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A TERRITORIAL ROLE FOR SUPERPLACES?[1]

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Over the last three decades, the metropolisation process of the contemporary city produced a number of new figures in the European territory. This paper focuses on superplaces: well-connected spaces - often located out of the consolidated city - where several central functions co-exist. Studying the case of Orio al Serio Airport (Italy) the authors describe the key features of superplaces and their territorial role.
Key words: Superplaces, Regional scale, Metropolisation, Poles, Nodes, New centralities

Quale ruolo nel territorio per i superluoghi?
Il processo di metropolizzazione che ha investito la cittá contemporanea europea negli ultimi trent'anni ha originato figure nuove nel territorio. In questo articolo gli autori si concentrano su alcuni ambiti - i "superluoghi" - localizzati in aree estremamente accessibili - spesso fuori dai nuclei urbani consolidati - dove coesistono diverse funzioni centrali. Lo studio del caso dell'aeroporto di Orio al Serio (BG) permette di descriverne i caratteri principali e il ruolo nel territorio.
Parole chiave: Superluoghi, Scala regionale, Metropolizzazzione, Polaritá, Nodo, Nuove centralitá

Introduction

The socio-economic transformations accompanying the transition from an industrial economy to an exchange and information-based one have undermined the functionalist model of the city along with its relative conceptual categories and operational tools. The rapid evolution of urban form (Frisa & Ratti, 2001) has done nothing but stress the difficulties in understanding contemporary urban dynamics. This is partly due to the fact that current theories tend to interpret urban reality "in pieces" instead of seeking a holistic view of it[2]. Over the last three decades many social

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[2] In this paper, we will not propose yet another analytical theory of the contemporary city, nor an ultimate explanation of today's emerging social phenomena, which are, by definition, changeable and elusive. However, practitioners of the "territorial sciences" and those skilled in spatial analysis and description cannot avoid facing the intrusive, puzzling

practices, figures and material signs, heretofore a peculiar legacy of town centres, have moved to the territory in recently urbanized spaces. This *metropolisation process* (Indovina, 2007) generates a "post-metropolitan" territory (Cacciari, 2004); a space without a centre or a clear boundary, an "edge city" (Garreau, 1991) or a "metapolis" (Ascher, 2001) where the market generates difficult-to-interpret dynamics (Sennett, 1991). This fragmented and interconnected space is nevertheless characterized by an original and specific identity and it gives rise to a number of new territorial presences. This paper is aims to focus on some of them which are exceptional in terms of location behaviours and territorial impacts. By gathering several different elements and reflecting on their spatial role, we will attempt to categorise the concept, "Superplaces". This is a concept that has been widely utilised and debated in recent years while remaining, however, quite imprecise and unstable. Among other meanings (Boeri, 2005) and according to recent contributions (Agnoletto & al., 2007)[3], it seems a term useful for identifying those multifunctional aggregations which have a territorial role more articulated than those of other consumption spaces. We will not limit ourselves to an attempt to redefine it; on the contrary, we will try to overcome the semantic issue while exploring the possible contributions that promote understanding of the superplace phenomenon, which can be useful to interpret some phenomena of the contemporary city and to design the future one.

1. Methodological notes

The methodology that sustains our underlying thesis derives from observing how some metropolitan services (such as stations, airports, stadiums and theme parks) are undergoing processes of transformation that are altering their uniquely mono-functional roles as well as their engineering and technical characteristics. In fact, they are becoming places which are dynamic and attractive to users and which concentrate a great number of diverse activities. The first part of the article describes the steps taken to develop an original definition of "superplace". In order to study the same phenomenon, in a previous research project (Paris, 2009), we

and often challenging reality of those places that are the products of the same mutations that are undermining the very idea of *city* (Morandi, 2009).

[3] This book is based on an extended work of different scholars, professionals and experts from different fields who have tried to explore the multidimensional features of superplaces.

selected and analysed eight case studies of superplaces (fig. 1 and 2).

In that phase, we investigated the conditions that led to their development projects, the actors' strategic responses and investors' reactions and, finally, the projects' territorial impacts[4].

Despite the simplification of some parts of this first attempt, the research project was an interesting starting point which provided useful empirical material.

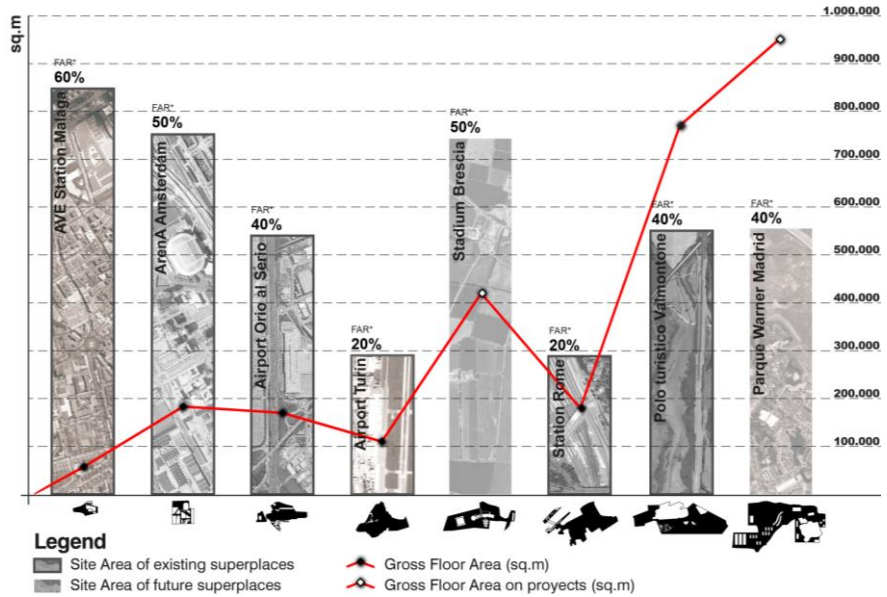
We identified several common features that distinguish superplaces from other places. Our observations were based on various aspects such as: the morphological and functional features of the elements considered, the relationships established with a broader context, the dynamics produced nationwide and the spatial strategies deployed by their (usually only temporal) inhabitants. Data collection, as well as the description of superplaces and the choice of a suitable scale for their representation required complex research procedures. In fact, if the aim of understanding superplaces as "objects" was clear, how to communicate their qualities and distinctive characteristics was not quite as evident. Finally, we focused on a case study, described in this article in depth, to better understand how a space can, according to some conditions, take on the symbolic and semantic features of *place*[5] and, in specific cases, of *superplaces*. This step, together with the bibliographic review of texts and authors investigating the same phenomenon, undermined the initial definition. At the same time, it forced us to overcome the preoccupation of creating a taxonomy turning our attention back to the regional system of superplaces. The use of the word "system" is not accidental in this framework since our work led us to view superplaces as a set of elements that are related to one

