



C. Morandi and M. Paris

Professor of Town Planning and Urban Design, Laboratorio Urb&Com, DASTU- Politecnico di Milano - mail: corinna.morandi@polimi.it

FPI-Uva Fellowship, Instituto Universitario de Urbanística - Universidad de Valladolid - mail: mario@institutourbanistica.com

From Retail Polarities to Superplaces New Tools to Understand Recent Transformations in Retail Geography in Italy: The Assago (Mi) Case.

Abstract

Over the past century in the theories of central places shops and services have been significant features of the traditional core of the city. But the localization strategies of large retailing chains have changed: moving from the city to the metropolitan - or post-metropolitan - space. For this reason some of the interpretative categories we usually deal with have to be updated.

This paper is aimed at explaining the relevance of the concept of commercial polarities to understand the transformations in the retail formats and in their localization and at focusing on some exceptional “superplaces”. This research could be the key to comprehend the double role of those polarities - product and producer of changes - in the contemporary metropolitan areas.

Key words: retail, polarities, superplaces, central places, placemaking

Introduction

Over the past century the theories of central places have emerged as geography and urbanism tools (Christaller, 1933; Alonso 1960). The presence of shops and the consumption habits have been significant features of central places. Is this concept still useful to describe the effects of recent changes in the geography of retail activities in Italy?

The localization strategies of large retailing chains have changed because the city itself has evolved in metropolitan - or post-metropolitan (Cacciari, 2004) - space and some of the interpretative categories we usually deal with have to be updated.

We concentrate on the concept of commercial polarities to understand the transformations in the retail formats and in their localization and at focusing on some exceptional polarities – superplaces – to understand some dynamics of the contemporary city and metropolitan areas. We integrate this theoretical framework with a number of empirical observations from our recent research work to describe the characters of superplaces in contemporary physical, socio-economical and institutional context. As a study case we have selected Assago (Milan – Italy): an aggregation formed in different phases from the seventies up to now by a business centre, concert hall and indoor stadium, shopping malls, offices, hotel, sport facilities and residential buildings in the southern periphery of the Milan urban region.

This case allows to argue if and when a process of accumulation and polarization of selected activities, supported by the enhancing of multimodal accessibility and by the control of the quality of urban, landscape and architectural design can "make a place" (Castello, 2010) with urban features in a suburban region.

The Italian deregulation: Toward a different retail geography

In Italy, after the retail reform of 1998¹, the modernization of the retail sector and of the sales formats developed rapidly. The liberalization process had a double impact: on the consumption attitudes and behaviours and on the economics of the sector.

These changes have been social, economic and regulatory at the same time and had a strong influence in the Italian territorial settlement due to the entrance into the market of foreign large retailing chains, to the innovations in the presence of

¹ D.Lgs. 114/98

international brands and to the introduction of a multi-channel supply system (Morandi, 2009).

As in other South European countries like Spain and Portugal, these recent transformations have changed both the settlement phenomena of sales in cities and regions and the consumers' everyday habits. One result of these transformations was the change in scale of the localization strategies of the large retailing chains.

On the side of the users, the trend, started since the '60s, to move by car for a relatively long time was largely accepted, together with the development of a selective attitude in shopping habits.

