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The Navigli Circle in Milan, yesterday and today

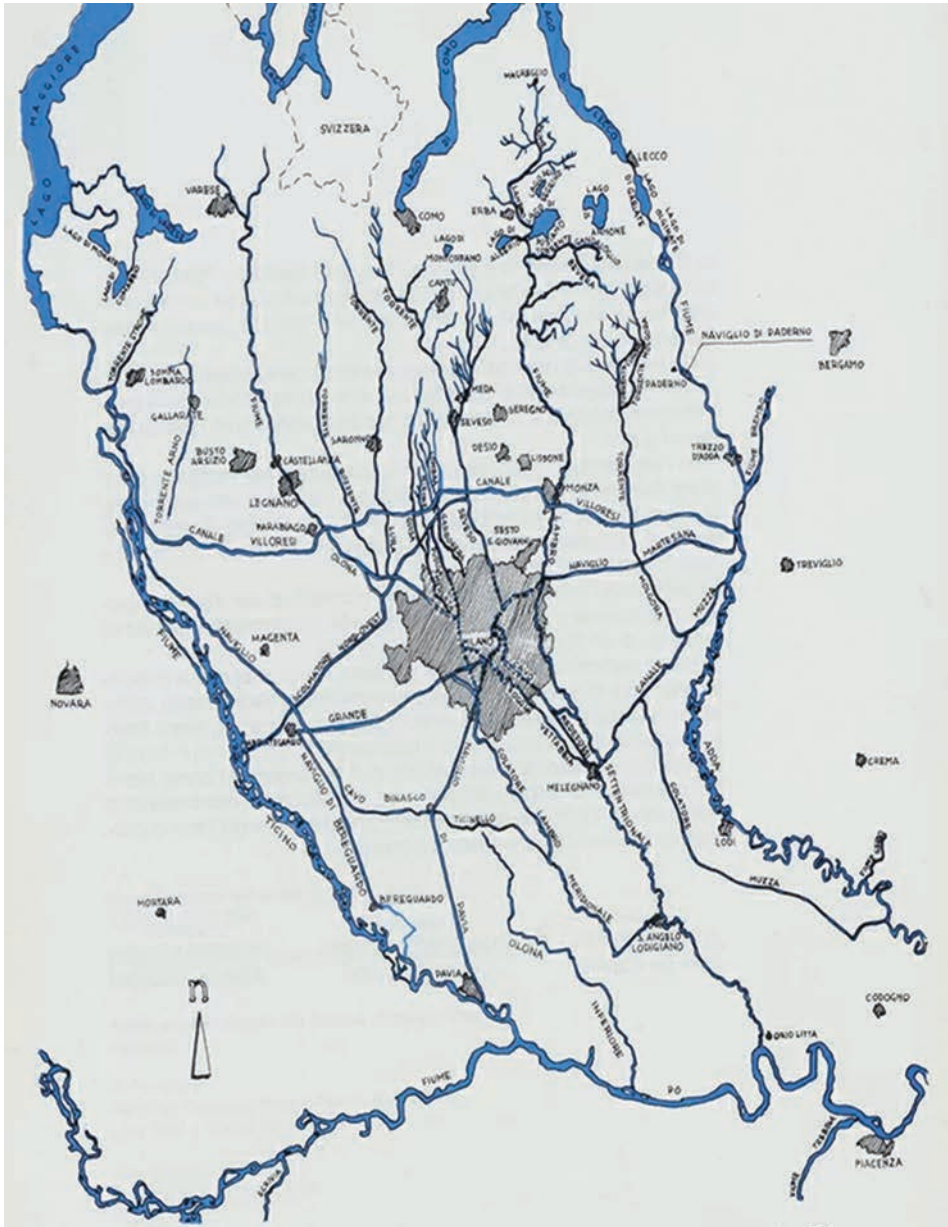
Through most of their circuit, the Milanese Navigli surround the historical center of the city, however without showing any segment of this old canal that was built together with other hydraulic projects for the purpose of bringing water to an urban space lacking in rivers. In fact, Milan is located 25 km east from Ticino, 25 km west from Adda and 35 km north of Po, without ever being crossed by any water course that is navigable or useful for water supply.

This is the reason its inhabitants equipped it with a complex artificial hydrography already in Roman age. Therefore, to take care of the population's water needs, some deviations of the small rivers of Seveso and Nirone were made, making them run around the Roman walls. Then, considering the water insufficiency of these rivers for the demographic growth of the city, Olona was deviated too.

