

Routes to the Royal Palace of Venaria Reale (TO): research for the valorization of the urban context

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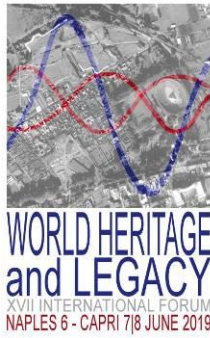
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Le Vie dei  
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## Routes to the Royal Palace of Venaria Reale (TO): research for the valorization of the urban context

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### Abstract

Walking through the village of Venaria Reale, we observe how the restoration of the palace, started at the end of the last century and ended in 2007, has determined a complex reality on the urban level in which the monumental asset shows difficulties in relation to a fabric historically connected to this in an inseparable way. More than ten years after the inauguration, the relationship between the palace and the old town has not yet completely reassembled: the main axis of via Mensa has benefited from extraordinary measures for the redevelopment to the detriment of the rest of the fabric that today is scarcely permeable and compromised by phenomena of material and anthropic degradation. From this premise comes the idea to analyze an urban axis that crosses via Mensa (via XX Settembre - via Cesare Battisti) historically documented since the foundation of the village and with a privileged role in relation to the connection routes to the palace. The proposed essay aims to present the results of a research carried out within the School of Specialization in Architectural Heritage and Landscape of the Turin Polytechnic with the aim of providing valorization actions able to balance the interventions along a single road axis that does not ensure an adequate urban relapse. The desired operation could have a cultural value of recovering the usability of the historical nucleus by defining a much more permeable urban fabric.

**Keywords:** urban restoration, conservation, valorization

### 1. The village of Venaria Reale after the restoration of the Palace

On 12 October 2007 the Royal Palace of Venaria Reale was inaugurated after restoration work [1]. The impressive activity that allowed the restitution of the complex to an extended fruition was preceded by the definition of methodological principles as a premise of the restoration itself: May 11th 1995, on the occasion of the "Memory and Future" study day organized by the Ministry for Cultural and Environmental Heritage and the Superintendency for Environmental and Architectural Heritage of Piedmont, concurrently with the completion of some restoration interventions, it was acknowledged that the intimate bond existing between the village and the Palace represented a fundamental point for the interventions restoration and enhancement. The restoration of the Palace therefore coincided with the restoration of the historic core and in turn could have been an effective means for the redevelopment of the urban building: that is, the need for policies able to enhance the urban fabric was identified, in the awareness that the restoration of the monument should not exempt from the rediscovery of the historical context to which the monument is strongly interrelated.

In this direction, parallel to the restoration of the complex, the Municipal Administration has promoted a series of actions aimed at triggering a process of requalification of the village. The first initiative dates back to 2001: the city of Venaria Reale was included in the Urban Italia Program "Venaria Unica" [2] which accompanied the restoration of the Palace, involving most of the territory of the city of Venaria Reale. Starting from the identification of cultural tourism and environmental quality as a prerequisite for economic and social development, the Program has defined a series of actions that have involved infrastructural interventions, revitalization of the social fabric and distribution of incentives for economic activities.

At the infrastructural level, a series of interventions have been planned aimed at recovering and enhancing the central area in terms of traffic and street furniture. The works involved the repaving of piazza Vittorio Veneto, via Mensa, piazza dell'Annunziata, piazza della Repubblica and via Amedeo di Castellamonte (fig. 1-2) [3]. In the case of via Mensa the works involved the reconstruction of both the roadway and the adjacent sidewalks with the establishment of a "limited traffic zone". The urban furniture positioning project was drafted in July 2003 and updated in September 2004 as part of the project aimed at giving a unified image to the historical nuclei of the municipalities of Savoy Residences ("Tagliasacchi Project").

The provision of large flows of visitors following the restoration work has resulted in the need to have new parking lots. The first parking spaces were built to the north of the Reggia complex at the entrance to the Mandria. Subsequently, once the complex was inaugurated, a new public car park was built on the surface usable both by the citizens and by the visitors of the Palace in the compendium of the former barracks Beleno [4]: the project also provided for the redevelopment of the perimeter buildings of the complex with relocation of the civic library "Tancredi Milone" without however proposing addresses for the refunctionalization of the barracks. In 2016, two more parking lots were opened at the service of the Palace: the Castellamonte parking lot (near the street of the same name that leads to the square in front of the main entrance to the Royal Palace) and "Carlo Emanuele II" (along the homonymous avenue leading to the Mandria).