[4] The eight case studies belonged to two "families". The first one, denominated "Superplaces & Mobility", included airports and HSR stations. Among the airports: *Il Caravaggio* International Airport and *Orio Center* shopping mall, Orio al Serio (Bergamo, Italy) and the renovation of the Turin city airport, Caselle Torinese (Turin, Italy). Concerning HSR stations, we investigated the *Maria Zambrano AVE* (HSR) station, Malaga (Spain) and the *Roma Tiburtina* HSR station, Rome (Italy). The second one, denominated "Superplaces & Leisure", included two stadiums and two theme parks. Stadiums: *Amsterdam ArenA* and *Arena Boulevard*, Amsterdam (Netherlands) and the project for the *Global Center Stadium*, Castenedolo (Brescia, Italy). Theme parks: *Parque Warner Madrid Resort y Parks*, Madrid (Spain) and *Polo Turistico Integrato*, Valmontone (Rome, Italy).

[5] According to several authors, such as Adams & al. (2001), places are a product of both (i) social processes and (ii) practices of use of space; they are strongly linked to specific imaginary and values systems. A number of geographers, sociologists, psychologists, etc. have explored the concept of place and its implications on dwelling and on different forms of living in space. We cannot focus on this topic in this text but, using this term, we ideally refer to this rich debate.

another on a regional scale and to their single contexts on a local one. Thus, our attention shifted from simply observing the *features* of the different objects to concentrating on their *externalities*. By doing so, we were able to grasp more clearly the process that transforms some major urban facilities into new "places".

Fig. 1: Gross Floor Area (GFA) and Floor Area Ratio (FAR) of superplaces (M. Paris, 2010)

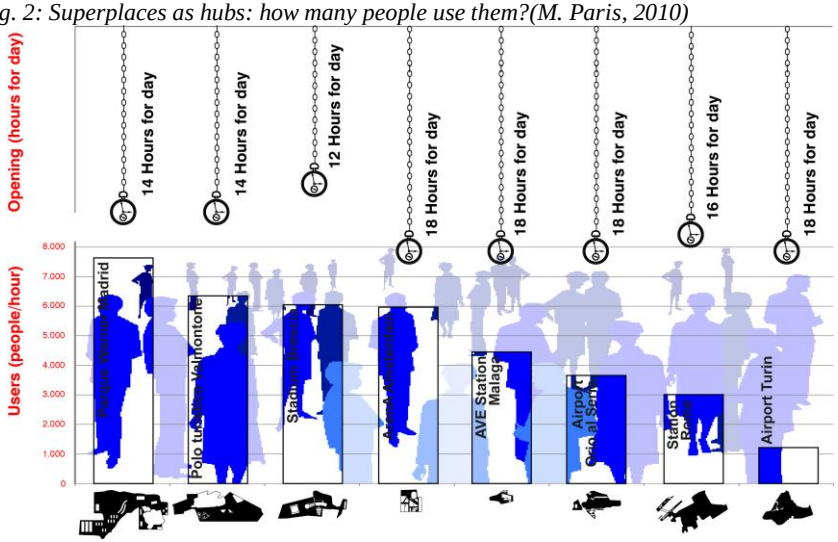


On the other hand, it was necessary to understand why only some become *superplaces*. The prefix itself suggests a unique character, or at least a prominent role, since what is "*super"* usually boasts exceptional size or some other qualifying trademark. In fact, the growth of superplaces does not follow a linear process through which specific characteristics simply increase in size. Instead, their properties are given by particular conditions and are thus the result of historical stratifications and economic strategies.

We could assume that the *genius loci* of superplaces, as Norberg-Schulz (1980) would define it, derives from specific features, such as high accessibility, crossing of different flows (goods, information, people, energy, money), multiple functions and uses. They are, therefore, transformed from narrowly-defined commercial functions into places of

consumption[6] and high concentrations of activities in order to comply with the contemporary need for greater mobility. The second part of the article explores the nature and some of the dynamics of the tensions caused by superplaces, or that they are subject to, within a regional context. Finally, the conclusions highlight some open issues and questions, proposing them as topics for further reflection that might contribute to the development of new insights not only regarding superplaces but also the contemporary city itself.

Fig. 2: Superplaces as hubs: how many people use them?(M. Paris, 2010)



2. How to talk about new places in a metropolised territory?

According to Bernardo Secchi (2000) over the immense number of contributions on the contemporary city produced in the '70s, only few scholars focused the issue with an approach which was technically appropriate. Between this moment and the financial crisis of 2008 in Europe the city changed and became something different from the modern

[6] This definition can fit those spaces where – as in the case study- the "inhabitants" (people who use or live superplaces with different rhythms or temporalities) appreciate the liveability, aesthetic qualities, comfort, safety and intensity of relations that they provide. With a different approach, M. Augé introduced for similar spaces the very successful definition of "no places" underlining the lack of historical features, relation with the context and human relations (Augé, 1993). In a recent publication the author (Augé, 2010), rejects the simplification based on the place/no-place opposition.

one (Secchi, 1998). Planning, as a discipline, still has difficulties in defining this new kind of city and in our opinion this difficulty is related to a lack of conceptual or theoretical tools that enable the planners to understand the changes taking place in contemporary cities.