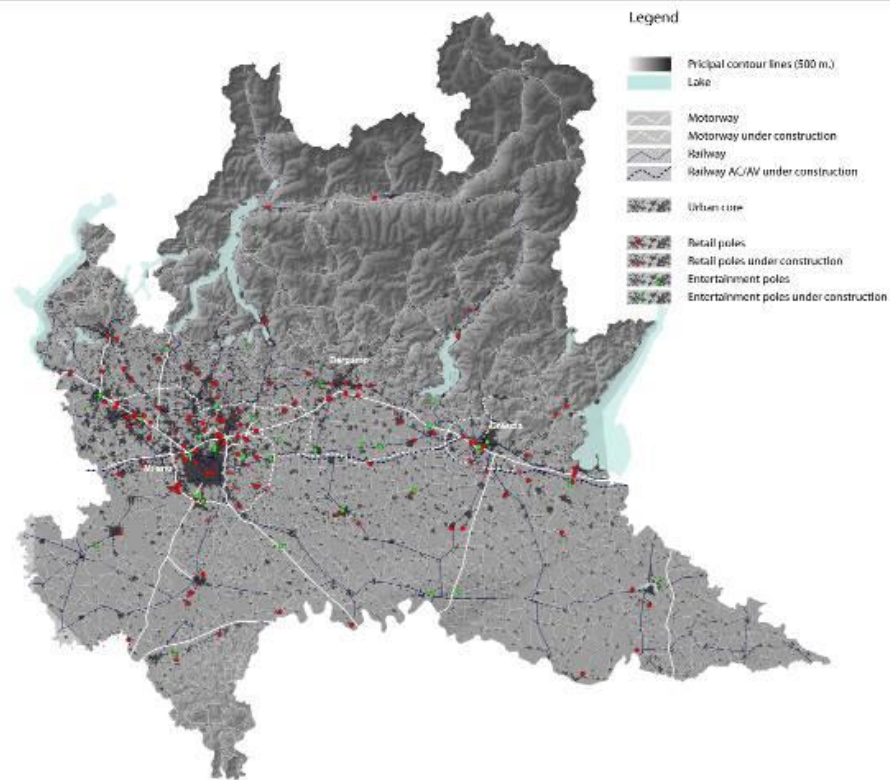


FIG. 1: The multiplication of commercial plants: From city to the post-metropolitan territory in Lombardia (I). Source: Mario Paris, 2012

Another key factor helps to explain the multiplication of commercial plants in the outskirts of cities and in the regions, as an effect of the deregulation and competition among international chains. Retail developers, with a new attention to territorial

features and to localization strategies, need to cover large catchment areas or at least to share them with competitors. Over the past ten years several retail actors tried to increase number of their stores and their economic role in the market. For suburban settlements this process led both to increase the presence of retail plants and the number of stores (shopping malls and specialized sales), with problematic effects on landscape and traffic.

In this paper we focus on both aspects of these changes: (i) we study the single product of these transformations (the “polarity” as an object and polarities as a system) and (ii) we analyse the territory outcomes due to the presence of this system.

From autistic stores to retail polarities

The effect of the changes in retail actors’ strategies being an over-offer of stores and sales surfaces, often shaped by the brands’ competition more than by the consumers’ demand, the result was a system, formed by heterogenic elements: from monofunctional spaces (stores), enclosed in themselves and autistic toward the context, to multifunctional settlements where retail is a destination among others, such as entertainment, culture, sports, and hospitality.



FIG. 2: Just autistic spaces? Source: Photomontage M. Paris on *Il vulcano buono*: RPBW Design Mall (2009)

The development of these integrated retail aggregations can also be related with the crisis of other commercial formats, up to now successful, like ipermarkets, or multiplex, or some “category killers”.

Consumers are attracted by these innovative multifunctional spaces where they buy goods and access to services and experiences. Most of these aggregations are located in highly accessible places, in the interfaces between different transport nets (where the highways cross the high-speed railway transport, the low-cost aerial traffic or the urban public transport, or all of them together).

Among these aggregations we distinguish some exceptional places, which we define *polarities* for the role they play in processes of territorial re-configuration.

The term “polarity” is used, for example by N. Portas, Á. Domingues and J. Cabral (2011), to contain several different situations. According to the Portuguese authors the key factor of polarities -their point in common- is their “large mass”. This mass could be intended from two points of view: the dimensional point, and the functional one.

Several authors point to the geometrical dimension of polarities as the cause of their spatial role. Scholars call it “*Grandi strutture del tempo libero*” (Usai, 2011) or “*Strutture a grande occupazione di suolo*”² (Morandi & al., 2009). In these definitions, the persistent recurrence of the term “structure” is due to the idea that these spaces are areas where some different elements converge on, and it reveals the complex nature of the polarities. At the same time, the root of the term, the Latin verb “*struere*” (to build) could be intended as a reference to the unequal and fragmented process of construction of polarities.

From the other point of view, the mass of polarities is the engine of a process of high congestion -term used in a positive sense by R. Koolhaas (1994)- of fluxes and activities. This way, as the Dutch author said (1995) about building, beyond a certain critical mass a polarity (as aggregate of retail and entertainment functions) could achieve the property of “*bigness*”³. This property is related to the power of attraction of different kinds of flows (in certain sense, it works as a gravity force and polarities system, as a gravity model).

² These definitions could be translated as “Large structures for enteratiment” and “Large ground occupation structures”.