Parallel to the infrastructural initiatives, the focus was on strengthening and growing the local entrepreneurial fabric, in particular the commercial activities located in the historic core area, directing them to improve and specialize their offer and to develop new activities in the tourism sector (realization of a hotel in via Castellamonte). The repercussions of this policy have mainly affected the streets already subject to the infrastructural interventions: the axis of via Mensa, piazza Vittorio Veneto, piazza dell'Annunziata and piazza della Repubblica. The increase and specialization of commercial and accommodation activities were accompanied by the creation of new business signs, in addition to the historic painted signs, and the installation of numerous seasonal dehors. The dimensions and types of these elements were governed by specific regulations issued by the City Council [5].



**Fig. 1-2:** Piazza dell'Annunziata and via Mensa after repaving work

Parallel to the regulations approved regarding the regulation of public space, the attention of the administration has turned to regulating also the urban image of the village with the approval of the "Plan of color and regulation of materials of the Central Area", drawn up by prof. arch. Giovanni Brino. The elaboration of the plan recalls consolidated methodological experiences through numerous application cases at national level [6]. The guiding principles that determined the realization of the plan can be summarized in the will to donate to the Via Mensa and the Central Area a dignity in harmony with the Palace itself. As stated by the same author, «with the recovery of the Royal Palace, now almost at the finishing line, it is clear that even its main access road and the area adjacent to it must resume if not the original image at least one 'image appropriate to the function they have to perform, in view of the considerable influx of visitors that will travel the via Mensa to reach the Palace »[7]. Based on the iconography of the period, the plan affirms not only the close connection of the main road and the fabric adjacent to the Palace, but also the presence of an environment to be treated in a unified manner, both from a formal and chromatic point of view, coordinating the colors of the main road with those of the Royal Palace itself or at least those of the buildings that overlook the Piazza della Repubblica.

The framework of the initiatives undertaken by the administration outlines today a complex reality in

which the monumental asset manifests relationship difficulties with a fabric historically connected to the Palace in an inseparable way. The relationship between the Palace and the village has not yet been completely reconstructed: the imbalance of the initiatives undertaken in favor of the main axis of via Mensa is evident, which has benefited from extraordinary measures for the redevelopment to the disadvantage of the rest of the fabric today it is compromised by phenomena of material and anthropic degradation. The interventions carried out along a single road axis didn't result in an adequate urban relapse: the scarce permeability of an urban fabric that has not been valued in its plurality of values emerges today.

The location of the new car parks at the service of the Palace, adjacent to the monumental complex but at the edge of the village, have accentuated the gap between the routes traveled by visitors and the rest of the urban fabric and don't constitute the occasion for greater use of the context. The interventions carried out also raise doubts about the way in which they were conceived: these are often interventions that merely modify the scenes of the buildings so as to guarantee an effect of urban decorum without favoring greater penetration into the urban fabric.

The solutions often contrast with the principles of conservation: the current arrangement of the activities on the ground floor of the buildings along the Via Mensa reveals a heterogeneity in the choice of the dimensions of the openings, of the drawings and of the materials that often don't relate to each other nor with the rest of the layout of the façade. There are also frequent cases in which the adaptation of the ground floors to commercial and receptive activities has involved a distortion of the original design of the historic façades. The distinctive character of the new signs installed denotes the desire to emphasize the traditional characters in the forms and materials used, which often contrasts drastically with the modernity of the advertised products.

Even the will to regulate the color of the fronts on public roads can raise objections due to the declared will to return every single building to its moment of origin, effectively denying the complexity of an urban nucleus that over the centuries has gradually changed: in the case of the via Mensa the declared will to restore to the environmental complex a value appropriate to the palace with which it relates clashed with the times of execution of the private interventions, with the result that today in the street façades follow one another restored in their original colors and fronts that still bear the marks of the passage of time.

With the aim of providing enhancement actions capable of balancing the interventions along the via Mensa axis alone and proposing alternative solutions to those implemented, the present research has identified as a field of study a road axis transversal to the Via Mensa [8]: the choice fell on the axis of via XX Settembre - via Cesare Battisti. The choice of the topic of investigation was dictated by two reasons: on the one hand the axis has an important historical value since it is documented since the foundation of the village, on the other it has a privileged role in relation to connections to the Royal Palace for near the parking lot at the former barracks Beleno.