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The first artificial canal of the city was Vettabia as the terminal segment of the antique riverbed of the Nirone, built by Romans for transportation, all the way to the Roman walls. Its origins lie in the section that is now buried between today's streets Vettabbia and Santa Croce; the canal – still underground – goes along via Calatafimi, via Col Moschin, via Castelbarco and via Bazzi where it finally emerges to open air, all the way to Chiaravalle where it joins Redefossi¹ near San Giuliano, ending in the estuary of Lambro in Melegnano. The Redefossi – another historical Milanese canal – begins at Porta Nuova near the Gabelle bridge, runs through the Martesana waters and continuing parallel to the eastern side of the Spanish walls, finally ending in the Lambro near Melegnano. In its final section it follows Seveso's natural riverbed prior to the alteration of its course made by Romans.

¹ This canal, similarly to the Navigli Circle, has been buried contemporarily to the burial of the latter in 1929. The Redefossi, called *Redefoss* in old Milanese, appeared in cartography also as *Re de' Fossi* or *Redefosso*, meaning "the king of the moats".



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Fig. 1. Milan at the center of a complex natural and artificial hydrographical system, between the river Ticino west, the river Adda east, pre-Alpine lakes north and the river Po south; in midst of these waters there are numerous smaller rivers and canals that arrive inside the city

Source: *La città d'ACQUA: Milano ha cinque fiumi e cinque navigli. Ed è posta in mezzo tra Ticino e Adda*, 2017, <https://www.milanocittastato.it/evergreen/forse-non-sapevi-che/milano-ha-cinque-fiumi-e-cinque-navigli/> (accessed: 19.11.2022).

However, the real Milanese Naviglio that created today's beltway (still called Navigli's circle despite being buried in 1929) originates from the medieval city walls. Roman walls were a masonry construction. However, in Medieval age, as the urban space advanced, a larger circle was built in 1156 with an external moat that gathered water from Seveso and Pudiga. This system was still not fully functional from a military point of view because it was built with soil excavated from the moat and some wood palisades. In fact, those walls were destroyed by Barbarossa in 1162 together with the Roman belt. However, construction of new walls begun already in 1171, and this time in masonry with a larger moat that held Olona's waters too after the Roman walls were deviated for the second time. This moat was solidified in centuries that followed and has was the foundation of the Navigli Circle that characterizes the city in our days.



Fig. 2. The inside circle of the Milanese Navigli as it appeared in the XIX century
Source: *Il Naviglio*, Milano 1887.

A first description of the medieval Milanese Naviglio can be found in Bonvesin de la Riva's 1288 *De magnalibus Mediolani* (approx. 1240–1315) and represents the hydric situation of the city at the time.²

Inside the city there are no cisterns or long water pipelines coming from afar, but live water, natural, incredibly adapted to be drunk by humans, clear, healthy, right there for the taking, never scarce even if there's no rain, and they are so abundant that every home that is barely decent has always a source of live water that gets called a well. [...] I could see that over six thousand live sources ensure that the citizens have live water every day. [...] No other city in the world is known or thought to have such wealth and abundance of resources. I dare openly say that the value of Milan's abundant and precious water is superior to all the wine and water of some other cities. (1, III)

A surprisingly beautiful and wide moat surrounds this city entirely and does not contain a swamp or a putrid pond, but live water from the source, filled with fish and shrimps. It lies between an embankment on the inside and a wonderful wall on the outside, whose circuit – measured with extreme accuracy – corresponds to 2541 cubits [an antique measurement still used in Middle Ages, corresponds roughly to ½ meter]. The width of the moat, along the whole circuit around the city, is 38 cubits. (2, V)

446 The writer makes space for a healthy dose of genius irony when he considers the city's flaws:

If I am allowed to say, our city has two main flaws: that of civic harmony and the lack of a port that would allow canals from the sea; if it could correct them both, there would be much wonderful utility and so much more glory. I hope that the first flaw will be corrected through prayers of the righteous; the second one could be corrected if powerful men of our lands dedicated to realization of this work all of those energies they employ in mutual destruction and extortion of money to their fellow citizens in order to feed their own evil endeavors.³ (8, X)

Therefore, in the XIII century a naval connection between Milan and the sea would not have been possible until the leadership did not improve themselves, avoiding both wasting energy in self-destruction and extortion of resources from their citizens for harmful projects. However, a true port that would be able to allow communication between the city and the Adriatic sea through canals and Po's flow – just as the Milanese friar auspicated – was never made.⁴ In regard to the topic we have Paolo Colussi's

² *De magnalibus Mediolani*, translated in Italian by Giuseppe Pontiggia, Milan 1974. The translation to English is by the author.