³ “Beyond a certain critical mass, a building becomes a big building. Such a mass can no longer be controlled by a singular architectural gesture, or even by any combination of architectural gestures. The impossibility triggers the autonomy of its parts, which is different from fragmentation: the parts remain committed to the whole” (Koolhaas, 1995: 495)

In this paper we focus on the evolution of the polarities format, according to our most recent researches⁴. We assume that some polarities are undergoing processes of transformation. In fact, there are aggregations becoming different from the usual mono-functional retail spaces. Some of them become dynamic and attractive areas to users, which can concentrate a great amount of diverse activities. By this way we deal with polarities as complex entities, aggregating different destinations, where there is no clear distinction in consumption of goods, services or experiences (Morandi, 2009). Some of them represent interesting innovations in retail formats, and an answer to intense and frequent changes in the consumers' demand.



FIG. 3: An interesting innovation on retail formats. Source: Photo of C. Morandi (2013)

The list of the functions that can “take place” in polarities is diverse and heterogeneous: retail and entertainment are one of the principal anchors (shoppertainment). Other important elements are: multiplex (as structures that modernize and expand the market of movie screenings), sports stadiums (among others: autodromes, arenas and, primarily, soccer stadiums) and theme parks. Over the last decade all these functions have experienced innovations to improve their activity time and, at a glance, their potential market). Other elements that show certain dynamism are spaces related to the mass transport, especially HSR station (due to the projects associated to the UE programs) and airports (and, above all, the low cost hubs). Several refurbishment projects try to transform those technical spaces in multifunctional containers and hybrid boxes. At the same time other interesting cases are the result of a simple accumulation process: any intentional projects or public strategies drive the change.

⁴ We refer to an Inter-university research Program called “*La valutazione dell'impatto territoriale delle grandi polarità commerciali: factory outlet centre, multiplex, parchi commerciali. Un approccio interregionale*”. It was developed by DITER, Politecnico di Torino and University of Torino, by DiAP (now DASTU) of Politecnico di Milano and by the Dipartimento di Economia of the University of Parma. The results of this Program, founded by Piemonte, Lombardia and Emilia Romagna Regions, are collected in the book Brunetta, G. & Morandi, C. (2009) *Polarità commerciali e trasformazioni territoriali: un approccio interregionale* (Firenze, Alinea)

A new layer in polcentric territory

To study polarities as nodes of a system we used different points of views, leaving the physicist models based on gravity on the background.

According to Van Oort & al. (2010) several scholars from economics studies (Lambooy, 1998; Batten, 1995; Sachar, 1994) point to network society as the key factor of the rise of a new geography. In this view the regional contemporary territory is completely different from the modern city (Secchi, 2000). Several authors created new definitions, trying to describe the changing status: the exopolis (Soja, 2011; 2000), the metapolis (Ascher, 1995), the generic city (Koolhaas, 1995), etc. All opinions point to describe the regional territory as a relational space (Echeverría; 1994, Castells, 1989), marked by a matrix where different scales, different process of growth and different phases of transformation co-exist. So a territorial pattern based on flows and nodes describes the contemporary condition better than consolidate models. The result is a new spatial vision: a poli-centric urban configuration where the region is structured by complementary and cooperative networks (Camagni, 1991; Camagni & Capello 2004).