## **2. The axis “via XX Settembre – via Cesare Battisti”**

### **2.1 The structuring processes of the axis and the current consistency**

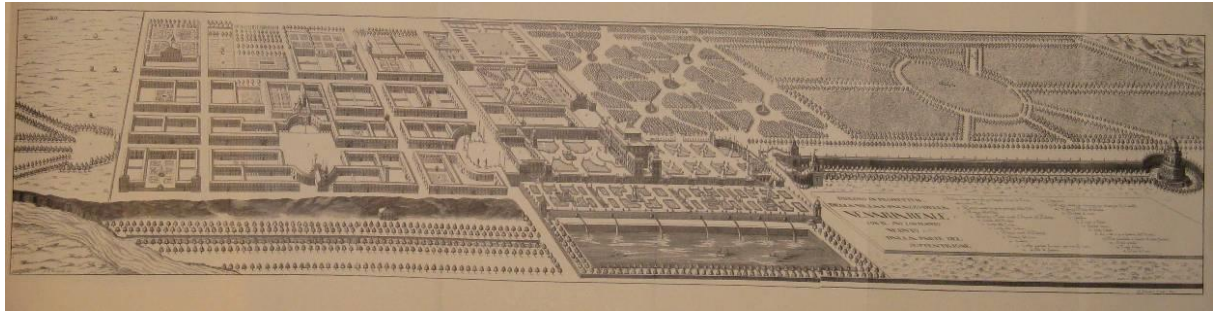
The axis “via XX Settembre - via Cesare Battisti” represents a fundamental axis in the urban layout grid [9] and finds documentation since the planning of the village of Venaria Reale as emerges from the reading of the work of Amedeo di Castellamonte dedicated to Venaria Reale: in particular two engravings by Giovanni Francesco Baroncelli engraved by George Tasnière illustrate the village as designed by the architect (fig. 3).

The first engraving, entitled "Pianta della Villa e palazzo della Venaria Reale con il suo contenuto", illustrates in planimetry the Castellamonte project for the complex of the Palace identifying the consistency of the premises and the destinations of use. The focus is not only on the Royal Palace but also on the gardens and the village in a perfectly integrated structure. The second engraving, "Disegno in prospettiva della villa e palazzo della Venaria Reale con il suo contenuto veduto dalla parte del settentrione", represents instead a view having the same subject. The principle that informs Castellamonte design is based on structural integration, through the unity of the rectors' compositional axes, the village, the hunting residence and the gardens [10].

Focusing attention on the village, the court architect divides the village into fourteen blocks through a grid of streets perpendicular to each other and of equal size. The current XX Settembre axis is perpendicular to the main road, intersecting the section between Piazza dell'Annunziata and the square in front of the ducal palace and dividing it into two sections of equal length. The sequence of the buildings overlooking it is characterized by that "uniform symmetry of the buildings" [11] which distinguishes the main road.

To the north of the axis, the ancient tower can be seen, corresponding to a medieval nucleus around the houses of the Scaravelli and Arcour counts, where the Galleani spinning mill would have risen [12]. In the south, gardens and orchards replace the urban construction. The incisions appear to be

reliable only for the areas facing the main road but all the more peripheral areas of the village don't seem to have been affected by the intervention [13].



**Fig. 3:** Giovanni Francesco Baroncelli with engraving of George Tasnière, *Disegno in prospettiva della villa e palazzo della Venaria Reale con il suo contenuto veduto dalla parte del settentrione*, 1674

Through the topographical map for hunting, datable to 1762 [14], it is possible to read the conformation of the village of Venaria Reale in the second half of the 18th century (fig. 4): next to a designed and courtly component, there is a smaller parcel dimension that has been leaning against and integrated. The most significant transformations with respect to the Castellamonte project concern the complex of the Palace with repercussions also on the investigated axis. The projects developed during the eighteenth century for the Palace led to a transfer to the village of the hunting service areas (stables) and of the Citroniera, strongly influencing the consistency of the grid designed by Castellamonte and determining a substantial reshaping. The expansion of the Palace took place to the south towards the urban built-up area: from the comparison extended to the rest of the inhabited area, it also emerges how this reshaping became a precious opportunity to organize an area, as already seen in Castellamonte's projects, unchanged or almost in its rural identity, due to its marginal location. The document also recognizes the construction of buildings in the two terminal sections of the axis that contrast with the open view envisaged in the iconography shown in support of the Castellamonte text: in the incisions described in fact the axis ends in the north on an open space sloping towards the Ceronda torrent, to the south instead leads towards gardens and orchards. Another recognizable element in the Charter is the start of the construction of the Corte Pagliere: of this construction, carried out on the space in front of the Citroniera and the Scuderia Juarriana, the only southern structure is currently recognizable.

