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The Urban Re-Scaling. Questions of Representation

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ABSTRACT

The instauration of a worldwide urban condition has gone together with a deep innovation in the mapping and data techniques of representation in the last two decades. The paper focuses on the relations between these two sets from the point of view of the urban planner and designer. The method of handling these topics starts from elementary research operations, such as collecting and comparing a series of representations, drawings, diagrams, and schemes about regional patterns of urbanization in European territories. The research of the scale of observation is not supported by the apparent realism of the aerial photographs and highlights the need of a new urban theory to describe the new, large, informational, discontinuous and topological nature of urban patterns. The municipal and local scales remain active, and work together at a regional, transregional and global scale. The observation of re-scaling in contemporary urban phenomena leads to the research of the criteria of a new urbanity hiding behind the uncontrolled proliferations of urban shapes, dimensions, experiences. Perhaps, it may be found in a kind of “minimum urbanization”, linked to the essential facilities: electricity, water, phone, web and bank connection. The aim of the operation would describe the cities and territories’ structures and their potentials, able to build a shared base for national and European policies.

Keywords: Urbanization, Livable and Sustainable Cities, Population

The incoming of an urban condition worldwide in the last four decades [1,2] is tied to an increasing loss of the programmatic issues of planning, urbanism and urban design in European cities, regions and states [3]. No other general condition of the civilization (agriculture; wilderness; water and maritime environments) can actually compete with the appeal of living in an urban condition. The matter of urbanism starting from the ‘70s of the 20th century became with all evidence, not unique, unable to be reduced (even in moralistic or dogmatic versions) into a disciplinary linear formula [4]. The increase of international mobility of goods, individuals, capitals and financial transactions has gone together with a seeming internationalization of urban forms that has not lead to the obsolescence or decrease of local specificities and inequalities [5].

The period of full awareness of the changing nature of the contemporary urban phenomena may perhaps be dated to the second half of the ‘70s (after the



Fig.1 London City Council, Forshaw J.H., Abercrombie P., County of London Plan 1943. London. Social and Functional Analysis, plate by King A. and Johnson D.K.. Different grey areas correspond to differently located communities boundaries

international oil crisis in 1973) according to the new responsibilities experienced by scholars, professionals, enterprises and institutions in front of the emerging limits of a merely economic growth. The impossibility to propose a new urban order legitimized by the rationality of technologies and techno-sciences, and the incoming of environmental worsening, weakened the leading role of the European and North-American socio-technical élites [6].

Just like every essential modern idea, the changing nature and dimension of the urban realm is not new. It has been stated many times before, and reveals links and roots that lead us to the heroic period of the constitution of modernity. In the first three decades of the 20th century the manners explored in order to include in forms of government control unplanned urban phenomena proceeded in three ways essentially. The first one concerns the reading of relations between the city and the region; developed at the beginning of the 20th century in the Anglo-American context, essentially. The sequence of ideas, built experiments, laws, inquiries, institutional engineering for London [fig.1,2], leading to the New Towns Act after World War II lay the first reference about an active way to recognize and to manage the new urban dimension. The second modern way has been something concerning the sequence among the planning documents, its rules.

