

# Slack City – Slack Land. Strategies, Processes and Projects for Intermediate Territories

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## Abstract

The essay summarizes the fundamental elements of a research study that involved the design and urban planning sectors. The work addresses the issue of identity transformation that affects the morphological and functional aspect of some urban areas and those mainly used for agriculture. The difficulty of adapting to increasingly rapid and substantial transformations is revealed in a multi-scalar reality involving material and virtual aspects. The research project starts from the definition of slack area given by Jeremy Till — an available but not necessarily built space within a homogeneous fabric — trying to contribute to the debate on medium-sized cities and transferring the concept of slack from the urban environment (city) to the predominantly agricultural one (land). The project has highlighted a polycentric and reticular reality that expresses growing social and environmental fragilities to which the project actions attempt to provide a vision by coordinating within a common scenario.

## Keywords

Local development  
Design for social innovation  
Strategic urban planning  
Design with/for territories

## Empty/Full, Agricultural/Urban. On the Territory and the Identity of the Landscape

The Ferrara area has unique characteristics and peculiarities in the regional and supra-regional panorama: an agricultural surface area 20 points higher than the average in the Emilia Romagna region and an incidence of the urbanized landscape on the total almost one third lower than the rest of the region. The historical distance from the development dynamics that have constituted the Via Emilia model on the one hand, and the Romagna model on the other, has isolated this plain area but has, at the same time, preserved it from aggressive and invasive phenomena of productive expansion from an environmental point of view. A territory that due to 'phenomena of subsidence', rising sea levels, marine ingress, hydrogeological vulnerability, must be defined as fragile but the set of 'UNESCO Whl and Mab' and Parco del Delta del Po recognitions testifies to its excellence. Between land and water, fragility and excellence, today the landscape is characterized by quality agricultural production. However, there are morphological and semantic discontinuities that require a new interpretation and design that, on the one hand, reconnects traditional material culture to the current and future needs of the environment and its inhabitants.

The adaptation of production to a systemic model, new models of tourism and entrepreneurial development, are principles included in development policies such as the National Strategy for Internal Areas (SNAI) and the Territorial Agreement for the implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) that were considered in the first phase of the project Fig.1.



Fig. 1  
Torre Palù and Chiavica  
del Bosco: the identity  
heritage in the Goro area  
within the Po Delta Park,  
by Francesco Alberti.

## Visibility and Boundaries

There is a double system of physical boundaries in the areas under consideration. The first is that of the cities defined by dense and compact buildings such as the historic center of Ferrara and other minor historic centers in the province; the other is the system of water and service villages built in the places affected by the agrarian reform between 1960 and 1965, which allowed communities to settle and consolidate in completely reclaimed agricultural areas. These areas have a strong productivity and morphological peculiarities. There is also a system of 'visual boundaries' that can be no less significant.

Emilio Sereni (1972) highlights how the processes of agricultural industrialization have influenced the choice and extension of crops, and therefore the image of the territories as well. Like architecture, cultivated places are also ideated and designed, albeit with different objectives: a fortification defines a place, but it is also defined by a chromatically homogeneous cultivated extension. In both cases, however, the elements of visible reality are essential for the recognisability of the territories and for their identity. Also, for this reason, the first environmental protection strategy, which led to the creation of reserves and natural parks, was conceived with the aim of preserving landscapes according to their visibility in terms of the concept of wilderness (Guha, 2016).

In the province of Ferrara, there is a significant presence of intensive cultivations of grasses, beside areas still covered by spontaneous vegetation and fauna that, through the early sixties, represented a characteristic although not primary resource. Human action has defined a visual identity image that can be a strategic element for the growth of economic, environmental and social well-being. The sudden social transformations and changes in climate that affect the entire territory and create continuous mutations in places and territories must then be considered.

## Discontinuity, Loosening

This being said, the term slack seeks to define the discontinuities, the loosening that in the two contexts, urban and non-urban, have a morphologically opposite value: in the compact homogeneous urban fabric, the attention of the project has been concentrated on the areas that are voids without design; in the non-urban area, on the other hand, the built elements are those that often have no relationship with the surrounding environment. The concept that Jeremy Till, in *Architecture Depends*, defines as slack space is that of an available but not necessarily built space, one that can be transformed and filled with different things (Till, 2013). A space that encourages the user to make decisions, exercise personal agency and interact with others: in other words to design their own citizenship. An idea not only of space that potentially shifts the interest from professional design towards the fluidity of participatory design, in which authority and the production of meaning are gradually restored to the user (Alberti, 2023).