Giandomenico Amendola (1997), for example, admits how difficult it is to read emerging spatial forms due to the structural vagueness and ambiguity of the contemporary city. He states that its new form eludes the attempts of all-encompassing understanding and new paradigms needed to do so are weak ones, manifold, not always coherent and often mutable and evanescent. At the same time, theories based on strong rationality or preconceived orders are undergoing evident crisis. Starting in the late 1980s, due to increased mobility together with declining birth rates and population growth, cities began to undergo deep metamorphosis surpassing any previous prediction. At the time, planning was still strongly influenced by functionalism and referred to the concept of the constantly-growing city based on the utopia of uninterrupted progress. For a decade, the discipline found it hard to keep up with a new and rapidly-developing reality often failing to respond to new shifts and trends. New lifestyles were opposing the city of mass housing and large concentrated urban functions, with decentralized production, residential sprawl and the emergence of forms of urban life[7] as result of a regional urbanization process (Soja, 2011a).

This transformation was extraordinary both in its speed and results and we have no intention of portraying a simplified version of it. At the same time it was related to a technical, financial and cultural framework that today is completely changed and this could be a good moment to try to understand better some of its urban results. We must be aware that the economic and financial crisis is nowadays radically changing this scenario, and the consequences of the decrease of consumption are evident both in sociological and economic terms.

There is a double territorial result of this transformation. On the one hand some of the most important functions of the post-modern city such as shopping and leisure are radically changing; consumer behaviour is more and more selective and based not only on the offer (of goods, services and experiences) but also on other factors (presence of public

[7] According to M. Cacciari (2004), the city has been replaced by different forms of urban life sprawled in the territory. Several scholars focused on this change and currently the discipline is marked by a multiplication of names and descriptions of the products of this process. Images as the "city region" or the "city landscape" point to the territorial scale and the complex pattern of this pervasive -and yet little known- reality (De las Rivas, 2013).

transport, price-based selection, green oriented marketing etc.). On the other hand, retail developers concentrate their investments in operations which seem to be more profitable in economic terms and sustainable in financial terms. The shrinking cities phenomenon can in some way be considered in part a cause and an effect of this changing trend in the consumption society (Coppola, 2012).

Rather than creating a "catalogue" of all the changes under way (which would be overly simplistic and perhaps even useless), we prefer to focus on the physical outcomes, particularly those involving large functional poles located at mobility junctions (such as airports, stations and stadiums). These urban elements are involved in public and private projects that demand the overall redefinition of their roles on the urban and regional scales. Numerous scholars of the city, including urban sociologists and economists (but also writers and journalists), have understood the social and economic importance of this metamorphosis and have attempted to describe its results. The main achievement of this meritorious and interesting exercise has been the acknowledgement of the birth of new *places* that were previously non-existent or merely functional (mainly devoted to mobility).

The limits of these views however relate mainly to the scarce consideration of the spatial role of these transformations and their influences on broader processes of urban and regional evolution. Perhaps the current difficulties of the urban planning discipline in repositioning itself are also responsible for this.

We believe that an analysis describing the final results of a process that adapts these spaces as leisure and consumption hubs should also lead to a revision of the disciplinary categories of urban planning. The problem that arises is whether, in order to study these places, we must still refer to the same categories which were first used to analyse the city and, subsequently, the territory of modernity. In the former circumstances, it still made sense to refer to a "centre" and a "periphery" or to boundaries between one urban situation and another. It was also possible to identify discrete points, each belonging to a specific urban condition having its own specific identity. However, the post-metropolitan framework (Soja, 2011b) makes it more difficult to mark a precise transition point between urban and non-urban conditions or between centre and periphery. In fact, Cacciari questions whether the post-metropolitan territory is the negation of any possibility of *being a place* or is instead a condition in which new specific types of place can be *invented* (Cacciari, 2004).

3. Superplaces: hypothesis for a definition and distinctive features

The authors cited have given an account of the phenomena under examination by using empirical methods. The limit of their analyses, however, lies in the fact that they observe described spatial and functional aggregates as objects *per se* with no concern for the polarisations and externalities they produce nationwide.

Taking into account territorial aspects, on the other hand, gives rise to two difficulties.

Firstly, it is objectively quite difficult to find a definition fit to frame the issue in a clear way. Often, improvised definitions that have no relevance to the urban planning field refer to ordinary aggregations of commercial spaces or multipurpose areas as "superplaces", suggesting a distorted geography which puts them on the same level as a few outstanding elements. Secondly, it is worth mentioning that the intentional design of superplaces is only a recent development. In fact, many of today's complexes are the result of a set of independent projects that group together a series of functions. In some cases this proximity, or "functional density", has encouraged users to perceive the various activities as belonging to a single system.

Underlying this thinking, we sought (Paris, 2009) to define a superplace as a twenty-four hour 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.

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 complex system of elements as superplaces. Once such inclusion criteria were defined, a selection of eight case studies was chosen from among the ones that fulfilled them (see footnote 1) to identify common traits.

As a *first* step, we used some tools that had already been tested in recent projects by the Laboratorio Urb&Com (a research group of the Department of Architecture and Planning of the Milan Polytechnic). In those studies we described commercial polarities as 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, and thus become selective in this sense (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 day. We argued that under specific conditions we can introduce the category of superplaces, whose spatial role develops on multiple scales:

- on a local scale, they behave as possible urban-like centres where different urban functions are connected by intermediate relational spaces
- on a supra-local scale, they represent poles of attraction for large potential "catchment" areas thanks to their good connections with long-distance collective transportation networks (motorway junctions, airports and high-speed rail stations)
- on a regional scale, they can generate new territorial issues, involving local businesses, tourist networks and economic inclinations of an entire area. It is on this level that the range of attraction of potential users is determined and different territories begin competing for the control and protection of the advantages deriving from a location close to people's movements and flows.

The dual nature of circulation through superplaces makes them exchange nodes between local and global systems. Continuous and prolonged attendance enhances these spaces through various use practices and identities until new ones emerge within the surrounding urban context.

Often, superplaces become "landmarks" thanks to their critical mass, to their wide array of facilities and/or to the fact that they have been designed by internationally renowned architects or "archistars". They house 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 (Garnsey & McGlade, 2006) that marks our times[8].