³ Translation to English made by the author.

⁴ In 1972 with the application of the constitutional norms concerning new powers given to regions, Lombardy begun the digging of the "Milan canal" from Cremona to Adda, in order to better the navigation towards the Po. However in 2000 the works have

bitter consideration implying that the “Sea Port” in Milanese area is just a subway station today.⁵

The Internal Naviglio grew into that from a simple defensive moat, 6.5 km long and 9 m wide. Its transformation happened between 1387 and 1496, done by the Visconti family first and the Sforza afterward. Its only non-navigable part was north-west towards the Sforza Castle because it was supposed to bring water to the Castle moat as its only purpose. The two ramifications going towards it were called San Gerolamo’s Naviglio coinciding with today’s via Carducci, and Naviglio Morto along today’s via Pontaccio, both unsuitable for navigation. The small pond of San Marco was a tributary of the Cerchia, meaning the last part of the Martesana Naviglio that changed name after the Conca dell’Incoronata. Its outlets were Naviglio Vallone that merged with Darsena di Porta Ticinese and a spillway canal that went towards Vettabbia. The Naviglio Vallone, called also Naviglio di Viarenna, was the connecting canal between the Cerchia dei Navigli and Darsena. It had been built between 1438 and 1439 by Filippo Maria Visconti with the intent to facilitate the transportation of Candoglia marble for the Milanese Duomo. From that moment on, the route of the Milanese cathedral building material was exclusively via water: Lago Maggiore, Ticino, Naviglio Grande, the small pond of Sant’Eustorgio, Naviglio Vallone, Cerchia dei Navigli and finally the pond of Santo Stefano near Duomo’s construction site. Before the Naviglio Vallone was built, the marble stopped at the Sant’Eustorgio pond and then transported by land. Afterwards, with the Naviglio Vallone and the enlargement of the wall and creating the Cerchia dei Navigli and the pond Santo Stefano, the marble could finally be transported by water. Along the Naviglio Vallone route (700 m) *the Conca di Viarenna was built in order to overcome the height difference of two meters between the Cerchia dei Navigli and the Darsena. Built in 1438,*⁶ it was the first navigation basin to be made in Europe. This was a new viability guaranteed by water that also serves as backdrop for the “legend” of the floating palace named “La Magna” and belonging to the Duke of Milan Filippo Maria Visconti (1392–1447), the younger son of Gian Galeazzo

been stopped after the Consortium of the Milan-Cremona-Po canal was suppressed, and have never been revived again.

⁵ P. Colussi, *Milano città acquatica e il suo porto di mare*, [in:] *Storia di Milano*, 2013, http://www.storiadimilano.it/Miti_e_leggende/acque.htm (accessed: 19.11.2022).

⁶ In matter of the invention of the basins, see C. Cattaneo, *Notizie naturali e civili su la Lombardia*, vol. I, capo V, Milano 1844, pp. 176–180. Cattaneo refuted the traditional beliefs that attributed the invention of the basins to Leonardo at the end of the XV century during his stay in Milan at the court of Ludovico il Moro, placing the dating to approximately half a century before.

(1351–1402) and the last lord of the Visconti dynasty. Aboard of his floating home, he moved between the castles of Abbiategrasso, Cusago and Bereguardo near Pavia, meeting his lovers in remote suburban areas and escaping the summer heat in the city.⁷

Under Francesco Sforza (1401–1466) an enlargement was implemented through dredging of the canals towards north and beyond the Santo Stefano pond, in order to make the canal navigable to heavy load transport boats.⁸ Therefore, a part of the naviglio had been connected to the San Marco pond. Furthermore, there were 30 fluxes that supplied irrigation and milling canals, considering the presence of gardens and mills in the city and its immediate surroundings, to the point that one of the latter gave the name to today's Molino delle Armi.