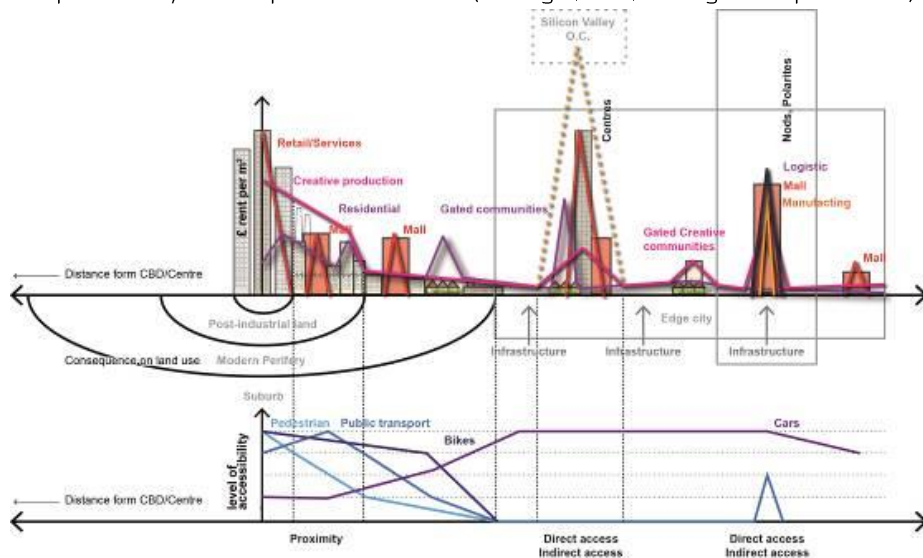


FIG. 4: Alonso's model in the contemporary territory. Source: M. Paris (2013) in *Ciudades*, n. 16, pp. 55

Such systems need spaces that allow and improve the interchange and the transmission of different factors. The polarities that we refer belong to such spaces and their presence shows two key factors.

a. Polarities growth is –maybe was, due to the current financial crisis- possible just in a few areas, with certain features (good accessibility, enough space, large potential market, etc.). These features are related to the “power of places” (De las Rivas, 2013, 2010). Over the adaptation of space to human needs (Mitchell, 1999), the power of place represents a condition for polarities, and place’s features are an element of strengthening.

b. Development of polarities is a simultaneous process. Each one grew through specific procedures marked by local characters and where, sometimes, the same stakeholders⁵ are involved. The result is a new spatial system, marked by an independent and unprecedented hierarchy and by logic of functional complementarity.

Territorial polarization is an extended and complex process. Despite our sectorial approach, the goal of our research has been to focus on polarities as a multifaceted phenomenon. For this reason we can highlight their spatial role, through different points of view (territorial, economic, social).

All these approaches point to polarities (located in urban centers or in other contexts) as differentiating factors for space. According to the several geographical studies (Aurousseau, 1921; Christaller, 1933; Losch, 1940; Berry, 1965) dimension and diversity in offer of goods, services and jobs contribute significantly to the polarization process of regions.

Thanks to their attraction power, polarities hold a richer system of interactions between functions and between functions and people. By this way, polarities become part of a spatial hierarchy. Some of them have evolved from their condition of retail agglomerates and became central spaces. Especially when they are multifunctional dense aggregations where, along with retail and entertainment functions and services, other destinations as hospitality, culture, production, logistics - and sometimes housing- are hosted.

Actually for most of the cases we should refer to a potential role more than a real position. But the functional density and the volume of possible interactions suggest this idea. Another factor is the existing difference between these areas and the

⁵ Stakeholders are often similar (real estate operators, retail chains, entertainment chains, etc.) and they work together building polarities equipped with the same type of functions and in competition against each other.

“ordinary” context -result of the metropolization of regions (Indovina, 2004) - where they are located.

Some polarities are competing and integrating in this complex urban-rural mosaic (De las Rivas & Paris, 2013) with the other elements of the centralities’ system composed by new agglomerations and consolidated urban spaces (Portas, 2004). N. Portas & al. (2003) stated that in urban conurbations this centralities’ system forms an upper level layer. Through it, relationships flow and densify. Besides, it connects territories, more or less distant from each other. At the same time, it strengthens complex networks, where different kinds of connections are developed: directed, tangential, multipolar and intermittent ones). We assumed that when a polarity attracts different functions and it has a high level of accessibility, it could become a vector for the development of a condition of new urbanity. The next step of the research was focusing and defining a group of polarities that we chose to name *superplaces* (Boeri, 2005).

The rising of “Superplaces”

We sought to define a superplace as a twenty-four hours active multipurpose space which develops by virtue of its connections to specific contextual conditions, creating and exploiting local and extra-local flows and acting as a pole for people’s daily activities within a broader regional context and as an engine of balanced spatial, economic and social development (Paris, 2009).

This definition synthesizes the terms of the problem and, as all simplifications do, reduces a much more fragmented and complex reality to a minimum. Its role was useful in applying some limits to accepting a series of cases as superplaces.

We assumed that to be considerate a “superplace” two features are required: those that (i) integrate themselves in - and modify- the geography of central places of a region and (ii) show characters similar to urban places, being more than an aggregation of a number of activities.