[8] As a second step, different cases were studied by using some comparative analysis matrices. These insights, which we called "views", as shown in the section regarding Orio al Serio, made it possible to:

1. look *inside* superplaces in order to explore the morphological and functional characteristics of individual projects

2. look *around* superplaces in order to understand their relationships with contiguous communities and a broader context

3. look *between* superplaces to focus on the network systems connecting them and on the interactions that global systems establish with the local context at the different nodes

During the case study analysis, we tried to overcome the catalogue model dominated by the "aesthetics of ascertainment" (Gregotti, 2007). Such an approach is limited to observing phenomena or, at the most, to classifying them. In contrast, we attempted to understand the structures' functioning rules, the location strategies adopted by their promoters and the role of these polarities on a higher level.

The aim of creating a geography of existing or planned superplaces throughout Europe satisfies the need for description. As Giuseppe Dematteis and Francesca Governa suggest, «What present day architects can usefully learn from geographical sciences is, above all, the ability to imagine places and people living in them as if they were immersed in spatial relation networks, by which they can be connected with other places, and which contribute to give shape and sense to the ways of inhabiting and settling» (Dematteis & Governa, 2005).

This operation allowed us to study the spatial relationships between a region and a set of exceptional objects (superplaces) located within it, which initially appeared to be disordered, accidental or out-of-context.

Focus on the European continent captured a series of scattered points, whose location approach was suggested by the technical rules of logistics, infrastructure, commercial strategies and marketing, all lying outside the realm of urban planning. In fact, this logic follows the dominant mobility networks, indicating intermodal exchange nodes as preferred locations. Entertainment and recreation facilities concentrate as additional points around highway axes. Superplaces position themselves in close proximity to them in order to exploit a low-density context and the attraction factor deriving from high accessibility, as broadly explained in the Orio al Serio case.

Such heterogeneous situations were observed through comparative matrices. What resulted were some recurring features relating to their physical, functional and temporal characteristics. The four principal ones are the following: large size, multi-purpose (or multi-functional) character, wide range of user types, regular distribution of space use over time.

By the *large size*[9] of the project, we mean its impact on a context that

4. look at superplaces *from the inside* to explore the innovative ways to inhabit them while investigating the different use practices that people deploy

[9] During the research project, it became clear that it is impossible to define superplaces by setting threshold dimensions for two reasons. Firstly, there are profound differences within the highly diversified sample of cases that we analysed. Secondly, 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.

might lead to the necessity of rethinking an entire system of public facilities and services within an urban context reaching even the regional scale.

Therefore, rather than thinking of superplaces in terms of floor area or volume, it is more interesting to delve into their great *functional density* which is the second of the above-mentioned features. In a superplace, the core facility (a stadium, station, airport, etc.) is flanked by a number of ancillary functions such as retail, tertiary activities, hospitality facilities, and so on.

Concerning this, the research project highlighted two distinctive aspects.

First, in the design of superplaces, the size and characteristics of these ancillary functions do not allow us to consider them as mere accessories (such as for instance, the ever-present bookshops and bars/restaurants inside railway stations). The retail example is particularly significant. Shopping areas within stadiums, airports or theme parks are veritable retail poles, able to attract customers from a supra-local area so as to compete with malls and city centres.

Their range of influence merges with that of the "driving" function thus creating a pole of attraction comparable only to highly - or even extremely - strong cores thanks to the multichannel and multiservice supply. This remarkable "positive congestion" (Koolhaas, 1994) is particularly evident in new project proposals in which real estate developers tend to leverage this aspect in order to plan increasingly large and complex transformations. The results are places where retail, entertainment, mobility and leisure functions overlap and where spaces and structures for the arts, health, quaternary services, industry and housing begin to appear.

The overlapping of the different areas of influence leads to what is a third distinctive feature of superplaces - the highly *varied range of users:* We identify three main user types: travellers, tourists and area residents.

Travellers frequent superplaces due to their intermodal or city gate roles (think of HSR stations) and are accustomed to using waiting time for leisure, recreational or consumer activities thus taking advantage of the opportunities present in the same structure.

For tourists, a superplace can be a specific stage in their journey, as in the case of theme parks, or football fans visiting team museums or using other functions inside the stadium. Some projects become tourist magnets on their own attended by visitors and advertised by real estate developers who exploit already-established tourist routes. An interesting example is Malaga's tourist promotion agency which offers a through-ticket that

includes a shopping stop at the HSR station along with the standard city tour.

Finally, area residents use superplaces as alternatives to or substitutes for their city's traditional public space. The shopping arcade of the Roma Tiburtina HSR station is the only public space connecting the two neighbourhoods that have always been divided by rails. This will lead to the daily use of the new covered passage and the nearby spaces by many non-travelling visitors, which implies an increased differentiation of users in the same place. The very interesting result is the continuous change in users' roles: travellers become visitors, tourists and business employees become customers of the superplace during their time off.

At the same time, superplaces are used for several different temporary activities during the year, sometimes with cyclical programs: happenings, events and exhibitions increase their multifunctional roles. Meanwhile, they influence the perception of people who go there. Inhabitants achieve a richer experience of those places, which become sites of cultural promotion, social interchanges and contacts.

Their value is enhanced by the fourth distinctive feature of superplaces –the *prolonged presence of the public*– which lengthens the average daily activity of these places by up to 12-14 hours. In most of Europe, businesses located at mobility nodes enjoy special treatment allowing them to exceed the Sunday opening limits usually imposed on shops, thus ensuring opening times of up to 350 days a year. Orio al Serio was the first municipality in Italy allowing opening hours until midnight. This aspect, together with the differentiation of functions and services, grants users almost uninterrupted 24/7 access. Moreover, the overlap of multiple user types distributes people's attendance over the course of the day thus avoiding slack periods.

4. The Caravaggio International Airport and Orio Center shopping mall at Orio al Serio (Bergamo, Italy)

In this article, we develop the case of the *Caravaggio International Airport/Orio Center shopping mall* at Orio al Serio (Bergamo, Italy) which we considered to be of particular interest for more than one reason. First, it reflects all of the inclusion criteria used to define superplaces in the previous framework. At the same time, it is still undergoing transformation processes in which we can observe the influence of a number of actors and territorial dynamics involved in the airport's evolution from a merely technical (infrastructural) space into a complex one. Finally, we chose this

case study because it shows all the features of superplaces and their potential and ambivalent roles in both local and regional dynamics.