The last decade of the XV century was characterized by Leonardo's presence and his ideas conceived for Ludovico il Moro (1452–1508). Da Vinci's mastermind produced the project of binding the enhancement of the Cerchia dei Navigli to an urbanistic expansion plan which was probably necessary also because of hygienic reasons, especially after the plague that stroke Milan in 1484–1485. The high population density inside the Navigli perimeter showed the need to scatter both population and buildings by extending the constructed area outside of the circle. For this purpose Leonardo had the idea of using water not just as a transportation carrier, but also to attract new population "in un territorio circueute quello antico, separato ed, al tempo medesimo, servitor da mirabile Naviglio".⁹ These new inhabitants would have found their space between the inner circle and the Redefossi and water would have been used instead of roads. Such plan was however refused by the Duke. Had it been made, it would have resulted in an urban model comparable to the one existing in Amsterdam, where viability is guaranteed by water instead of streets. Furthermore, such an enlargement of urbanized spaces would have solved the issue of excessive buildings density through insertion of green areas of urban gardens next to buildings, and public and private parks. Still, another work commissioned by Ludovico il Moro stayed as a milestone for the city's history: the connection between the

⁷ In regard to this, *Pavia e dintorni*, n.d., http://www.paviaedintorni.it/temi/sguardo_nel_passato/curiosita_file/VISCONTI_POI_SFORZA.htm (accessed: 19.11.2022).

⁸ Under Francesco Sforza's rule, between 1457 and 1460 another important Milanese canal has been built, the Martesana one. This allowed the waters of Adda river to arrive in the city, similarly to the ones coming from the Ticino through the Naviglio Grande.

⁹ "[I]n a territory surrounding the antique one, separated and at the same time served by the wonderful Naviglio". In matter of these Leonardo's projects, see E. Malara, *Il Naviglio di Milano*, Milano 2008, pp. 38–39.

Martesana canal and the Naviglio Grande through the civic Cerchia Interna. This way two big pre-Alpine lakes of Lombardy – the Como and the Maggiore – became connected to the Duchy capital through a single waterway.¹⁰ This would result in the XVI century Milan being recognized by Fernand Braudel as an important river port in mainland, capable of transporting by water bulky and heavy goods all the way to Po estuary, thanks to an artificial canal system.¹¹

However, the Leonardo inspired trinomial water – buildings – green areas went on to become reality anyway after Leonardo with the expansion of boroughs between the Cerchia and Redefossi, extended up to the future Bastioni perimeter. Therefore, these were waterways that connected the other two components as fundamental transportation carriers until the second industrial revolution. This three-way combination is easily recognizable on Antonio Lafrery's 1573 map, representing Milan around 1560.¹²

There are accurately detailed “suburban” green areas that, instead outside of the wall circle, appear inside the Spanish Bastioni, built between 1548 and 1562. The author easily spotted the fundamental role of navigable canals and he even left “to the readers” the following caption in a scroll on the map itself:

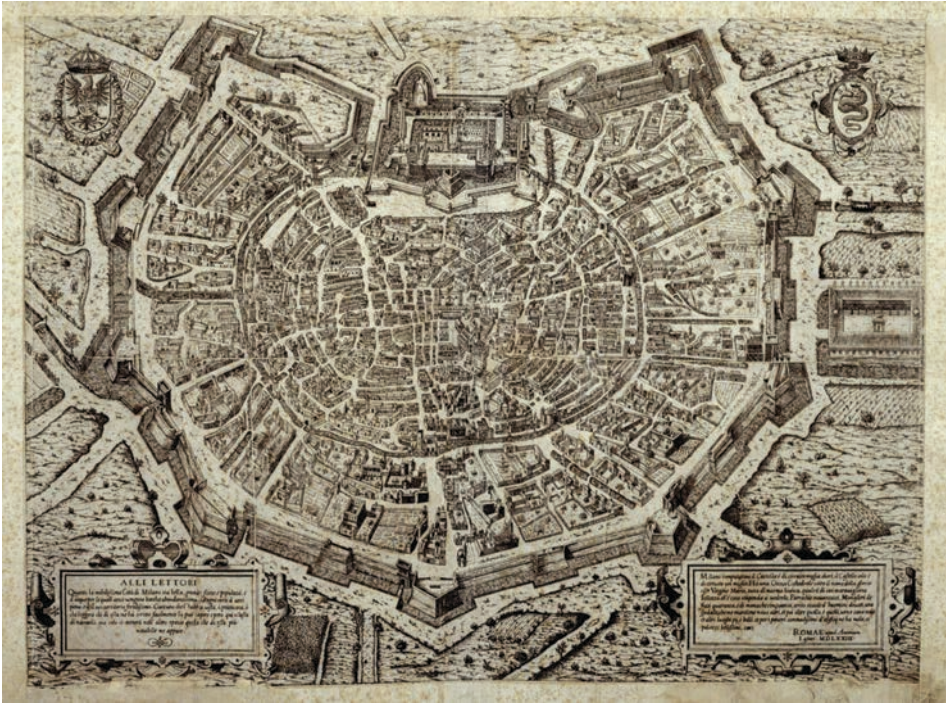
Quanto la nobilissima Città di Milano sia bella, grande, forte, è popolata, è d'acqua per le quali anco vengono barche abundantissima, et d'ogni sorti d'arti piena ed il suo territorio fertilissimo. Ciascuna che l'habbia vista, ó praticata, ó che leggerá chi di essa ne ha scritto facilmente lo può sapere e pero qui si lafa di narrarlo, ma solo si metterà nell'altro spatio quello che di essa più notabile ne appar.¹³

