Only in the last 200 years, new infrastructural lines attempted to corrupt this scenery thanks to the possibilities related to the modern engineering technologies and

construction systems. All the first industrial developments (in Italy, late XIX century) were built along rivers, especially on mid mountain river valleys (in Italy, close to villages as Biella, Calcagno, Scio, in example) in order to use the mechanical power of the water flow to engine the machineries. Then, with the arrival of the electricity, industries could be located anywhere, creating the premises for a strong developing and urbanization of several communities located all along the Po Valley. Last, the possibility to count on lorries instead of only railways for products distribution contributed to start (in Italy from the early XX century, but exploded after the Second World War) the urban sprawl, which included both housing and industry all over Northern Italy, with acceleration in the change and transformation of landscape. Nowadays most Northern Italy town centres are intended as “open air living rooms”, where citizens can find all the services (from banks to cafés) that they need and lesser and lesser ‘real’ commerce made of shops, boutiques and food markets. These kind of commercial activities are even more often moved to the new shopping centres lying in the city outskirts. A place where urban landscape turned into industrial landscape and now it is modifying into a new shopping-scape.

2 Italian Marketplaces

The history of the urban places devoted to the commerce in the towns of the Italian peninsula and analyses the change the quality and quantity of exchanges and shopping places brought before into at the urban scale and then into the territorial one. The result of this action is a contemporary continuous landscape signed by shopping and commercial network that from the town centres heads to the open countryside and then comes back to the urban fabric again, without any possibility of escape.

It's incredible to see how; places of commerce were and are always ‘independent’ from the settlements as very often they were and are the catalysers of the urban developing. Millennia are passed but the real needs for trading is a place where to meet. And what's better than a crossroad? All starts from here: a public, simple node where people coming from different places with different goods to exchange can meet and do the trade. Around the marketplace grows the town, a community able to do commerce. The importance of places like these are still alive in the toponymy like ‘Mercato’ in Italy, but it is more clear in Germany, where still several villages are titled as ‘Marktstadt’ beside their name. When a marketplace became structured inside an urban fabric (or designed from tabula rasa in a foundation settlement) it becomes the

Roman 'forum', then the Medieval 'piazza delle erbe' (Market Square). Around this place devoted to nomad exchange commerce open the first shops with relative workshops. The town has its residential commerce and can start to specialize its trades.

With the centuries, the commercial fortune of some towns is so wide that a 'void' location in the centre for trade is not more sufficient both for the nomad traders, who start to open representative shops into the town, and the owners of the local workshops that occupy strategic locations along the streets. The late Medieval and Renaissance Market Streets are born. If the most known Italian examples from this period are two very special places like 'Ponte Vecchio' in Florence o 'Ponte di Rialto' in Venice, it's very interesting to notice how the developing of the streets displaying shops coincides with the invention of the arcaded streets still visible in most part of the Northern Italy towns, from Turin to Bologna and in most of the towns under the Venice's Serenissima Republic political influence. (Fig. 1)

During the last century the market squares became hosts of the weekly 'mercato' (the combines usually food and clothing apparel offers) and the shops of all the commercial categories (along the time, more and more without any kind of related workshop and vice versa more and more resellers of industrial products and at last, franchisees) transformed villages and cities streets in linear marketplaces, aligned from the centre to the periphery, with a density that fades in the distance. The common urban landscape of the modern Italian town has come.

The evolution of this model, still balanced on the real necessities of the urban inhabitants, is the Market Road, an invention of the Italian economical "Boom" period (early '60s of last century). The linear shopping-scape that describes the modern Italian towns grows and expands itself along all the great communication roads ("Strade Statali", State roads) connecting town to town. Even it could be absurd do a relation between the developing from nothing of a town like Las Vegas and the advancing of the Market Streets in Italy, the comparison stands. In both cases, the linear distribution of the new built volumes besides a road, assaults the void. But this void is the Nevada's desert in on case, and the fertile Po Valley country fields on the other. More, it has to take in count that, before the developing of Industrial Areas ("Zone Industriali") in the late '70s of last century, along the State Roads find place also industries (big and small) creating a miscellaneous and confused continuum constituted by shops, emporiums, and firms interspersed by buildings for the great distribution (not yet comparable with the volume and importance of nowadays shopping centres). Even if one of the most well known examples of this kind of multifaceted shopping scape are the State roads starting from Milan heading North

to the Lake of Como passing through the Brianza region (one of the more crowded area of Italy), the best idea of this continuous wall built up with shops, supermarkets, industries is the State Road 13 “Pontebbana” from Venice heading North-East to Udine, more than 120 km of commercial buildings and firms of any size that constitute a screen avoiding any permeability with the country fields (vineyards usually) that surround the road channel. The perfect linear shopping scape, you can’t escape all long the way. This is a constant “dèjà vu”, which unifies completely different landscapes.