4.1. Historical context

In recent years, many airports have been enlarged and transformed. Some are still simple terminals while others have undergone more profound change. Such transformation is often the result of the work of a number of developers and is strictly related to specific context conditions. The macroscopic manifestation of this change is an increase in the number of functions developing in the same area which therefore becomes a complex space in which specialised activity and the supply of goods and services coexist.

Airport management companies are faced with three emerging issues[10]: (i) increase in air mobility (both in terms of number of travellers and frequency), (ii) demand for airport facilities by passengers and other users, (iii) the need to make the airport attractive to private investors in a context in which regions are competing for airport localisation. This last reason leads management companies to transform airports into containers for differentiated activities as a strategy for investment diversification.

Over the past ten years, the terminals in Europe with the greatest increase –and especially in Italy– are those used by low-cost airlines[11] often characterised by high traffic volumes.

Today, airport management companies are playing new and more active roles, developing innovative policies and business strategies. These policies seek to maintain or increase the number of airport users (not only travellers), while strategies seek to exploit this growth. In this article, we will focus on the two principal real-estate strategies, both of which resort to the renovation and improvement of airport buildings. The first transforms underused technical volumes to increase users' space (for passengers and other users). The other concentrates new functions in unbuilt areas close to the airport –often on agricultural land– to support aeronautical activity. Often the results are a combination of both.

[10] Since the early 1990's, airports have been simultaneously *affected by* and *drivers of* changes concerning both their physical realities and the behaviours of their users. In this article, these two aspects are not explored, as we will not analyse the social, logistical and economic drivers of change, but only their territorial effects.

[11] In Italy between 2009 and 2010, domestic passengers (arrivals + departures) carried by low-cost operators increased by 8.38%, while those served by traditional operators increased by 6.17% (Data: ENAC – Ente Nazionale Aviazione Civile, 2010).

Many secondary airports[12] have undergone this kind of transformation. Although developers emphasize the territorial aspects of their projects during the decision-making process, very few transformations exercise real influence outside the project perimeter. In many cases, projects focus only on expanding buildings, on renovating existing volumes and on establishing new activities relating to logistics or flights. Only in a few cases does the airport become a dynamic and complex system, more than just a terminal. The airport can then become a "driver" of further transformation; not just a product but also a "producer" of change, manifesting its influence on different scales (local, regional, sometimes national) and in different fields (for example on a region's economy and social structure).

The result is the creation of a new kind of space that is more "intense" than other kinds. In the case of the Caravaggio International Airport and Orio Center mall, two factors (specific location characteristics and the relationship between the area and the local and regional contexts) mark both the underlying reasons for and the strength of these transformations. At the same time, they contribute to the development of a new and unusual space, heretofore unknown: a "superplace".

4.2. Geographical context and development

The Caravaggio International Airport (BGY) is located in northern Italy. It was built in 1937 as a military stopover in Orio al Serio, a small town (1,752 inhabitants in 2011) near the city of Bergamo (5 km). It belongs to the Milan airport system due to its proximity to the city (45 km) and its good accessibility. Moreover, the airport is located in the centre of a galaxy of small and medium-size towns, the so-called "urban region" of Milan, a metropolised area with more than 4 million inhabitants which Aldo Bonomi defined as the *città infinita* (infinite city) (Bonomi, Abruzzese, 2004).

The A4, an express highway connecting Turin and Venice along with other important arteries, provides the airport with good accessibility. The terminal was transformed into a civilian airport in the 1970's and was considered a strategic stop-over by freight operators due to its

[12] The strategies of low cost airlines (as in the cases of Ryanair or Virgin) are different from those of full-service airlines. For instance, operational costs are minimized by using secondary airports, where the passenger flows have therefore considerably increased. This is one of the reasons why the most interesting transformations are concentrated in medium or small airports.

proximity to the Milan and the Lombardy industrial districts. The Orio Center shopping mall was built facing the airport on the other side of the motorway.

After having long been ignored by most conventional carriers for passenger transport purposes (1.1 million passengers in 1999), in 1998 the airport management company initiated a new development plan called PN 16 whose goal was to capitalise on a well-located and constantly expanding, but not fully-exploited, structure. At the same time, following other actors' strategies, a new shopping mall named Orio Center (160 stores and one large commercial establishment) was located in front of the airport. The mall is so close to the airport that during the authorisation process, a specific request was made to build a new road facilitating the access to both destinations. One of the planned actions was a pedestrian underpass connecting the two areas in order to overcome the motorway barrier. Even if this request was not based on data analysis or on an explicit strategy, this underground passage should be considered one of the most important keys to the area's transformation.

In the following years, the development of the two destinations ran parallel but independently. The terminal was expanded and the management company implemented a strategy to gradually increase passenger flows even at the price of affecting cargo traffic. In 2002, Ryanair, Europe's largest low-cost airline, chose Caravaggio International Airport as a slot and in 2003 as a hub for Southern European flights. Due to the new flows,[13] retail and services activities also increased significantly within the airport perimeter[14].

In 2004, the second phase of the Orio Center mall was completed with 40 additional stores over a total of 49,000 m^2 GLA. A number of highly attractive brands was introduced, mostly in the fashion and accessories gallery. At the same time, some specialised large and medium size retail establishments[15] settled in an area close to the mall "parasitically" exploiting the flows.

In 2006, the construction of a hotel[16] close to the shopping mall was authorised affirming continuity in the development and, above all,

[13] 2,82 mln passengers in 2003, 3,3 mln in 2004 and 4,3 mln in 2005 (Data: ENAC – Ente Nazionale Aviazione Civile, 2010).

[14] +65% in 2002-2003 (Data: Sacbo, 2003).

[15] Currently there are four specialized stores: sport facilities, an armory, a furniture and a garden supply store. On the whole, the area is 9,663 m^2 (Data: Oss. Regionale del Commercio, 2010).