¹⁰ In the matter of Milan's connectio to the Lombardy lakes, E. Malara, *La rinascita dei Navigli. Percorsi per valorizzare una delle fondamentali risorse della Grande Milano*, Milano 2017, p. 14.

¹¹ F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, Paris 1949.

¹² Preserved in Milan, Civica Raccolta Stampe A. Bertarelli. It is the first engraving representing the whole city. Having the Castle in the upper area and the east in low right side of it, it is the only urban plant of the XVI century oriented towards north-west instead of north. It has been defined “an exceptional document” of the Spanish Milan, resulting from the initiatives of its governor Ferrante Gonzaga (*Lafrery, Pianta prospettica di Milano*, n.d., <https://bertarelli.milanocastello.it/it/content/lafrery-pianta-prospettica-di-Milano> (accessed: 19.11.2022)) who ordered the building of the new city wall belt, interred walls capable of resisting any artillery.

¹³ Translation from XVI century Italian to English made by the author. “The very noble City of Milan is beautiful, large, strong, and populated, it has a lot of water used by boats, it bustles with all sorts of activities and its lands are very fertile. Whoever has seen or visited it, or whoever will read what was written about it can easily know this and therefore I will not narrate about it, but I will merely highlight what is more notable about the city.”



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Fig. 3. A prospect map of Milan by Antonio Lafrery, etching print, 1573. Civica raccolta stampe A. Bertarelli. The external beltway of the city is made of “Spanish walls”, of which some segments still stand today. The internal circle, almost a perfect circular shape, corresponds to the Milanese Navigli, buried in 1929. Gardens and orchards that existed inside the “Spanish walls” were watered using the Navigli waters

Source: *Lafrery, Pianta prospettica di Milano*, n.d., <https://bertarelli.milanocastello.it/it/content/lafrery-pianta-prospettica-di-Milano> (accessed: 19.11.2022).

This countryside “hosted” within the walls was an exclusively Milanese peculiarity, where waterways played the most essential role, with docks in function of inside ports, however never to be reproduced in contemporary age.

This system of navigable artificial canals with Milan as epicenter and extending towards the Lombardia plane fully bloomed in Carlo Cattaneo’s age, where he compared it to the Netherlands:

Le linee d’interna navigazione, percorse in parte da vaporiere, sòmmano a 1200 chilometri [...]

Un paese del tutto mediterraneo come il nostro s’avvicina per questo aspetto all’Olanda. I nostri canali, navigabili ad un tempo e irrigatorj, sono costrutti sopra un principio speciale; non sono una serie di tronchi orizzontali come i canali

oltremontani di mera navigazione, ma sono veri fiumi, prima inclinati fortemente, poi progressivamente moderati, per accogliere di tronco in tronco le diseguali masse d'acqua, che l'irrigazione vien successivamente emungendo.¹⁴

Today not only this intense river navigation does not exist anymore, but the very junction spot of all the artificial canals of Milan and surrounding areas – meaning the Inner Circle – has disappeared, and in many of its parts it has also been buried with landfill of the subway excavations. Only a memory remains – in the abundant literature on the city canals in the *Literary walk* by Dante Isella published in 1987 and reproduced thirty years later with a new iconographic system.¹⁵ The essay contains written, painted, cartographic and customs testimonials of Milan as it was along today's via San Marco, via Fatebenefratelli, via Senato, via San Damiano, via Visconti di Modrone, Verziere, via Laghetto, Cà Granda, via Francesco Sforza, via Santa Sofia and via Molino delle Armi. That city no longer exists today because it does not coincide with water, the component that previously had characterized it for centuries.