The last feature is a key factor because superplaces are collusive⁶ sites (Lyster, 2006) where fluxes of people, informations, goods, energies and investments⁷ overlap each

⁶ May we can focus on the concept of collusive sites. As C. Lyster says (2007; p. 217): “High-speed infrastructural networks such as distribution hubs, airports, rail yards, highway interchanges, and inter-modal facilities are natural collusive sites. Collusive territories tend not to occur accidentally but instead accumulate upon each other over time and are commonly coincident to preexisting sympathetic conditions such as infrastructure, geographical features, natural resources, and program; that is, they reconfigure and magnetize existing topography rather than develop it from scratch” (pag. 217).

other. When this condition is real, place has an identity “per se”, and users’ practices tend to enrich technical locations: even if such places are usually neither urban nor central⁸.

Superplaces are exceptional “objects”, which initially appeared to be disordered, accidental or out-of-context. In this heterogeneous system some recurring features relate to their physical, functional and temporal characteristics. The principal ones are the following:

- Large size⁹
- Multi-purpose (or multi-functional) character
- Dynamic growth (sequence of phases of realization)
- Multimodal accessibility
- Wide range of user types
- Regular distribution of space use over time.

Superplaces are aggregations of public buildings, public spaces and technical areas exceeding the monofunctional consumer-oriented places that people visit specifically for purchasing goods, services and experiences. They play a polarizing role in a region depending on the possibility and availability to travel by potential clients who even endure relatively long journeys in terms of time and distance, thus becoming selective in their choice (Brunetta & Morandi, 2009).

Moreover, since these polarities are located next to - or within - transport exchange nodes, inflowing people act alternately as travellers, users or consumers according to the time of the day.

The spatial role of superplaces develops on multiple scales (basically local, supra-local and regional) and for this reason this role could be defined as transitory (or liquid, using a Z. Bauman’s term). Often, superplaces are “city gates” or “monuments” thanks to their critical mass, to their wide array of facilities and/or to the fact that they have been designed by internationally renowned archistars. They house

⁷ In recent publications (Paris, 2013) we use the acronym PIGES (People, Informations, Goods, Energies and \$ is for “Investments”) to describe the complex nature of these flows.

⁸ Not just places but *superplaces*. The prefix itself suggests a unique character, or at least a prominent role, since what is *super* usually boasts exceptional size or some other qualifying trademark. In this sense, a superplace *should* correspond to a context in which the qualities of a place develop on a higher, or even an extreme, level.

⁹ During the research project, it became clear that it is impossible to define superplaces by setting threshold dimensions for two reasons. First, there are profound differences within the highly diversified sample of cases that we analysed. Second, the extent of these phenomena is to be understood from a multi-scale perspective, which often makes it difficult to measure both their true size and the effects they generate within their surroundings and beyond.

shopping centres, office complexes and spaces for collective entertainment such as stadiums and theme parks where human, capital and information flows are concentrated and interact thus strengthening the image of the consumer-oriented society (Gamesey & McGlade, 2006) that marks our times.

The hypothesis around which we are arguing is that in the next future a further selection of superplaces will support a process of territorial reorganization at the regional scale. The study case of Milano Fiori seems to have the characters to play that kind of role for the Milan urban region.

The case study: Milano Fiori from a business district to a mixed-uses pole in Assago-Rozzano

Assago is a city of more than 8.000 inhabitants¹⁰ which, together with the nearby city of Rozzano (39.882 inhabitants in 2012), hosts one of the most important developments which has completely transformed the hierarchy of the urban poles in the southern sector of the Milan metropolitan area.



FIG. 5: Milano Fiori: a mixed-uses pole in the southern sector of the Milan metropolitan area. Source: M. Paris (2013)

¹⁰ 8.107 in 2012 (Data Istat – Istituto nazionale di statistica).

We have selected this site as a case study for several reasons, related to the characters assumed as relevant to define a “superplace”: the size of the development, the significance of the territorial and functional components of the pole, the clear sequence of phases which allowed to transform a place: from a settlement of industrial area in a complex regional pole hosting a complete set of uses (retail, residence and entertainment).