FIG. 1: Arcades in Corso Vittorio Emanuele, Pordenone. ©LMFFabris

3. Lombardy

Focusing on Lombardy, the A4 Motorway connecting Turin to Venice and Trieste, and part of the European Corridor that in the next future will link Lisbon to Kiev, can be described, between the towns of Novara and Verona, like a more than 200 km long great shopping centre at open air. It's easy to find that distributed near the exits of this Motorway there are more or less 20 commercial centres having each more than 100 shops in average, but some of them reach the great amount of 190 shops under one roof.

Shopping along the A4 Motorway, the highway presenting more traffic in Italy, nowadays is a kind of must for the inhabitants of the major towns of Lombardy. Thanks to the good connections and the heavy advertising campaigns, most part of the people reads the whole commercial system constituted by several and competitors shopping centres as a whole, a kind of unique wide shop with more locations where it is worth to go according with the best offer or the maximum discount available. The Lombardy shopping-scape becomes a kind of new virtual landscape, generating the idea that distances between places are shorter than the real ones, pushing costumers to travel far away from their own city, not more a place where to go to shopping, but a mere point were coming back with full baskets. In example, the society Telepass, the owner of the automatic service for payment of the highways toll throughout Italy, offers a price discount in all the shops present in most part of the Outlet Villages reachable with the motorways. In the stations of the Milanese Metro lines are always present advertisements telling people all the daylong where to go during the weekend to do shopping. All these shopping centres –both commercial or outlets– are built and designed to be friendly places where an individual can pass a day, not only to do shopping, but also for a simple visit offering a quantity of services and amusements as cinemas and restaurants, but also a representative office of the City.

Each shopping centre, actually, has a kind of ‘selfish’ landscape that illustrates the relation existing with the territory that surrounds it and its history. In fact are very few the ones that have a real relation with the location, and even if the local administrations justify the Shopping Centres and moreover the Outlet Villages as a component of the territorial strategy to bring tourist and valorise the places where they are located, unfortunately it is clear by the results that the interaction with the existing former landscape is always disappointed.

4. Friuli Venezia Giulia

As written before, pointing North-East, where Italy meets Austria and Slovenia, ends one of the most interesting Motor Roads, but this part of Italy (the autonomous region Friuli Venezia Giulia) is also home of another peculiar phenomena due to two change happened in the last decades: the entry in the European Union of Austria and Slovenia (and the forthcoming joining to EU of Croatia in July 2013) and new regional rules regarding the big distribution retail and the shopping centres. Both arguments changed not only the way to shop in Friuli, but also innovated, we can argue if with

good or bad results, the landscape of the region. In fact, the very restricted law about commerce and shopping centres in Friuli, dated mid '80s of the last century, allowed the planning and the construction of shopping centres, but –to prevent the economical loss of the street retail into the urban centres- it imposed an incredible schedule of openings times, with the obligation to close during the midday interval (between 12:30 to 15:30) just like the street shops and imposing to them the compulsory closing of one day and half during the week, more the total closing on Sundays. It's evident that with a so limitative regional law the investors didn't like to open new shopping centres, and in fact they where only two (one in Trieste and the other one in Udine, the two major communities of the region) with a very low fortune both in economical and success returns. In fact, during a lapse of time lasted 20 years, Friuli Venezia Giulia has been surrounded by a great commercial offer just few kilometres over its borders both on the Italian side (Veneto Region) and on the Austrian and Slovenian sides: obviously all these commercial sites had and have non-stop openings, and in Slovenia they were (and are) opened 24/7 including a massive offer of casinos that calls people from all the North-East of Italy.

Things changed greatly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the former-Yugoslavian States revolution and finally the Schengen Treaty application: Friuli Venezia Giulia found itself transformed from the extreme borderline of Eastern Italy to be the most important gateway to the Far Eastern Europe with road and railway infrastructures to be bettered and, moreover, a new commercial system to be invented to answer to the new request coming from the new great flows of people passing through there, most part arriving from outside the European Union. And all this was also the start for a first landscape revolution in several places of the region. Starting with the third Millennium, the new Friuli Venezia Giulia law of commerce has been changed, permitting the non-stop openings without pauses during the weekdays, and all the urban master plans (from the Regional to the local ones) indicated the infrastructural road junctions as places devoted to the future development of commerce. This meant that in some places, at the outskirts of the greater communities, like Udine and Pordenone, the old "Market Road" was deformed to integrate bigger commerce interventions, real Shopping Centres, which started to do real concurrency to the street retail (both on food and non-food commerce) hitting first more the private owned realities present in the little communities than the retail shop systems concentrated in the historical centres of the bigger towns.