Going back to XIX century, there was conflict between ways to use city's open-air waters: according to testimonies of the time, the Inner Circle waters that were also used as waste floodways permeated the surrounding area with insufferable stench,¹⁶ which worsened especially during temporary drainages. The distressing issue produced by waste dumped into the water in plain sight was known already in the XVII century to Giovanni Battista Settala, who had auspicated – and who was ignored – for an underground sewerage: “resta da ordinare, che li condotti de Necessarij sbocchino tutti su'l fondo, cioè sotto acqua, perché non rendino fetore al tempo de caldi”.¹⁷ To remedy at least partially to this distress, in the XIX century the pond of Santo Stefano had been sacrificed and buried in 1857 following dispositions of the emperor Franz Joseph.

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¹⁴ C. Cattaneo, *Notizie naturali...*, p. CI. Translation to English by the author. “The internal line of navigation that is followed in part by steamboats, are 1200 km long [...] An entirely Mediterranean country such as ours is very similar in this aspect to Netherlands. Our canals, navigable and at the same time irrigable, are built for a special purpose: there are not a series of horizontal segments like the trans-Alpine ones that are merely navigable, but they are real rivers, at first strongly inclined, then progressively growing more moderate, in order to welcome gradually the different water masses that are later deviated.”

¹⁵ D. Isella, *La Milano dei Navigli. Passeggiata letteraria*, Milano 2017.

¹⁶ E. Malara, *Il Naviglio...*, p. 125.

¹⁷ “We have to make sure that the sewerage is entirely underground, precisely under the water, so that there is no stench during warm climate” – G.B. Settala, *Relazioni del Navilio Grande, et di quello di Martesana della città di Milano*, Milano 1603. The original quote is from Malara, *Il Naviglio...*, p. 173; the English translation is by the author.



Fig. 4. The Santo Stefano pond which was buried in 1857. The Duomo, whose marble was transported by water from Lake Maggiore all the way to this small artificial pond, is in the background

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Source: print owned by the author.

Dating back to 1388, it had been used to station boats full of Candoglia marble that were transported through Ticino and the Naviglio Grande for the multi-century building of the Duomo. This not only erased a spot in the city that was perceived as one of the most charming ones, but it also made the building of the Milanese cathedral more difficult, even though the need of said marble was much less for the continuation of the works.

In those same years a new idea arose: burying the whole internal Naviglio that was perceived as the carrier of urban insalubrity and less and less a transport route. Not even the eclectic taste of the century that saw the Naviglio as a city characteristic trait – among other things, an excellent topic for painters and successively photographers – could stop the intention to put the space occupied by the Internal Circle to other use. This was a line of thought brought on by a need for rationality deriving from the new positivist mindset that was strong in the second half of the XIX century. Consequently, for around 70 years – from 1858 to 1928, the year the burying started – there were projects, discussions, polemics for a radical redefinition of the city's hydrographic plan. However, all the projects proposed during that period stayed almost entirely on paper.

Among very few exceptions there was the 1895 burying of the Naviglio di San Gerloamo – which corresponds to the segment of the internal Naviglio that went down from the Sforza Castle along today's Via Carducci – because of the stench that derived from its closed nature without outlets.

The internal Naviglio, Milan's city center water beltway, has been definitely buried in 1929. This act, more than any other, has disrupted the complex and multi-secular Milanese artificial hydrographic system. In fact, the burying of the internal Naviglio interrupted the water connection that made Milan the pivot of a unique system linking water from Lake Maggiore to the river Po through the river Ticino, and then all the way to the Adriatic sea, from lake Como to the Po through the river Adda; these waters, partially deviated from artificial navigable canals, allowed access to Milan to boats. Before passing the burying point of no return, two opposing schools of thought discussed for a long time: one was favorable to keeping the internal Circle as an open-air canal, as opposed to the other that already since the second half of the XIX century was asking for it to be suppressed. The reasons invoked by both sides were the reflection of antithetical cultural positions that competed in the age of positivism, futurism and subsequently in that of fascism.

The XIX century idea of progress, culturally supported by the positivism, was unlikely to be reconciled with the intention of keeping the slow water transportation all the way to Milan's core. This was one of the reasons for the burial together with those abovementioned of hygienic nature.¹⁸ On the other hand, the romantic and slightly nostalgic vision of Milan tied to water and its slow course, suggesting a predisposition to a rhythm of life opposite to hectic, almost meditative and inclined to appreciation of aesthetic suggestions such as that provided by the canals: glimpses of urban scenery with wash-houses, moored boats, ponds, walks along the canals, small bridges as the Sirenette one that evoked romantic suggestions,¹⁹ the moon reflected in the canal waters etc.