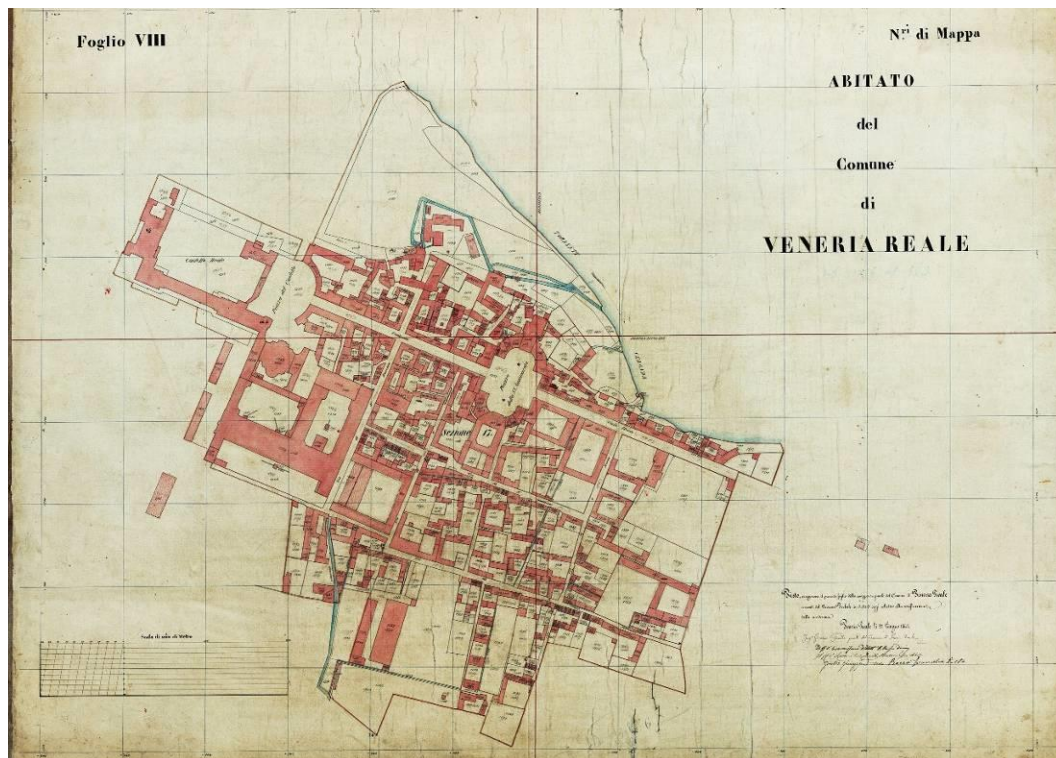


**Fig. 4:** Topographical map for hunting, [1762]

The road configuration has remained almost unchanged in the French cadastre [15]: the entire fabric has maintained its configuration at least from the formal point of view, while the destinations of use

reveal the presence of numerous military departments that make up for abandonment by the royal family by starting a process of converting part of the building heritage to military use. With particular reference to the axis under investigation, the stratification recognized already in the previous historical map is confirmed: the most significant transformations are connected to the complex of the Palace, which the French cadastre represents in its completeness of plan following the Alfieri intervention, and to the Corte Pagliere, which reveals the still recognizable planimetric layout.

The conformation of the village of Venaria Reale in the middle of the nineteenth century, returned by the Rabbini cadastre [16], essentially reveals the structure identified in the previous cartographic sources, confirming the boundaries of the Castellamonte's town, to which modifications were made on limited areas (fig. 5). Even the structuring of the current axis "via XX Settembre - via Cesare Battisti" is consolidated on the configuration of the French period. This invariance is not, however, to be extended to the functions of the urban fabric: a large part of the buildings currently owned by the State Property Office are host to activities related to the presence of military forces, reflecting a gradual change in the activities no longer linked to the hunting practices but in the presence of the military both in the Royal Palace and in the surrounding town.