FIG. 6: Milano Fiori: a mixed-uses pole in the southern sector of the Milan metropolitan area. Source: Elaboration of M. Paris on Bing Maps image (2013)

Early stage (1975-1985): the self-sufficient business district

The Milano Fiori settlement was started in the mid Seventies, when a great amount of agricultural areas (150 hectares) are transformed to host a business district. Several reasons support this choice, such as the lack of areas for innovative and large tertiary services in the city centre, quite congested for the uncontrolled traffic flows and for the lack of parking areas. Secondly the decision of the Milan Municipality not to provide zones for tertiary destinations in the general plan. Besides, the idea of programming the realization of a satellite city started to be discussed in the most advanced metropolitan area of Italy, following European models¹¹. In fact, it is

¹¹ An article of Times of October 27th 1981 describes the Milano Fiori business district as the North Italy answer to Milton Keynes

interesting to notice in the perspective of the future development of the pole, that since the beginning the idea of a self-sufficient settlement was forwarded, integrating the main buildings for offices with other services.

The area in the southern sector of the Milan region was selected on account of the availability of low cost land, round 15 kilometres from the city centre, quite accessible by car at the crossing of the Milano-Genova motorway with the west by-pass. The areas were owned by one of the few main financial groups acting in the transformation process of the south Lombardy agricultural land to support real-estate developments (gruppo Cabassi).

At the same time, a parallel process of change of the destination of a large amount of areas from agricultural to industrial or tertiary uses was ongoing and a strategic planning tool at the metropolitan scale forwarded the realization in the southern sector of a business district and of a new motorway junction. Meanwhile, a project was under discussion to extend to south the metro line, as far as an interchange node with bus lines to reach Milano Fiori.

For the realization of the business district a modular model was decided, following a grid where the 21 buildings are organized in perpendicular blocks quite recognizable both in the plan and in the reflecting curtain-wall surfaces.

At the beginning of the Eighties the greatest part of the Milano Fiori district was completed, hosting round 10.000 jobs, with a relevant presence of societies in the media field. The World Trade Centre, a congress hall, a 500 beds hotel, a sport centre and other facilities, a commercial plant of 12.000 square meters of GLA, Euromercato, representing the largest in Lombardy at the time belong to this first phase of the establishment of the new settlement.

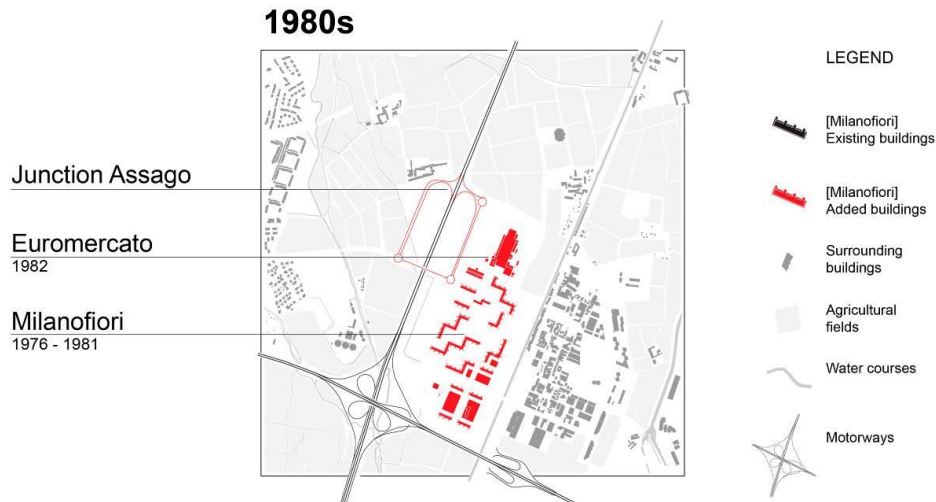


FIG. 7: Milano Fiori - 1980s. Source: Elaboration of M. Paracchini (2013)

The south extension (during the Nineties): shopping mall and parking lots

The second phase of development of Milano Fiori outlines the perspective of the strengthening of the southern settlement, according to some relevant decisions or to projects which don't find nevertheless the conditions for their implementation. The main actor is the same Gruppo Cabassi which has led the realization of the business district, which aims at the realization of a system of different functions interacting with each other. The areas for the new development amount to 110 hectares. The main proposal under discussion concerns the localization of an exhibition site of the Milan Fair close to Milano Fiori and goes back to 1982 (project by Renzo Piano). The spaces for the exhibition were conceived as a new part of a metropolitan system. This part was composed by destinations and services for the industrial and tertiary activities and, among them, also the experimental project for a farmhouse. In fact, after years of debates the new site of the Milan Fair will be located in the north-western direction (municipalities of Rho-Pero), while the extension of Milano Fiori is mainly addressed to increase the supply of commercial activities, starting from the doubling of Euromercato, owned by the Fininvest Group. In the late Eighties one of the results of the negotiation between the local municipalities and the land owners and developers for changing some destinations of the former agricultural ground, was that 50 hectares in the most southern zone were destined to the realization of a park.