FIG. 2: A panoramic view of the new Shopping Centre on construction in Villesse, Gorizia. ©LMFFabris

A second revolution started with the arrival of one of the greatest actors on the commerce retail like IKEA (actually Inter IKEA Centre Group) that came to Friuli to build the biggest 'Family Friendly' Shopping Centre of Northern East of Italy (90.000 square metres of gross surface to be realized completely and opened at the end of this year)¹. The new commercial centre is located in Villesse (province of Gorizia)

¹ From the www.iicg.it website: "Set to open in 2013, the Shopping Centre of Villesse will renew the exciting retail offer in Italy. Villesse will be the largest shopping destination in the north-eastern part of Italy and the first retail destination in Italy featuring a fully integrated IKEA store providing direct access to and from the shopping centre. The Shopping Centre of Villesse will feature the strongest and most diverse tenant line-up in the province of Gorizia. The unique design of the Shopping Centre of Villesse welcomes families into a safe and comfortable environment, offering an indulging variety of dedicated play areas and a range of spaces and activities tailored to captivate their imagination while offering adults a refreshing and complete shopping and leisure experience. It is a place for the entire family. The Shopping Centre of Villesse will completely alter the perception of the existing retail concepts creating the most innovative, convenient, captivating and enjoyable shopping address in the region. This unique innovation with an integrated IKEA store within its scheme offers our partners and clients the perfect synergy between the IKEA catchment strength and a top-quality tenant mix including national and international brands. The Shopping Centre of Villesse is designed to welcome families in a safe and comfortable environment, offering an indulging variety of kids & children's dedicated areas and a range of spaces and activities tailored to captivate their imagination while offering adults a refreshing and complete shopping and leisure experience. The Shopping Centre of Villesse is strategically located in the proximity of the junction of the motorway A4 linking Venezia and Trieste and the roads H4 and SS351 connecting Villesse with Gorizia and the Slovenian border. Providing direct access from these primary roads, Villesse offers its visitors sufficient and convenient parking for 4.200 cars. The primary target group for the Shopping Centre of Villesse is the modern family and the location enjoys a wide catchment area with a high family purchasing. The Shopping Centre of Villesse is a family-friendly place, safe, convenient, pleasant and relaxing: the Shopping Centre of

where the A4 Motorway divides in two braches, one leading to Ljubljana (Slovenia) via Gorizia and the other to Trieste continuing towards the Dalmatian Coast (Croatia) and the Balkans (via Zagreb). The new mall serves, counting altogether with the inhabitants reachable also through the A23 Motorway (connecting with Austria) and the Regional Roads, a target basin of about 1,3 millions of potential costumers. It's a real retail revolution, both for the size of the entire building structure (it will include, when finished, 175 shops more a hypermarket and, as logical, the IKEA store) and program, which has a greater and transnational meaning (Fig. 2).

A sample of what could be happening here when the Commercial Centre will be opened, just beside the motorway exit realized anew and empowered to sustain the expected big amount of vehicular traffic, has occurred three years ago when opened the Palmanova Outlet Village². Palmanova is the historical city-fortress built in 1593 by the Venetian Republic as extreme defence against the expected Turks' invasion. The invasion never occurred, but it leaved in the Friulan Plain the beautiful, world-known star-shaped walled town. Now, Palmanova is replicated 2 km beside its own walls, where A23/A4 motorways junction is, in the form of a little shining village organized like a Venetian style town waiting for the assault of costumers from all Europe, coming in this artificial urban landscape called by a siren promising them discounts reaching the 70 per cent of the street prices. (Fig. 3)

Villesse appeals to every customer's imagination. The Shopping Centre of Villesse is the ideal combination between traditional Scandinavian design and the most recent sustainable retail architecture. The centre will have two main entrances, enlightened by impressive full glass façades providing access to the centre and to the IKEA store. Both retail levels have direct access from the wide underlying parking, thus optimizing the in-store traffic. The ground floor will host the IKEA store, a hypermarket and a wide selection of family goods: textiles, electronic goods, home and sport goods. Second level will offer large selection of fashion brands, beauty, a food court offering a wide gastronomy selection as well as a modern multiplex cinema."