¹⁸ It is recognized today that the health hazard to citizens resulting from unhealthy and foul-smelling waters of the internal Navigli were unfounded. In regard to this, G. Beltrame, *Lettera aperta agli "scoperchiatori facili" dei Navigli*, Milano 2012, <https://www.arcipelagomilano.org/archives/19460> (accessed: 19.11.2022).

¹⁹ The Sirenette bridge provided a fairytale atmosphere given the homonymy with Hans Christian Andersen's poignant narrative work. Its current name is due to four female figures made of cast iron that dominate it, wanted by the architect Francesco Tetamanzi who made the bridge in 1842. Back then it was positioned on the Naviglio near via Mascagni in the San Damiano quarter, and it was easily identified by its statues called "the Ghisini sisters" by the Milanese, quite prosaically. It was the lovers' spot par excellence and brought suggestions of the Little Siren statue inspired by Andersen's tale, built in 1913 and placed on water near Copenhagen's port: it went on to become the city's

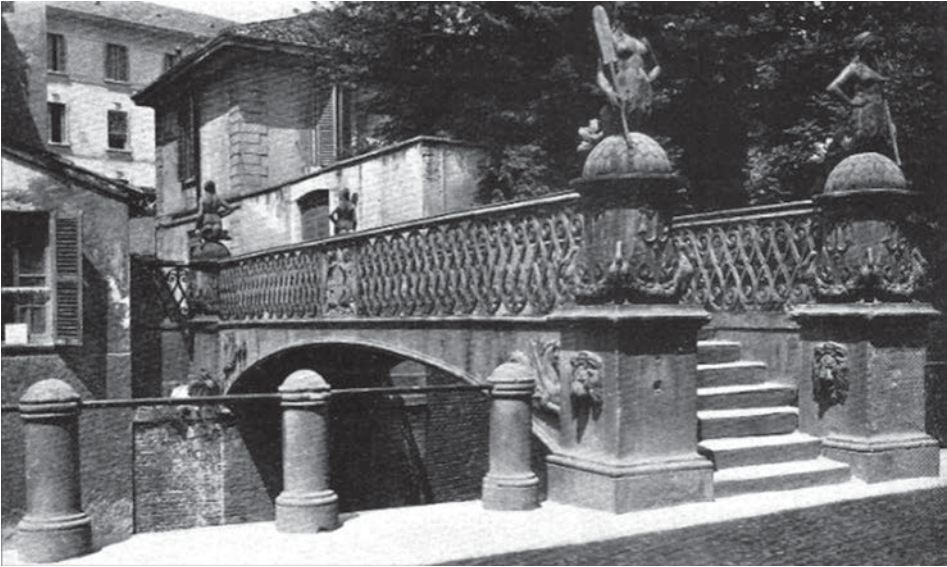


Fig. 5. The so-called “Sirenette bridge” as it was originally positioned on the internal Milanese Naviglio

Source: *Il “Ponte delle Sirenette”*, n.d., <https://naviglireloading.eu/il-ponte-delle-sirenette/> (accessed: 19.11.2022).

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These elements were also commonly found in painting of views and successively also in photography. With the arrival of the XX century and the futuristic anxiousness to destroy anything that even remotely tasted of old or tradition, the idea of burying the Internal Circle became solidified. From a literary point of view, a good example of such iconoclasm are some parts of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s famous work *Uccidiamo il chiaro di luna* from April 1909: they have been compared inside Pietro Lembi’s analysis to “a description of a great transformation work of the Milanese territory and the Padana Plane (deforestations, building infrastructures,

symbol despite continuous vandalism acts endured, and that it keeps enduring. Perhaps the Milanese mermaids had even worse luck. The bridge hosting them was removed when the Navigli were buried in 1929 and placed inside the Sempione Park. However, during transport its railings were damaged and replaced with simple iron tubes. Furthermore, one of the sirens got damaged during the 1943 bombings and fell into the water. Once the war was over there cast iron decorations on the pillars were gone, while two sirens were taken to restauration. Sometime afterwards one of the two remaining ones was stolen because of the material it was made of. Finally, in 1954 they all got replaced with bronze copies. The bridge’s restauration was completed in 2003, the railing replaced with another correspondent to the original that existed until 1929. Therefore, the bridge was saved but its current placing results in it being almost entirely ignored by the Milanese and by the tourists, losing its function as a romantic and sentimental city landmark.