The concept of Slack space seems to find assonances with what Riccardo Varini defines as threshold spaces, “transition spaces between different contexts that communities ultimately represent: threshold spaces between public and private, nature and artifice, city and architecture, center and periphery, urban and agricultural, south and north” (Varini, 2019, p. 236).

Unresolved spaces in the urban environment, according to Sennett, can be interpreted as spaces in which transformations, predominantly of a social nature, find the physical and functional opportunity to materialize: “The density, the heterogeneous character of the population of a city generate multiple scenarios for civil society, provided that these spaces are not fixed in form and function. Our thesis is that the DNA of these unresolved and liberating spaces can, in fact, be designed” (Sendra & Sennett, 2020, p. 35).

In rural areas, the transformation of production processes has generated social and structural changes that are perhaps less visible, but seem to be able to generate innovation, especially in networks of relationships Fig. 2.



Fig. 2  
Destra Po: cycle and pedestrian infrastructure in the Riva del Po area, by Francesco Alberti.

### Two Contexts, One Territory

Ferrara is a medium-sized city that can represent a case study on both a national and European scale. The socio-demographic characteristics and related historical evolutions allow us to analyze and read a territory occupied by parts, correlated and complementary to one another: the medieval historical center, the Renaissance additions with the important eighteenth-century inserts, and the city consolidated between the 19th and 20th centuries that completes the spaces available within the city walls. With the demise of the hypothesis of industrial development which had been a driving force until a few decades ago, the goal today is to enhance the existing architectural heritage and consolidate quality agricultural production within an emerging framework of controlled tertiary sector growth, supported by university centers of applied research (Dicecca, 2019), internationally renowned cultural activities, and an increasingly qual-

ified and sustainable tourism attracted both by natural areas and the cultural heritage (Ippoliti, 2018). The capital exerts a natural attraction for people from the smaller agglomerations that, as a whole, have a population numerically comparable to that of Ferrara and which, as mentioned earlier, constitute a system of network relations. The combination of these factors has made it necessary to organize spaces that, like a sponge, can expand and accommodate people and activities, and then contract when not in use.

Of the elements that have guided the reading of the territories, urban and otherwise, we wanted to start with the meanings represented by the word border, interpreting it as a marker of differences in identity capable of defining homogeneous realities that are enriched by the constant reciprocity expressed in the connections of networks, and not as a limit or separation.

Elements of discontinuity and instability are considered as a richness, not as foreign bodies or elements that must be assimilated into the prevailing contexts. While on the basis of the National Internal Areas Strategy, attention to the importance of non-urban territories has increased, Richard Florida's (2003) thesis, which posits that change, especially when linked to creative activities, is concentrated in cities, in dense places, cannot be considered completely outdated. This statement is of particular interest when considering the productive aspects of the territories. Giuseppe Lotti seems to reinforce the concept in this regard when he writes that "Increasingly, the knowledge economy tends to take root in cities with consequences on the territory" (Lotti & Trivellin, 2018, p. 10). While the city remains the fulcrum of the most substantial changes, it is also true that relationships foster a new concept of innovation that cannot be separated from that of sustainability, and must be applied to the various social, environmental, economic and cultural aspects. These relationships are also intensifying in non-urban environments (Tamborrini & Stabellini, 2018) making it possible to conceive of a design strategy that provides more homogeneous opportunities in different realities, in this case involving the presence of medium-sized urban centers Fig. 3.



Fig. 3  
Coletta Park, redeveloped urban space in front of the skyscraper. Landmark of the north-western part of the city of Ferrara, by Francesco Alberti.

## The Design Premises

In these two contexts, design can be defined as design with and for the territories. In the first case, it was defined with interventions of a regenerative nature and social design, centered on local communities in urban areas; in the second, interventions are being defined to enhance the territories, in some cases even developing system-product projects.

Among the best-known contributions on the role of the designer in participatory design interventions are those by Ezio Manzini. In the analysis phase, we referred to his definitions of communities of purpose and interest and how they develop in hybrid environments — between physical and virtual — and how one of their main characteristics is fluidity (Manzini, 2018).

One of the elements on which the research was based is the Davos Declaration, which states that measures must be adopted to prevent social, economic, environmental and climate developments from further reducing the quality of built space, and that changes must instead be perceived as an opportunity to improve the existing situation (Ave, 2020).

The disciplines of urban planning and design have sought to delve deeper into this theme by trying to define the term building in the contemporary context, proposing that it can no longer be a synonym of construction but rather of designing using material and immaterial elements.