² From the description present on the website www.palmanovaoutlet.it: "Palmanova Outlet Village is a shopping citadel with plenty of pedestrian areas and vast, free of charge parking areas. Instead of the traditional type of stores, it hosts over 90 outlets selling famous Italian and European brands of clothes and fashion accessories, cosmetics, home decoration products, as well as restaurants, coffee bars and other socializing areas. Direct sale enables the producers and authorized re-sellers to commercialize the production surplus and unsold merchandise with no additional intermediary costs, at the same time maintaining the quality and the brand image level intact. All products are therefore sold at lower prices, with a minimum of 30% sale during the whole year and a 70% sale for seasonal clearances or special promotional sales. Various events and animation activities make the visit to the Village even more amusing and render the outlet a safe, outdoor place in which to spend free time with friends and the family."



FIG. 3: One commercial streets inside the Palmanova Outlet Village, near Palmanova (Udine). ©LMFFabris

5. Some questions as conclusion

While we are writing, all Europe is facing a terrible crisis that hits all the facets of our common lifestyle. All the family strategies to save money are now provoking unexpected losses also in the great distribution companies' incomes. In Italy, most part of the people spend less also for the food, deserting first the little market of vicinity, then the supermarket and at the end even the hypermarket present inside the big shopping centres. Nor product quality neither budget prices seem to have the same appeal they had few years ago. This crisis, for the first time, seems to dismantle a market system that thought to have reached a kind of perfect climax. For sure, after months of economical losses and the resulting necessity to redesign the commercial and distributive systems, this artificial absolutely anthropic landscape of marketplaces is changing.

In Italy is time to start to think is it still logic to fill the former industrial outskirts areas with new commerce, when we start to see these spaces transformed in shopping centres have no more sense: a commercial place full of temptations for all the family components becomes a place to avoid, and actually nowadays people save also on fuel.



FIG. 4: "Where a building falls down, a garden is blooming". A IBA Stadtumbau 2010 in Dessau (D)
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So it seems to arrive the time for the revenge of the little commerce at local or neighbourhood scale. The little shops that in the last 20 years have been transplanted in the shopping centres could now represent the new challenge in such a dramatic situation, but they have to be thought as innovative, and target shaped. Could this international economic crisis, in example, bring shopping again inside the town, avoiding transportation costs and embracing the zero km theory benefits? In Italy, one of the countries more advanced in cultivation and breeding of organic food, this could be a chance. Actually, beside the local shop of organic food, the commercial retail chains of organic brands are the few still growing realities in all the Country. And is still the shopping by car a valid universal solution? Are the outlet villages with their market squares created for pedestrian shoppers just beside the logistic nodes a mere shooting star phenomenon?

Even if Italian towns are not so touched by the emerging problem of urban shrinking thanks to a almost stable number of inhabitants and a still very weak internal mobility, the problem of an amount of cubic meters abandoned or without use coming out from the disappearing of part of the commerce could be a new task to be faced in the next future. Going by car from Milan to Bergamo, in example, one can see a lot of these void skeletons that are testifying the change now happening.

In a perspective like this, could it be possible to transport here the simple idea studied and developed in Germany for shrinking cities like Dessau by the Internationale Bauausstellung Stadtumbau³ presented in 2010? To react to an urban fabric losing one by one its patterns, in this case they were the abandoned housing blocks that occupied all the inner centre of the German town, passed –after the Berlin Wall fall– from 70.000 inhabitants to less than 45.000, actually a number still decreasing, IBA convinced the City Authorities to demolish these void housing structures filling the parcels with green, simple wild country field vegetation (grass and wild flowers). The great idea was to promote the feeling that something new and positive is still going on where the cancer of the urban shrinking is present. These new wild gardens that cross the city centre of Dessau are there to demonstrate that a change is possible, and if in the future the city will start to grow again the places for new urban structures (housings, shops, offices) are easily at disposal, even if maybe decades have been passed. (Fig. 4)

Apply the a solution like this, that could appear radical, but is very convenient in a moment of complete lack of public money like this, it would really mean to change extremely the linear landscape besides the Northern Italy Motorways and State Roads. It could be a naïve, but intelligent escape to a disastrous reality.

A last question: what if our home was the perfect shopping place? What could happen to landscape if we would decide to shop global thanks to the World Wide Web connections? Should we still have the need of Shopping Centres? This could be the way to the total escape. (Fig. 5).



FIG. 5: Are Shopping Centres a shooting star? What kind of urban landscape will be their legacy?

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³ About this, please visit the pages on Dessau IBA project at www.iba-stadtumbau.de.