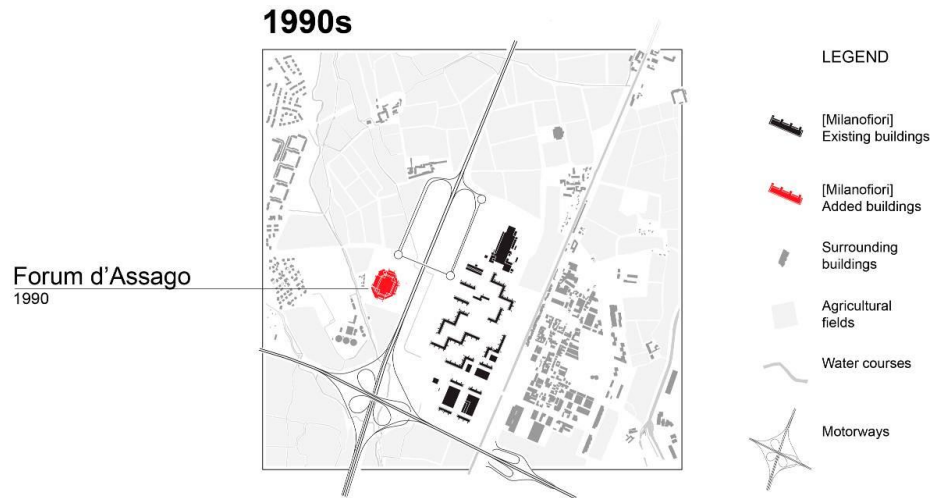


FIG. 8: Milano Fiori – 1990s. Source: Elaboration of M. Paracchini (2013)

The competition in land uses and the power of the landlords, financial groups and developers struggled against the realization of the Parco Agricolo Sud Milano, whose perimeter was influenced and attached by developments such as Milano Fiori or others in the south of the Milan region.

In 1990 another important tile of the reinforcement of the southern settlement is represented by the realization – on the western side of the motorway – of a sport and music hall (Forum di Assago), covering an area of 40.000 sqm and hosting up to 13.500 people.

The north extension(2006-up to now): public transport and mixed uses

The last stage of the reinforcement of the settlement that we are describing shows some similarities and some new issues in comparison with the previous phases. The development is led again by the Cabassi Group (Brioschi Sviluppo Immobiliare spa). The whole complex realization, covering an area of 36 hectares, is referred to a master plan, for which Erick van Egeraat is committed and several designers are involved in the different parts of the settlement¹². This approach is quite different either from

¹² Offices along the Milano-Genova motorway by Erick Van Egeraat, shopping mall by Studio 5+1AA, residential buildings by Open Building Research, offices building by CZA Cino Zucchi Architetti, by Park Associati and by ABDA Architetti Botticini De Apollonia Associati.

the unitary design of the Milano Fiori business district and from the “not labelled” design of the commercial activities.

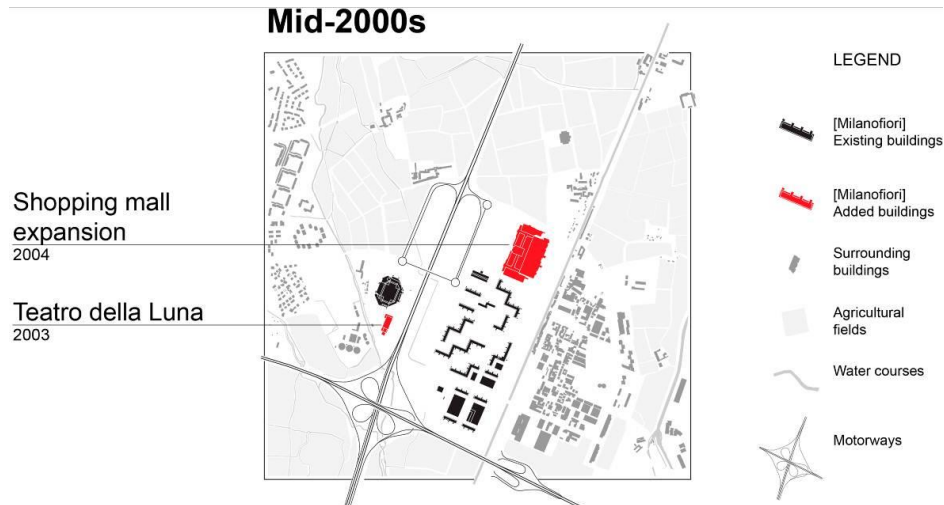


FIG. 9: Milano Fiori – Mid-2000s. Source: Elaboration of M. Paracchini (2013)