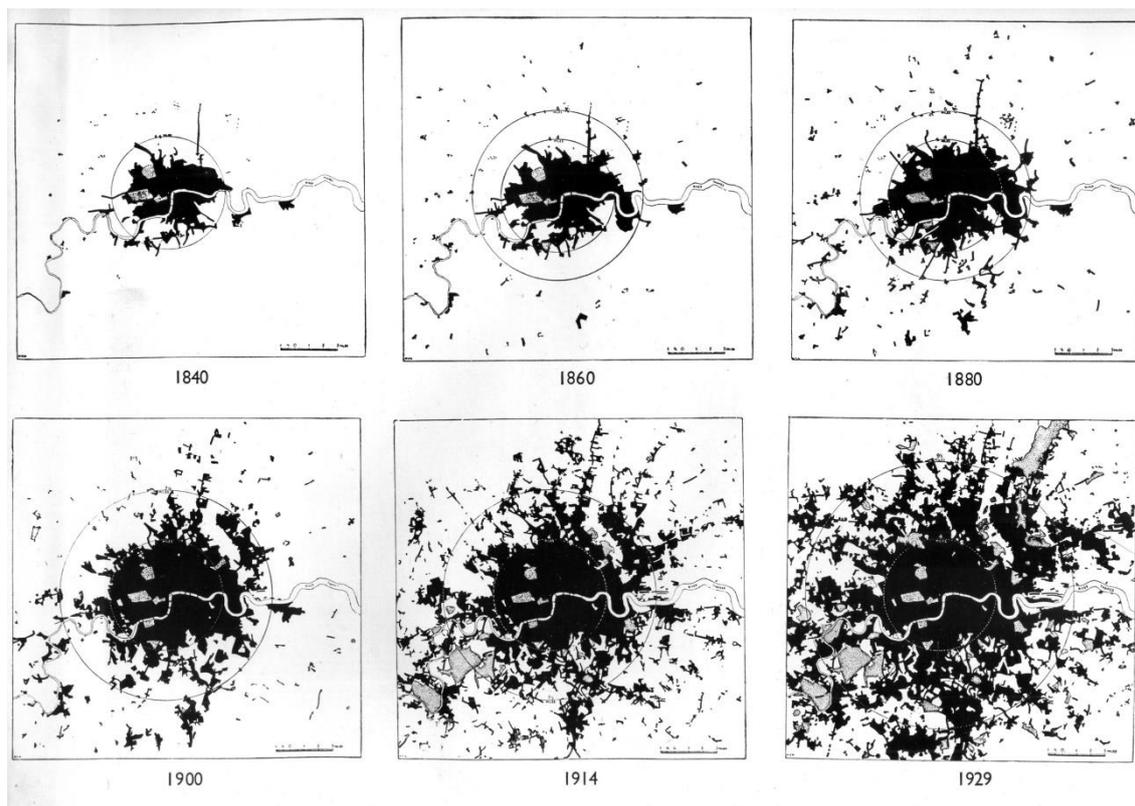


Fig.2 Rasmussen S.E., London. The Unique City, 1934. Built up area since 1840.

The coordination of plans, development initiatives, and yards, also meant the introduction of a linear order regarding times and places, behaviours, decisions, and forecasts. The third and last modern tool to reduce the newness of the contemporary urban phenomena must probably be searched in the trials to understand the new dimension by combination and fusion of former well known entities, as terms like “conurbation”, “megalopolis” or “metropolis” attest.

In modern and modernist times, the idea of increasing the urban phenomenon has gone together with the multipurpose belief of the idea that the existence of a “structure” acting in the city [7]. In these terms, the changing dimensions of urban phenomena directly indicate architects and planners to imagine which kind of general frame could eventually lead the metropolis of the 20th century to its maximum beauty and performances. Concentric growth, rather than polycentric models or grids were tools for trying to pursuit a new state of things. In order to be adequate to the newness of the phenomena, this trial lead architecture and urbanism to enlarge their representations (unchanged from the letter Pope Leone X by Raffaello Sanzio and Baldassarre Castiglione in 1519). Diagrams and schemes, inside a general knowledge syntax ruled by biological and evolutionist sciences, enlarged our capacity to understand and to describe the urban phenomena, in order to manage its general sense and its possibility to be organized. Cities and territories, layered by the topographical precision of the maps, were the milestones and the determination issue that allowed steady links with the data about population and society.

This movement in present time put in a strong relief the concept of “urbanization” [8]. It comes after the failure of the former urban theories to lay an affordable frame to include