[16] The NH Orio al Serio Hotel has 600 beds, 4 conference halls and is directly connected to the mall.

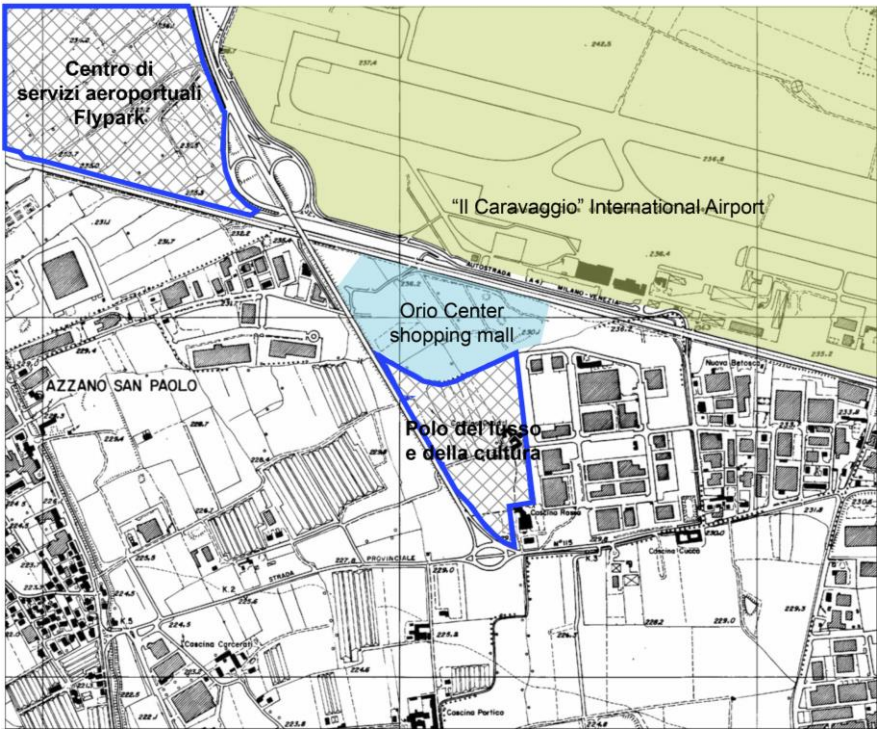
underscoring the synergistic behaviour of the two structures. In fact, although the hotel is spatially linked to the shopping mall, its activity is more closely related to the airport. The overall strategy put into place by operators and developers clearly sought to concentrate a growing number of activities in the area and to increase supply in order to take advantage of the increasing flows of people, also by improving the pedestrian connection between the two sides of the motorway. Recently, two additional projects have been initiated close to the area; they are now on hold but could possibly emerge as new components within this large and complex system.

The first is the *Centro di servizi aeroportuali – Flypark*, a new airport development including customs offices, a hostel, a fire station, a railway station and some new commercial activities. The most important element in this project is the direct rail connection between the airport and Bergamo's railway station, a planned solution to worsening congestion problems but also a tool to attract new customer inflows. The developer's strategy is to create a direct connection between the city centre and the shopping mall because, while the airport is becoming an important European hub[17], the entire area is becoming a new "place".

The second project, the *Polo del lusso e della cultura*, will be a new business/retail/entertainment pole with a luxury hotel, an exhibition area, a multiplex, offices and a hospital. The structure is located behind the existing mall, constituting an enormous expansion.

[17] 7.1 million passengers in 2009, 7.6 million in 2010 and 8.4 million in 2011 (Data: ENAC – Ente Nazionale Aviazione Civile, 2011).

Fig. 3: Two additional projects around the superplace (M. Paris, 2014)



4.3. Actors and developers

The area's development is based on the progressive integration (in physical, functional and perceptive terms) between two independent structures, the terminal and the mall. It is the result of a series of actions and strategies activated by a number of different public and private subjects.

Private subjects

Sacbo (Società per l'Aeroporto Civile di Bergamo – Orio al serio) was established in 1970 as a partnership of Bergamo's major financial companies and banks with the scope of developing the airport's commercial traffic. The company's role in the process is active and not self-oriented, a development agent for the entire area.

The Percassi Group, one of Italy's most important retail and real estate developers, is a co-founder of Sacbo. Percassi is the Orio Center mall's developer and franchisor of a number of fashion brands located both in the

gallery and the terminal. Its subsidiaries Aviostil Srl, Pro.Gen., Stilo Immobiliare Finanziaria Srl and Finser Spa are the operative and finance partners of the group and have recently activated the two above-mentioned projects: Centro di servizi aeroportuali and Flypark and Polo del lusso e della cultura.

Private companies in the area show unique and uncommon skill, especially when integrating the site's exceptional spatial, social and economic features with innovative solutions to regional transformation. At the same time superplaces are a field for those operators able to adapt their strategies to different scales. The Percassi Group, meanwhile working on the new development of Orio Center, is one of the promoters of a new project based on the settlement of a large regional Mall close to the Milano-Linate Airport (MI), led by Westfield an Australian retail company. This new step is based on a "change of scale" for the operator and shows the global "network logic" of superplaces and of their developers.

Fig. 4: Masterplan of the "Polo del lusso e della cultura" (ASY – Asimptote Architecture, De Otto Studio, Progen, 2008)

public subjects

Public agencies play a central role as authorizing entities or promoters along every step of the transformation process. The Lombardy Region is charged with the regional planning process and at the same time is promoter and developer of most of the infrastructure and sector policies (such as retail planning).

Bergamo Province and the local municipalities in which the new developments are located are other important actors within the process[18]. While the first development seemed "autistic" (Portas, Domingues, Cabral, 2003), merely following accessibility issues, more recent transformations mark an evolution since they better integrate with their context. We might argue that this change is due to the joint approach of different subjects and the integration of their planning strategies.

The analysis evidences two remarkable aspects of the developers' role: the change in the approach of public agencies and the presence of multi-scale interactions necessary to best exploit the site's extraordinary characteristics.