**Fig. 5:** Rabbini cadastre, 1863.

Modest changes to the layout of the axis were made in the course of the 20th century. In particular, we note the demolition of the building on the corner between Via XX Settembre and Via La Marmora which caused the reduction of the road surface: the intervention was already envisaged in the regulator plan of Paolo Saccarelli approved by the City Council on 29 April 1908 and never entered into force [17].

Further transformations in the fabric are instead connected to the creation of new buildings that are inserted on the site of the previous fabric: these new contributions are today easily recognizable due to the architectural features that are strongly foreign to the context to which they belong. The current consistency of the axis reveals a palimpsest outcome of transformations and stratifications closely interrelated with the Palace but at the same time presents a situation of strong material and anthropic degradation.

The public space is characterized by the presence of emergencies of great historical and architectural value whose events, as emerged from the historical analysis, are strongly interrelated with the Reggia (fig. 6-7): next to the Palace, the Corte Pagliere, the Cavallerizza and the Galoppatoio La Marmora are distinguished. At the same time, the road section between Via La Marmora and Via Mascia is congested by the presence of one-way vehicle traffic south towards Via Mascia, with the massive presence of parked vehicles, despite the modest width of the roadway. In particular, at the Cavallerizza La Marmora, the space resulting from the backward movement of the front onto the road is used as a real vehicle parking lot and strongly hinders the perception of the architectural quality of

the fabric, which appears to be a resultant space to and from the historical core and the Royal Palace of Venaria Reale. There are many elements that disqualify the public space: the asphalt pavements in a very poor state of preservation, the systems affixed to the fronts of the buildings, the presence of poor quality urban furnishings according to shapes and materials extraneous to the historical context.

The fronts on public space, of high historical-documentary value, present numerous phenomena of degradation, with architectural episodes that are not congruent with the context (fig. 8): paradigmatic is the case of buildings built on the grounds of the previous fabric that are not compatible with the historical context from the point in view of the choice of shapes and materials.

From the point of view of the functions currently established, there is the presence of a strong attraction center consisting of the Conservation and Restoration Center "La Venaria Reale" which occupies the spaces of the Alfieri's Stables and the Galoppatoio La Marmora. At the same time, a weak point of the axis "via XX Settembre - via Cesare Battisti" is the presence of disused public monumental complexes (Corte Pagliere, Cavallerizza La Marmora) which remain as undefined spaces within the urban plot and which, in some cases, already bear the signs of invasive interventions of restructuring. These are flanked by numerous disused ground floors: currently privately owned, they were used in the past for commercial functions.

The value of the fabric in relation to the current recognizability is evidenced in many cases by the presence of the original Castellamonte structure as emerged from the reading of the historical documentation. The accessibility and permeability of these spaces from the public street is made possible by the presence of entrance halls that allow communication between the public and private space. Currently the presence of non-compatible activities, buildings inconsistent with the context and a widespread condition of decay reveal a total disregard for the value of the urban fabric. These functions, in addition to being de-qualifying in themselves, contrast with a possible enhancement of these spaces (fig. 9-10). The perception that one has today in going through these places is to find oneself in front of resulting spaces, in which the phenomena of degradation prevent the reading of the whole design.

## **2.1 Actions for conservation and valorization**

The fundamental aim that the present study has set itself was the integrated and sustainable preservation of the axis, its historical characterizations and its peculiarities, in a more general context that acquires value precisely from the interrelation of singularities [18].

The intervention on this complex reality will therefore be aimed essentially at preserving its legibility, and when it is necessary to intervene, it will have to be done in such a way as to add to and enrich the existing material, without making falsifications through homologation and typing operations. The methodological guidelines will not only inform the interventions on the monumental buildings but will be extended to all the historical patrimony of which the value has been critically recognized: in the case of Venaria Reale, in the face of a historical nucleus that for formation and consistency is closely interrelated to the residence real as evidenced during the analysis, in fact a small number of buildings is subjected to monumental constraint. On the contrary, the presence of a settlement plot is recognizable which, in most cases, has preserved a historical and architectural value as emerged from the investigations.

The choice of in-depth themes reflects the attempt to always maintain a unified vision of the axis, as supported by the results of the historical investigation. In detail it was a matter of setting up a working method that followed the principle of scaling in the approach to a complex system [19].

With reference to public space, its role as a qualifying connective with regard to the individual architectures that face it requires to relate to the design of such spaces with the same attention and methodological approach that inform the conservative restoration. In parallel, the changing needs with respect to the past require the adaptation of these spaces through the inclusion of new facilities and new road and urban furniture elements, for which it will be necessary to respond to criteria of congruency and compatibility with the context.