The focus thus shifts to design based on the enhancement of local resources and to community design projects, as a participatory model implemented through practice in both urban and non-urban contexts (Villari, 2012).

Two strategies have been applied: the valorization of cultural and productive traditions and the reinforcement of networks by means of digital technologies based on consolidated traditional models that bring together the local and the global. Regarding the valorization of local productions and the application of circular economy principles and systemic design, agricultural productions are the first to be investigated (Bistagnino, 2009). There are various associations whose role is to keep local culture alive and promote a conscious use of urban space — such as the cultural activities of the GAL Delta 2000. But they struggle to create a wider network and involve young people, to whom they can transmit their interest in ensuring the survival of these areas (Carta & Ronsivalle, 2015). Within this specific context, certain educational research projects, developed in parallel with this experience, seek to valorise and explore the processing of local resources to create everyday objects. Here the research has been oriented towards rethinking construction processes by innovating techniques (Brignoni & Trivellin 2024), but also by interpreting tradition with contemporary criteria, for the value it can have today (Lenclud, 2001).

The set of elements thus described seems to be the basis for the production of elastic spaces where shaping the living environment is not only a cultural act but also a design act (Ratti, 2014).

It is important to highlight that the project is based on objectives number 11 and 12 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (sustainable cities and communities; responsible consumption and production).

Such attention goes in the direction previously traced by the Faro Convention, in relation to the right and duty, on the part of cultural communities, to take care of their cultural heritage (Brown, 2011).

## The Research Project

The parts that we consider most original and that we believe it appropriate to report concern two thematic directions. The first is Land architecture: city networks between inclusion and marginality. The second is Water architecture: development geometries. The first focuses on the reclaimed territories east of Ferrara, with the aim of studying the architecture of the cities and villages newly founded in the twentieth century (Mulazzani, 2010; Alberti 2024). Here we find highly valuable realities such as Tresigallo, and three of the seven rural villages — Corte Cascina, Santa Giustina and Sant'Apollinare in Dossetti — designed by Pier Luigi Giordani over the decade 1953-1963.

This is a highly valuable punctiform built fabric which we examined, starting from a historical-critical analysis of the cities of foundation to review the analogies and differences that exist between the different contexts today, and how they can be developed through material and virtual connections.

We have verified how in the urban and non-urban reality there is a constant dialogue between what Bauman (2018) calls the space of flows and the local space where the latter, even in rural areas, corresponds less and less to an authentic reality.

While in the urban context the focus has been on public space as a common good, in the non-urban area the focus is also on shared space. For example, in the dimension of rural villages, the energy community and digital network model can present elements of interest for the contextualization of the territory and reducing the consumption of resources, and for the development of a sustainable dimension in the digital networks both from a social and energy point of view. In this sense we can think of the application of data management of a generative rather than extractive nature, which can be experimented more easily on a small scale (Casarotto et al., 2023).

The second direction — Water architectures: development geometries — seeks to focus attention on the hydraulic system which allows the urban complexity of Ferrara to exist. It is about the valorization of a fabric of artifacts made in different eras by largely anonymous authors, a little-known infrastructural system that can compare in scale and ambition with numerous European examples (Gausa, 2009). The Ferrara countryside is substantially anthropic in nature, the result of large hydraulic interventions and land reclamation projects that began in the 18th century and culminated at the beginning of the 20th century, consisting of a dense network of drainage channels, locks, pumping stations and dams. These characteristics align closely with the principles of the New European Bauhaus, orienting the proposal towards the cultural enrichment of local communities, raising awareness on the issues of environmental, social and economic sustainability, encouraging inclusive dynamics of transformation in the public space (Garda et al., 2022). All the infrastructures of the Ferrara reclamation are included within the Natura 2000 Networks. This allows us to consider the case of Ferrara as particularly representative of a complex sample of relationships that

exist between cities and what cities are not: countryside, woods, naturalistic territories. Those who live in this territory love it deeply; they have a strongly rooted relationship with it that emerges from the demographic mobility data and the resistance of local cultural communities (Marini & Santangelo, 2013) Fig. 4.



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The partnership included: Atelier Mobile, Municipality of Ferrara, Department of Architecture of Ferrara, Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, The Oslo School of Architecture and Design, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, British School at Rome, ICAM (International Confederation of Architectural Museums).

Fig. 4  
Former covered market, abandoned public commercial structure undergoing transformation into a multifunctional space, by Francesco Albetti.