factories) that saw in the last 150 years an incredible acceleration”.²⁰ The Navigli and the moonlight were seen as the first symbols that needed to be destroyed, even in the considerations of Fulvio Irace: “the futurist movement launched its challenge to moonlight reflected inside the Naviglio. Just like Venice’s Canal Grande, the Naviglio represented a gangrenous folkloristic tradition whose disappearance underneath a concrete pour could appear as a sign of the unstoppable winds of Progress”.²¹ The futuristic trepidation of disposing of the old finally got its chance of becoming reality in Milan when a good part of the ideology and initiatives of the Futurism movement got revived in fascism.²² By burying the Navigli, Mussolini’s party presented itself as a *decisionist* force, able to accomplish important tasks by springing directly into action without much discussions, delays, bureaucracy or hesitation caused by sentimental scruples in front of a much too fast-moving cancellation of the past.



Fig. 6. The Sirenette bridge today inside the Sempione Park

Source: *Due Sirenette in città...*, n.d., <https://naviglireloading.eu/2017/07/01/du-sirenette-in-citta/> (accessed: 19.11.2022).

²⁰ P. Lembi, *Il fiume sommerso. Milano, le acque, gli abitanti*, Milano 2006, p. 253. The translation of the fragment in the essay is made by the author.

²¹ F. Irace, *I Navigli come monumenti*, [in:] R. Pugliese, M. Lucchini (eds.), *Milano città d’acqua. Nuovi paesaggi urbani per la tutela dei Navigli*, Firenze 2009, p. 21. The translation is by the author.

²² It is not a mere coincidence that Marinetti, the founder of the futurism, had lived in the very central area of Milan (Corso Venezia 23). Core of the city, inside the Navigli’s circle, where few years later fascism would begin, with the famous “gathering” in San Sepolcro square on March 19th 1919.

Thus, the burying of the Navigli replaced the traditional water mobility inside of the ring surrounding Milan's center with automobile traffic and public transportation. Furthermore, from 1970 on, the situation of the internal Milanese Navigli got even worse. In fact, that is when the polluted waters of the Seveso river going towards Milan and the Martesana canal north of the city (that beforehand alimented the Circle) were deviated into the floodway canal Redefossi, that is external to the city center. Such measure entirely dried out the riverbed of the Navigli. Furthermore, their underground space was used as a deposit for all the rubble deriving from the subway excavations: this resulted in uncertainty that lasts to this day about whether the riverbed still exists, or it had been buried.²³ And yet, there is a part of the public opinion that by auspicating the reopening of the Navigli Circle would like to return to a water mobility as it was in the past. However, it is reasonably certain that today it would be impossible to bring the Navigli urban circuit to light in the prospect of recuperating the old waterway and contemporarily the old atmosphere and environment of a Milan that does not exist anymore; it remains an unreachable dream, especially considering the effect of such operation on the contemporary urban mobility, which is more than ten times over the one that existed a century ago. Not only that: there is no way of knowing what would emerge after the uncovering, therefore it is preferable to leave things as they are.

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However, it is not just a technical unsuitability, considering that there are no cultural grounds that would make this return to old Milan plausible. As Raffaele Pugliese opportunely observed in relation to the Navigli case, our identity is based on signs of the past which are remembered with nostalgia; however, an attempt to a real-life recovery, without behavior and lifestyle that is connected to those signs and landscapes, would not be a culturally credible task.²⁴ Instead, this operation would be more a step towards a *museification* of the city, with structures that are indeed aesthetically evocative, but entirely unsuitable for a life that follows the contemporary spirit and needs. On the contrary, an example of a fully successful museification was that of Venice that is now a museum city par excellence, whose urbanistic structure is based on laguna canals and has stayed nearly unchanged for centuries despite losing the functional needs that lead to it; in fact, Venice today is a touristic city that lives off this, unique and worldwide famous. Whereas on the contrary, Milan's main characteristic

²³ G. Beltrame, *Lettera aperta...*, p. 6.

²⁴ R. Pugliese, *Milano città d'acqua*, [in:] R. Pugliese, M. Lucchini (eds.), *Milano città d'acqua. Nuovi paesaggi urbani per la tutela dei Navigli*, Firenze 2009, p. 16.

stays firmly that of a place oriented towards productive activities such as fashion, design, and in general with an innovative spirit that cannot easily be reconciled with a glance towards a romantic past. However, the long-gone canals that until about a century ago embraced the entire city center are not gone entirely from the perceptions of the Milanese of their city, to the point that the old circuit is called “the Navigli Circle”.

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