The research suggests extending the limited traffic area to include the axis in its entirety in order to enhance its value through an exclusively pedestrian use as an access route to the Palace and it is also hoped that the spaces used for vehicle parking will be eliminated.

The choice of the new elements of street furniture will have to match the characteristics of the extremely sober public space, avoiding false-antique standard elements and favoring the use of contemporary items.



**Fig. 6-7:** Axis “via XX Settembre – via Cesare Battisti”

The façades on the public space of the “via XX Settembre - via Cesare Battisti” axis present numerous phenomena of degradation, as highlighted during the analysis (fig. 8). The guidelines will be oriented primarily to a classification of the fronts in relation to their conservation status. To this end, a scale of values will be introduced that can identify the extent of the phenomenon that affects the front. The importance of this form of classification will become even more significant when the individual buildings are related to each other through a transition from the architectural scale to that of the urban context. In addition to immediately suggesting an indication of the state of preservation of the entire road axis, this assessment will in fact make it possible to identify the fronts subject to recent restorations, for which a minimum intervention is sufficient, and to define a priority in the restoration of façades marked by an advanced state of degradation. The methodological direction will consist in adopting the indispensable measures to remedy the degradation phenomena encountered, guaranteeing the preservation of the authenticity of the fronts. The interventions will not lead to the cancellation of the stratifications but will preserve the characteristic elements as a sign of connotation and identity of the place (particular constructive typologies, decorations on the façade, characters of the openings, cornices etc).



**Fig. 8:** Photogrammetric straightening of the façade overlooking via Cesare Battisti.

The assignment of new functions to disused complexes is fundamental to guarantee the survival of the built environment. However, these functions cannot be established a priori but must derive from adequate knowledge projects: set unavoidable terms of reference for interventions on the historical heritage such as the conservation of the material and the historical stratifications, the reversibility of the interventions, the compatibility of the new destinations of use, economic feasibility, will already imply making choices and guiding restoration and enhancement projects.

The intervention addresses for disused ground floors must move from the drafting of a knowledge project that includes a survey of all the ground floors as a means capable of providing updated information on the consistency of the spaces. It is important to reiterate the need to guarantee the conservation of the built heritage and the preservation of architectural features as a prerequisite for any intervention. In particular it will be necessary to pay attention to the layout of the fronts, avoiding the change of the levels of the thresholds to eliminate any difference in level between the street level and the internal floor of the building. Similar attention will also be given to the sequence of openings.

With reference to private spaces, which represent a nodal point of research with a view to greater fabric permeability, the study proposes the introduction of a classification in relation to their state of preservation. Depending on this analysis, simple maintenance operations and minimum intervention or more drastic works will be required, which will include requalification interventions. A premise of any intervention, also in this case it will be necessary to have a knowledge project aimed at defining the



permanences to be conserved and enhanced. The next phase will include the elaboration of an organic reorganization program which will have to extend to all the properties involved.



**Fig. 9-10:** Private spaces

With the aim of favoring the use of space and enhancing its documentary meaning, a conceivable scenery consists in the transformation of these places into mixed public / private spaces [20]. In other words, it would be a question of creating, if an overall situation of adhesions of the various owners was outlined to the project, a structured system connected to the main public roads, with a strong cultural value of recovering the usability of the spaces inside the fabric; this hypothesis would lead to the definition of a much more permeable fabric, through which it would be possible to recover even a perception of the spaces that are currently compromised by phenomena of material and anthropic degradation.

The enhancement of the interior spaces may arise from the reorganization of green spaces: as emerges from the analysis of historical cartography, the village of Venaria Reale was characterized by the presence of gardens and orchards within the urban fabric. This characteristic was clearly ascribable to the original agricultural vocation of the village, evidenced by the presence of significant documentary traces that survived the Castellamonte's reshaping and are still recognizable today within the urban network. It is therefore suggested to redesign these green spaces where historically ascertained through careful documentary investigation. The effect that such a proposal will be able to produce will be an enhancement through a new perception that can recall the historical memory of the places and obviate the actual value of resulting spaces.

The strength of the proposed actions will be expressed in a reappropriation of the cultural identity of the historical core, further enriched by the contribution of new meanings for the benefit of both tourists and resident citizens.

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