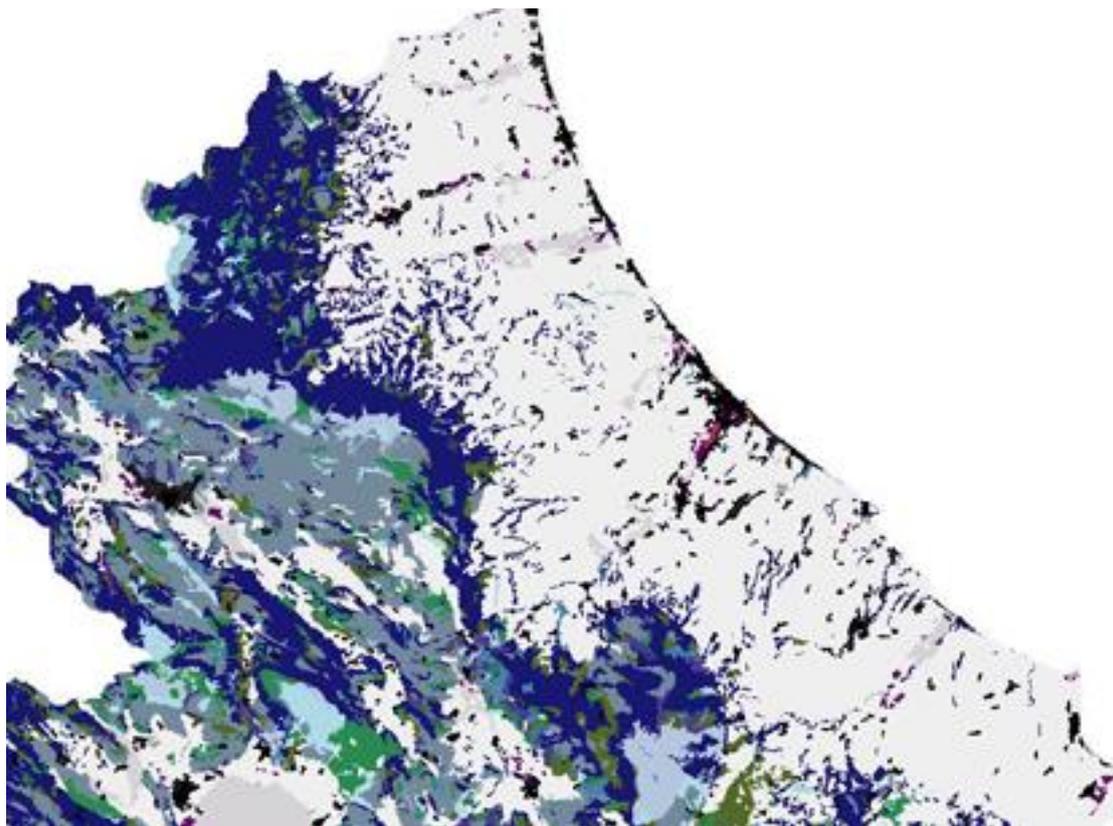


Fig.3 Corine Land Use Map, 2008. Central Italy. Adriatic urban system around Pescara County. Built up area in black, forests and woods hilly areas in different kinds of blue.

the new meanings and forms of urbanity, and the possibilities to organize them in an intentional way [9].

The urban condition included very different urban environments and urban experiences. It's probably vain to try to re-define an enlarged or renewed urban consistence, and try to organize it following the leading modern concept of hierarchy, ordered sequence of institutional acts, superiority of the public sphere in order to state the collective interest [10]. The hypothesis I would introduce is regarding the opportunity to adopt a minimum concept of urbanity referred to the contemporary urbanization conditions. Most of all it regards technological skills: we can read cities where electricity, phone services, web, bank facilities, drinkable water distribution and instructions for the individual and collective mobility are available. We can read an urban feature in the physical or mental place, where it has been read before.

We find something that could be mentioned like urban quality when artificial ways to modify the earth surface offered a good repair to the «small sphere» of the single biological lives.

In this way, many voluntary assumptions can be made about the urbanization structures. The unifying and regulating power of the state has weakened, and the capitalist division of labor and global competition shows the opportunity to disarticulate the former territorial and urban cohesion [11].