The public agencies' approaches have evolved over time. At first, public subjects were involved only during the authorisation process, their contribution limited to requests for project improvements. During a project's development however, their role became increasingly important within the design process itself due to the important influence of both public policy and public funding in the construction of infrastructure, public space and so on. As a consequence, their role evolved towards a more strategic and design-oriented one based on the coordination of different stakeholders. Moreover, cooperation between public and private subjects has also been reinforced in order to produce services targeting different users. Coordination is required to focus on problems, to guide actions and to locate those facilities whose impacts affect a larger context in a specific area. In the case of Orio al Serio, coordination was improved by the presence of public subjects belonging to different government levels (Region, Province, Municipalities) animating the multi-scale discussion.

4.4. From internal relations to external effects

The terminal and the mall are environments which appear to be hybrid and still in evolution, formed as the result of accumulation, rather than

[18] The terminal and the mall are entirely included within the municipality of Orio al Serio, while the Centro di servizi aeroportuali – Flypark will be located in Bergamo and the Polo del lusso e della cultura in Azzano San Paolo.

design, marking their shape and the way people use them (what we define here as "practices"). In this article, we consider these practices to be one of the key factors in transforming *space* into *place*. In fact, it is through innovative spatial use practices that spatial integration between different structures evolves into the integration of activities. However, we cannot ascribe the exceptional character of a site merely to the proximity of the activities located there. Spatial tension is created by the overlapping of the airport and the mall and the fact that they complement each other's attractiveness within a limited area[19]. The Lombardy Region's 2006-2008 program for retail activities defined this situation as «a dense commercial area joined to an infrastructural node with effective synergy between transport infrastructure, specialised in low cost flights, and non-food sales activities[20]». In 2007, the Orio Center shops earned three euros per passenger[21] which means that passengers at the Orio al Serio airport spent more on goods and services there than in any other airport in Lombardy. The mall captures different types of flows; "traditional" ones thanks to its critical mass and rich supply, along with other flows using the terminal space (shopping travellers[22], accompanying family, friends and business associates, tourists waiting for connecting flights).

Furthermore, the analysis of airport earnings over the last five years shows that the increase of the non-aviation dependent average revenue is greater than the increase in passenger transit, revealing a change in users' practices due to spatial features and functional supply, both improving the success of commercial activity within the airport.

The physical and immaterial connections between the terminal and the mall are perceived outside the area on different scales and from different points of view: they generate tensions which affect a number of aspects, from residents' attitudes and habits and business behaviours, to trends in the regional economy. In turn, the transformation of developers' and

[19] In 2010, Il Caravaggio International Airport was the fourth Italian airport in terms of passenger traffic, which increased 580% between 2000 and 2010, reaching 7.6 million transiting passengers in 2010 (data: ENAC – Ente Nazionale Aviazione Civile). On the other hand, Orio Center is one of the largest and most utilized shopping malls in Italy, with more than 70,000 m^2 GLA, and an average of 40,000 users/day and more than 12 million users/year.

[20] Regione Lombardia, Programma triennale per lo sviluppo del settore commerciale 2006-2008.

[21] Source: Report Sacbo Spa, 2007

[22] Before the economic crisis, Sacbo calculated that 15% of Ryanair one-day round trip travellers (flying in the same day with a minimum gap of 6 hours between the two journeys) decided to travel to Orio al Serio airport in order to visit the shopping mall.

residents' strategies themselves modifies the context's spatial configuration.

In particular, the superplace generates two kinds of local change: in economic opportunities and in public policy.

For many years now, Bergamo's outskirts have hosted an industrial district of national and European importance. The presence of the airport is now changing this general context. Over the past ten years, new developments and substitutions of existing structures have occurred and are still occurring. Industrial activities located near the airport have been substituted by companies providing goods and services to the airport itself and to its users. Simultaneously, a number of retail operators have relocated there to exploit the site's strong attraction to potential consumers.

We might affirm that there is a dual polarisation process going on. On the one hand, the dimension and number of activities is increasing (with project completion, Orio Center will be the fifth largest shopping mall in Italy with 73,516 m^2 GLA). On the other, functional differentiation and improvement is underway throughout the entire area (for example, the Polo della cultura will also include a hospital).

Local public policy is changing too. Local plans moved from a regulatory approach to a strategic one. Therefore, current public policy - including urban plans - regards the Orio system as an opportunity for local development which also explains the negotiation process with the airport management company.

The effects on businesses are not limited to the local scale, however. A number of companies (local or Lombardy-based in any case) use the airport and the mall as a national or even European showcase for their products. At the same time the airport's role as an interface is important for the tourist and hospitality sector in the province of Bergamo. Sector studies highlight an increase in the numbers of visitors (+3,3% in 2010) both in the central city's museums and in smaller towns. Region-wide, the demand for hospitality services is rapidly evolving towards shorter stays (less than 3 night "breaks" instead of more than 7). Experts associate this change with the presence of the airport terminal and new, partially-related frequent-flyer habits.

Sacbo's recent strategy favouring passenger traffic at the expense of freight activity is generating both partnerships and conflicts on the regional scale. For example, two other airports (Brescia-Montichiari and Verona) have developed an integrated – non-competing – strategy with Sacbo, seeking to capture part of the cargo business. This partnership could become a driving force behind the re-activation of a regional airport

system. In contrast, Malpensa Airport tried to compete with Orio in attracting flight operators and investors but failed.

The different effects on the region caused by the presence of the Orio airport/mall complex overlap both in spatial and temporal terms. The place analysed here is where all these phenomena unfold. The area is the focal point for the different power games relating to the strategies of retailers, real estate developers, politicians, etc. But at the same time it is also the place where users' habits and spatial practices coexist and converge thus shaping a space that hosts everyday "urban" life, beyond just the planned activities.

4.5. Remarks on the empirical evidence

In the theoretical framework, we assumed a number of requirements that multifunctional spaces must share in order to be considered *superplaces*. We assumed such requirements by borrowing them from a number of observed case studies (Paris, 2009).

The case of Caravaggio International Airport and Orio Center shopping mall satisfies these requirements. Moreover, we understood that the same features make it both different and similar to other places.