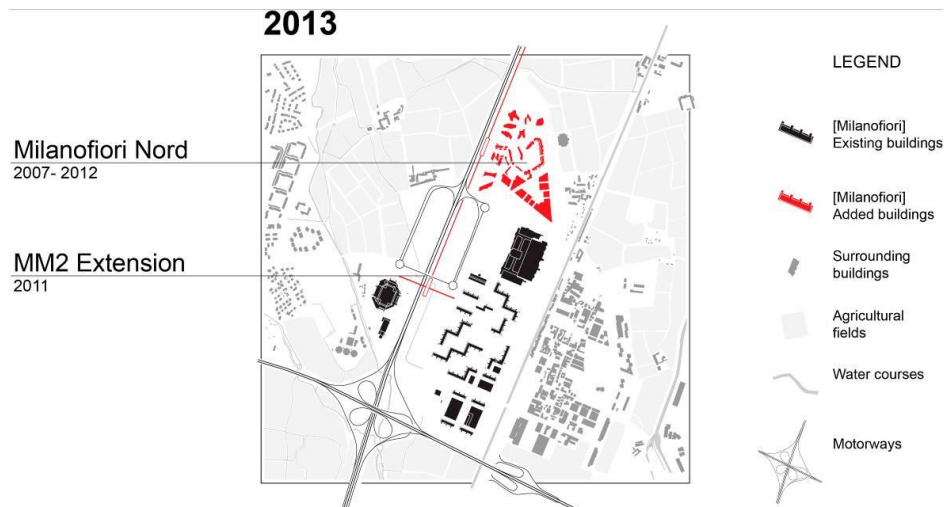


FIG. 10: Milano Fiori – from 2006 up to now. Source: Elaboration of M. Paracchini (2013)

The main aim of Milano Fiori Nord seems to be the implementation of the idea of providing a satellite city, whose components are characterized by the huge presence of offices and shopping malls, integrated by several activities such as the UCI multiplex, the Virgin gym, the Hotel, restaurants and pubs.

Some elements seem to represent a step forward the realization of a new polarity in the regional context.

The metro line has been extended to Milano Fiori and reaches the sport and music hall, and it allows a multimodal accessibility to the whole pole.

The integration of activities is quite high, and it produces an effect of attractiveness for a large part of the 24 hours time. Round 10% of the total floor space is destined to the residential buildings, easily accessible by the metro line and settled around a large green space. Nevertheless, despite these attempts to mix the components of the urban settlement, some weak elements show the difficulties in realizing spaces that are not just the result of the aggregation of different functions. The integration of the parts of the settlement realized in different stages seems quite difficult to be achieved and the pedestrian, hanging “piazza” in the centre of the new shopping mall looks less vital and attractive than the space dedicated to different mobility flows in-between the various commercial buildings.

Conclusion

The case study of Milano Fiori has proved to be quite significant to explore the theme of the process of selection of settlements where the component of retail activities is relevant: one orientation of this process is toward a progressive decline of attractiveness due to the multiplication and competition of commercial plants which lack of specific features; on the other side, there is the opportunity for some aggregations of commercial activities to be recognized as “superplaces” in the sense that we explained before: due to the size of the aggregation, to the richness and complexity of the aggregated activities and to their level of integration and time of liveliness, to the multimodal accessibility, to the attractiveness of the public space, to the quality of urban, landscape and architectural design.

In the case study some of these features can be found, for others some weak elements at the local scale will probably take time to show their possibility to produce “urbanity” as a recognized value for “shoppingscapes”. Nevertheless it seems possible that Milano Fiori can contribute to the process of polycentric reorganization at the regional scale, through the improvement of the physical and social relationship among its components, avoiding any other consumption of land.

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