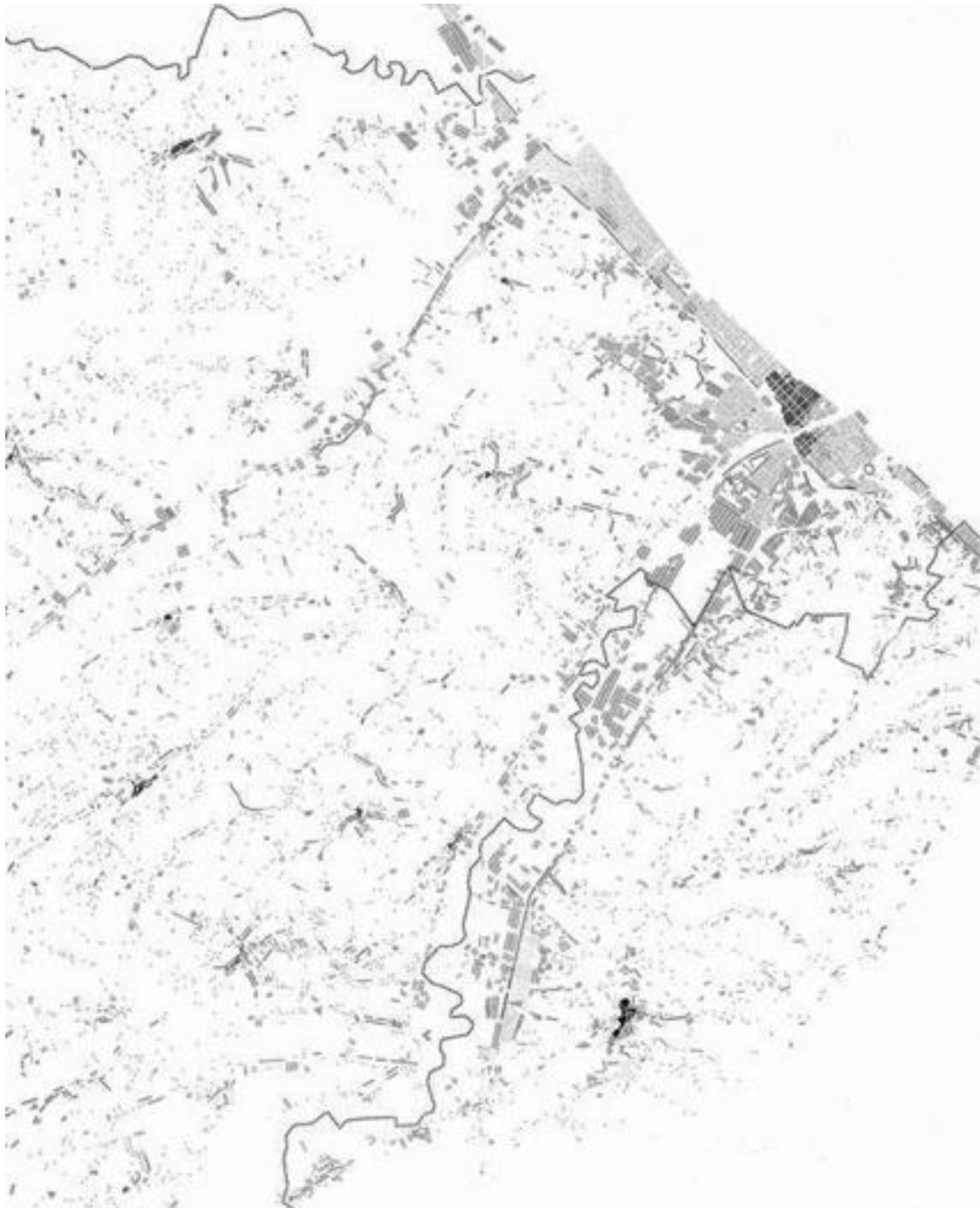


Fig.4 Secchi B., Pescara County Plan, 1996. Settlements general types. Drawing by Paone F. based on IGM map and aerial photographs printed on paper.

During several occasions of regional and town planning in central Italy in the first decade of the 21st century, I had the possibility to describe the new settlement structure of the post WW2 urbanization [figg.3, 4, 5].