The area is remarkably different from its context: it is complex and hosts different typologies of users and activities. At the same time, it is an important regional destination and these aspects make it more similar to traditional city centres than to single-purpose commercial areas like conventional airport terminals.

The area – a suburban aggregation of new buildings – displays some of the characteristics of urbanity. Is this kind of urbanity, in places which are neither urban nor central, another feature of superplaces? And if so, is there a kind of urbanity that is specific to superplaces?

We should advance our research further in order to answer this question but this hypothesis leads to two partial conclusions.

Users' habits, data and empirical observations highlight how something different – and probably new – occurs in this place. Further evidence relates to the strategies of private subjects who tend to consider it an urban space. We need new words to define this "*suburban urbanity*", like the word *superplaces* might, and its effects on a broader space.

Urbanity is a distinctive feature of superplaces, the product of a number of often unplanned actions and transformations through which space becomes an *interface* where users, services, and goods flow in a fluid and unstructured – or still not structured – way. Some of the most

recent projects for Orio (the Polo del lusso e della cultura, for example) are attempts to structure these flows and exploit them for commercial purposes.

In the minds of the developers, the ongoing phase of transformation should lead to a new regional centrality connecting the superplace with its surroundings, further increasing the mall's critical mass and revenue potential.

In principle, we do not find fault with the buildings' architectural form and design but we should point out their weak bonds with the context. The relationship between the site and its context is one of the most important reasons for its transformation. A new phase could recognize its centrality and support its integration with other central places and with its context which, in this light, could become more attractive.

5. Conclusions

The research supporting this article has allowed us to study a new spatial phenomenon known as "*superplace*" for which we have defined features, typologies and externalities. We briefly analysed spaces – having specific practical purposes and resulting from real estate development – that can take on the symbolic dimension of "*place*" thanks to their size, attractiveness, and ability to provide services. These transformations seek to take advantage of the value deriving from their location in proximity to either mobility nodes or some other type of large metropolitan facility. They can be present both within the consolidated urban fabric and within newly urbanized areas.

The common element, which is described at length in the Orio al Serio case study, is that these places lend themselves to (or impose) spatial use of an urban type. This occurs chiefly within connective and transitional spaces sometimes on the edges of, rather than within, functional perimeters (where an engineering or econometric efficiency model tends to prevail).

However, it would be a mistake to identify superplaces with the "city of the future", most of all in a phase where we face the effects of the economic crisis on people's behaviour and urban practices. Although usually endowed with a high degree of urbanity, from several points of view (such as the presence of residents, the nature of the public space, etc.), they still cannot represent a true alternative to towns or cities that have been established over time. Instead, they can be seen in a selection process of polarities as a new layer within a given region that can create new forces while interacting with its surroundings.

We believe that these forces can be of three types: *dynamic*, *invasive* or *conflicting*.

In the case of *dynamic* forces, a superplace generates transformations on different scales: regional, urban and local. This phenomenon is evident when we look at real estate development and new businesses clustering and concentrating around already-established structures particularly along road axes connecting these poles with nearby towns and settlements or with city centres.

The category of *invasive* forces includes those phenomena through which a superplace "lands" in a context and draws upon all of its resources without foreseeing compensation or reciprocal advantage. In other words, it concentrates all economic dynamics and activities upon itself until it deprives the hosting context of all meaning.

This process, or the risk that it might come about, lies at the root of the *conflicts* that superplaces sometimes generate. The refusal of this sort of transformation or open opposition to the location of such entities by those affected by it (citizens, businesses, local authorities) should lead to careful thinking about the role that these structures play in their contexts and their possible integration on local and regional levels.

Today, the task of those who question the nature and the geography of superplaces is not only to define and document them. Such an approach would lead urban planners and scholars to the paradox of discussing these objects already knowing that they are not meant to be different from what they are: that is, "autistic fragments" (Portas, Domingues, Cabral, 2003) disconnected from their contexts and from the city. Perpetuating analysis along these lines would correspond to repeating the aporia of an eternal thought regarding the language of the city without ever facing urban phenomena as such.

The responsibility of all studies addressing aspects of contemporary space is to observe their prospects for evolution and grasp the possible interactions with their respective environments. In the case of superplaces, these interactions must be understood on different scales. In essence, we propose that the materials produced by this study, as well as by other ongoing research projects, serve both designers and local authorities responsible for issuing building permits as tools for observing the quality of the proposals and the related management models put forth for their assessment. Measuring quality corresponds to estimating the degree of integration that these structures can establish with their contexts once completed.

In this sense, it is worth looking at four key points that we propose as

indicators of the character of superplaces:

degree of interaction with the system of already-established centralities. While focusing on this aspect, the presence of both historic urban centres and new-generation specialized poles (shopping malls, office or leisure-related compounds, etc.) should be taken into account

interaction with the metropolitan landscape as the basis for evaluating sustainability along with the ability of a superplace to create its own sense of identity and to represent a landmark through which cohesion and new types of "territoriality" can be created. In this sense, transformation should seek to redirect and create a new balance in an entire area. We speak of balance, since "predators" (meaning those functions which parasitically exploit a site's resources, flows and peculiarities) should not be allowed to "kill" a territory as the very organism from which they draw their lifeblood

technical efficiency of new superplace proposals. In this case, it is suggested to think about the role of new sustainable developments in terms of the efficiency of all the functions they hold; also with policies of functional densification and protection of not urbanized land. It is senseless to conceive of an airport integrated with other functions if the regional context already boasts a network of terminals, something that would hinder the satisfactory use of the new facility. This point requires that econometric criteria be adapted to local situations and needs. ICTs innovations could be very effective in immaterial connections able to make territorial functions "closer" and more accessible

capacity of superplaces to evolve into a contemporary habitat. This means acknowledging human needs and providing appropriate, practical and feasible responses to them. In order to better understand this indicator, it is necessary to think in ecosystemic terms in which the biotic part of a territory (contemporary society) colonizes and enlivens these structures by transforming them into spaces/places for meeting, socializing and living.

Conceiving superplaces in these terms does not only mean questioning their roles in any given region but also fostering new proposals that respect and enrich their contexts, interacting with them and improving the quality of life of their populations.

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