## Actions

The main part of the project was funded by the Ministry of Culture of the Italian Government under the Festival dell'Architettura II edition call<sup>1</sup>.

The main actions included the organization of the Forum on the medium-sized European city, which featured scientific round tables with the participation of European cities that share problems and perspectives related to the cultural and environmental heritage. The Ferrara proposal focused on the UNESCO landscape: beyond the boundaries of local communities, exploring the theme of the territory as a complex cultural landscape (Gaeta, 2022), and going so far as to identify the need to draft the Second Management Plan of the Site, twenty years after the first in 2004, with the purpose of carrying out a coordinated and organic action of interventions that consider the environmental, productive, cultural and social aspects.

A further experience of considerable interest - carried out in continuity with the festival - involves the activity carried out within the International Doctorate in Design Architecture Urban Planning (IDAUP) at the Department of Architecture of Ferrara, concerning the potential offered by strategic planning to develop policies for the protection and management of complex landscapes. The case study that the workshop addressed concerned the project to avoid the risk of compromising the identity values of the local community Consorzio Uomini di Massenzatica (CUM), which was awarded the Landscape Prize of the E.U. Council for the year 2018.

Three workshops were then organized: the first involved a network of associations and universities, with the aim of designing and building temporary devices dedicated to inactive spaces, both urban and non-urban. The second, which involved university students and young professionals, was oriented towards the production of maps, cartography, drawings and digital modeling spanning the entire territory.

The third addressed issues of sustainable urban design, which were discussed in contrast to increasingly frequent territorial risks.

Finally, with the aim of innovating and enhancing production techniques and processes with the use of local plant fibers, an educational laboratory was developed within the Product Design Course of the University of Ferrara. We started from the analysis of the objects exhibited at the Ecomuseum of Marsh Grasses at Villanova di Bagnacavallo, which belongs to the above-mentioned network Local Action Group GAL Delta 2000. The materials, typology and history of the products were highlighted with particular attention to the characteristics of the woven workmanship. Subsequently, we moved on to the design process, exploring possible new weaving methods cross-fertilised with technical and typological innovations Fig. 5, Fig. 6.



**Fig. 5**  
Student learning about weaving technique at the Ecomuseum of Villanova di Bagnacavallo, by Eleonora Trivellin.



**Fig. 6**  
Students in the model development phase, by Eleonora Trivellin.

**Francesco Alberti**

Francesco Alberti is the author of over seventy publications on urban and territorial planning topics. He has taught and conducted research on strategic urban planning at: Zurich-ETH, Versailles-ENSP, Ku Leuven. He is a research fellow in Techniques and Urban Planning at the University of Ferrara.

**Eleonora Trivellin**

Eleonora Trivellin is a researcher in design at the University of Ferrara. She is the author of more than one hundred and twenty scientific publications. She is one of the founders of the joint laboratory Communication Design for Sustainability.

**Conclusions**

From the necessary and continuous comparison between different vocations – functional (proximity hubs and services for the territory), productive (agriculture 4.0, controlled designation of origin for local specialties), ‘exceptional landscape identities’ (MAB UNESCO) and ‘borders’ (Interregional Park of the Po Delta Emilia-Romagna and Veneto) – it is possible to increase the overall value of sustainability, expressed in each area in a different and complementary way. In the urban environment, replicable actions have been implemented that have also been validated with respect to other comparable territorial realities with a focus on social sustainability, through the promotion of cohesion policies. In the extra-urban territory, environmental, energy and digital sustainability have developed opportunities for the growth of networks between the material and digital realms. They involve, for example, the implementation of ultra-broadband for inland areas, with varying relationships and proportions.

It is therefore possible to obtain visions of the future, through sequences of coherent and compliant interventions in which the ‘identity values of the landscape’ are identified as a component of strategic-structural value. The integrated use of these different forms of action for this territory and similar areas can therefore build a possible scenario for the evolution of the government of intermediate territories. They can, in fact, play a decisive role in development, against which it is possible to measure the degree of resilience of every sector action and policy, from the agricultural to the productive, from emergency measures to those of the infrastructural networks, and even to define interventions of a specific nature for individual local communities.

## Author's Role Acknowledgment

The text was conceived and structured together by two authors. However, for the definitive elaboration Eleonora Trivellini wrote the Abstract and paragraphs called: Visibility and Boundaries; Two Contest, One Territory; The Design Promises and Conclusion. Francesco Alberti wrote the paragraphs called: Empty/Full, Agricultural/Urban; Discontinuity, Loosening, The Research Project and Actions.

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