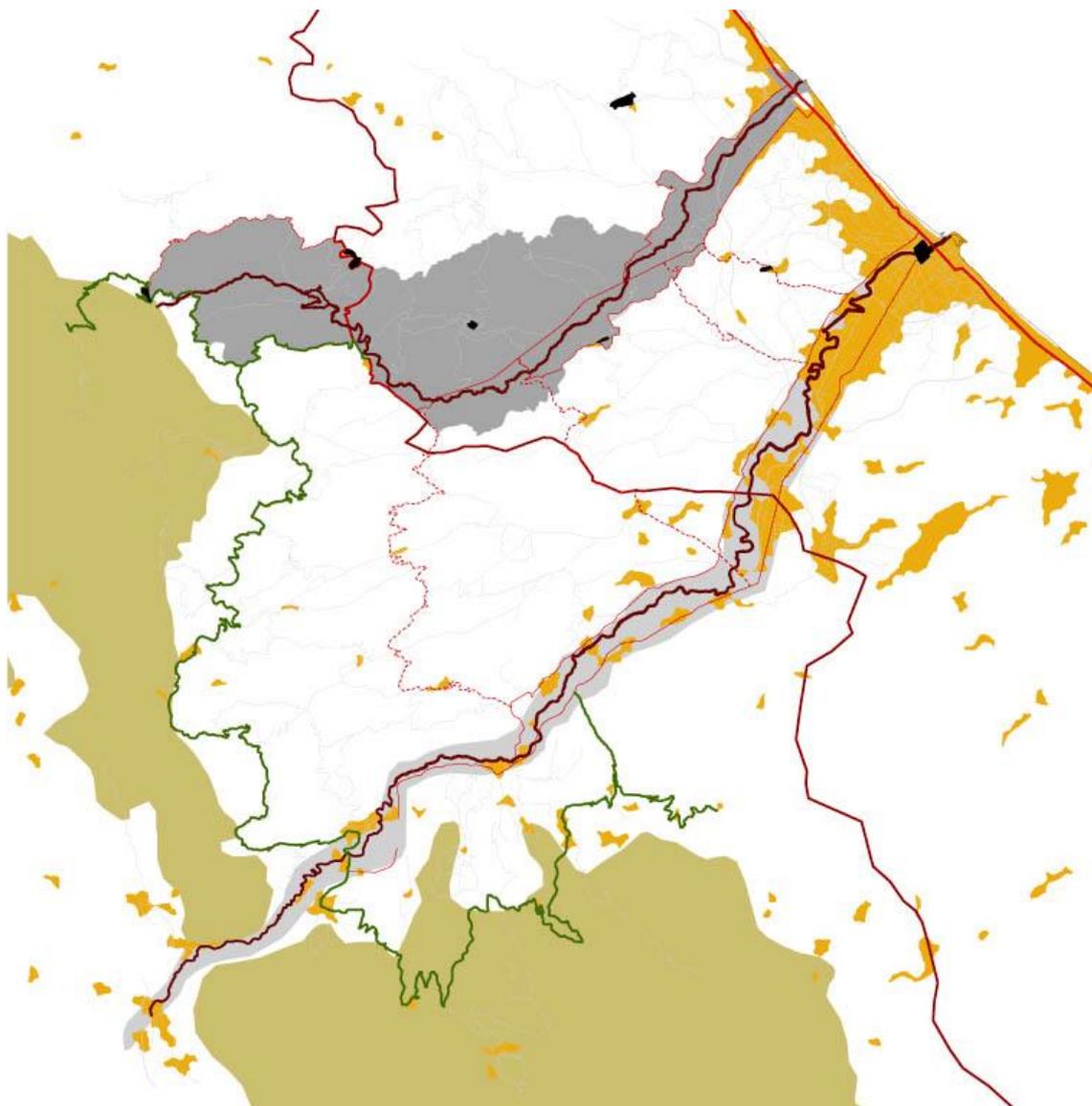


Fig.5 Paone F., Tavo Saline Valley. Eschema directeur, 2008 (grey area). Interpretation of physical and administrative limits and settlements structure.

Intense phenomena of persistence of land parceling are mixed with a general increase of the constructions and of the infrastructures. Historical centers maintain their identity function and host a role of symbolic urbanity, absorbing a maximum of architectural care. At the same time, the valleys, usually in an orthogonal position in relation to the coastline, host all the surfaces and the functions necessary for contemporary life. A general movement of the inhabited environment, attracted by the shore and by the flat and well-connected sites, takes place. At the same time, the ancient pattern of civilization shows relevant phenomena of stagnation and loneliness referred to the hilly and mountain sites. The regularities of the urban structure, starting with the observation of the Abruzzi region and of the Pescara county shows an urban system facing the Adriatic sea

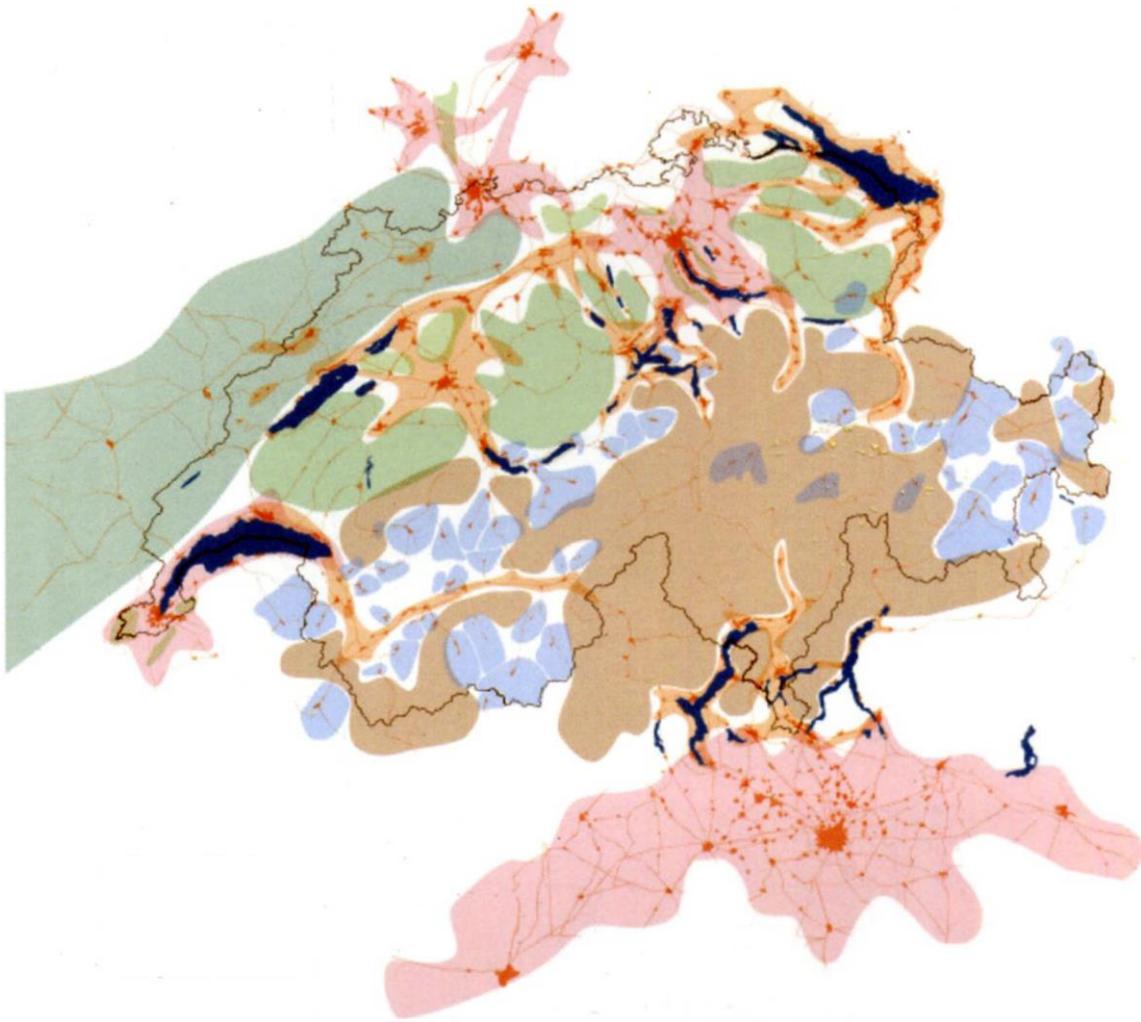


Fig.6 ETH Office, Basel, 2005, Switzerland's Urban Potential. Metropolitan regions (pink), network of cities (orange), quiet zones (green), alpine resorts (light blue), alpine fallow lands (brown).

completely different from the one that distinguishes the central Italy facing the Tyrrhenian Sea. No single urban entity has a leading role: the geological support suggest coplanar positions for the main roads and railways. The rivers organize regular patterns from the northern Emilia region since the southern Puglia region, laying a unique urban structure with great internal differences and landscape values.

In this intense and not clear re-scaling process, the urban and social categories have to be re-founded. Many planning and geographical description exercises have been drawn in different contexts [es., fig.6]. Otherwise, it is hard to produce and share representations with ambition by the local communities, decision makers, technicians, and contemporary media. Which structure could be looked for without strong public policies, and stable alliances between the economic powers and the design disciplines? Architecture seems to have introjected the urban dimension. The perfection of the relation between a commitment and a professional brand, able to explore the intellectual content of their mission, substitutes the construction or maintenance of the city as a collective action. A

side effect of this tendency produces some changes in representations. They remark spatial discontinuity as an objective condition, after the search for the continuity of the modern.

Conclusion: The contemporary urban condition leads from the point of view of planning, urban design and architecture to new associations with the field of representation. The municipal and local scales remain active, and work together at a regional, transregional and global scale. This research shows the presence of an experimental field in large scale urban representations. It points out the large size urbanized patterns and the links with the fields of economic, institutional, communication powers and competences, without trusting in the possibility to recognize a relatively stable structure of the settlements. The urban re-scaling, taken as a permanent condition in contemporary urban studies, lead to a variable set of thematic images, or links between data and images (like GIS). It shows an innovation in space conception, fostering discontinuity and topology better than continuity, the main figure of the modern space. The research of the pertinent and relevant scale of observation and the wideness of the observed fields lead us far from the apparent realism of the aerial photographs. This fact highlights the need of a new urban theory to describe the open, informational nature of urban patterns. At the same time it remarks the difficulty to establish new shared urban and territorial images, in absence of a strong association with public policies and governance actions.

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