

Facilities, landscape, city. To the origins of a missed meeting.

Travelling around the new high-speed Naples-Afragola train station.

Luisa Fatigati

Visiting Lecturer
Facoltà di Architettura - Università Federico II di Napoli
luisa.fatigati@polimi.it

Enrico Formato

Adjunct Professor
Facoltà di Architettura "Luigi Vanvitelli" - Seconda Università di Napoli
e.formato@unina.it

ABSTRACT

This article gives an account of a series of researches and town plans drawn up in the early 21st century about the areas nearby the settlement of the future high-speed train station in Afragola. Ten years later, during the construction of the facilities of the Station, designed by the star architect Zaha Hadid, it is probably about time to wonder why the huge cost that the construction of the railway required was not redistributed to the community in terms of utilities and improvement in the landscape. And why did no one, neither public operators nor politic makers, act "rationally", by following up on the technical solutions concerning the problems caused by politics itself? The depressing landscape absolutely recalls the wide gap between design and town planning practices.

INTRODUCTION

The *Asse Mediano* is the highway that crosses, along a path that looks like an arabesque, the entire inland urban sprawl near Naples - over the hills that separate it from the city by the sea. In a sense, the *Asse Mediano* is the *modern decuman* of this conurbation, the fluid axis that with its infinite string of junctions and viaducts holds together the multitude of scattered agglomerations and their recent developments.

Moving along this highway is a very interesting experience not only for those who deal with the territory. With its advertising totem and shopping centres, more or less dense and structured fragments of contemporary city, the infinite sequence of bends that characterizes its route, – further on, the reason why this road has no proper straight stretches – it provides the driving observer with a repertoire of landscapes that fully gives you back the idea of confusion and inconsistency of this territory.

Until a few years ago, maybe less than a decade, it was still possible – driving on this unique *highway* - to stumble on not urbanized, still under cultivation gaps. It was before the shopping centres colonization (now there are a few dozens of them, they are pretty large and with a strong impact), before the housing boom in the early twenty-first century, before the "EU aid" that contributed to the almost complete abandonment of agriculture. One of the most interesting town gaps was between Afragola and Acerra, a cultivated "green wedge" that, following the orographic depression, spreads out from the east area of Naples to the plain of the Regi Lagni, and from here back to the centurial countryside of Caserta.

1. ANTECEDENT

In October 1997, the Ministry of Transport, together with the Campania Region, the Province and the City of Naples and in agreement with the Società TAV spa, identified the area where to locate the new suburban rail of the future high speed railway station: the chosen site is in the town of Afragola, in the centre of the "green wedge" that is one of the few still cultivated gaps in the inland conurbation near Naples.

This decision, taken on the basis of a pure transport rationality, underwent, during the Environmental Assessment at the Ministry of Environment, some "corrections" of great interest:

1. the request that the high-speed suburban rail would also become an interchange station with the local railways;
2. the final design of interventions must be subordinated to an inter-towns town plan aiming at the environmental protection of the area.

Following these requirements, the Region Campania commissioned the starting up of a research to a group of planners, landscape architects and engineers in 2000¹.

The research, completed in 2002, features a two-level prediction:

1. a general structure, with strategies and requirements that will be absorbed in the under preparation Provincial Plan (as yet unapproved);
2. an accurate regulation with the arrangement of some variations to the current General town planning schemes of the five towns most directly affected by the new railway station and its suburban rail (the towns of Acerra, Afragola, Casoria, Casalnuovo di Napoli, Caivano).

The general targets of the "Plan for five towns" are defined as follows²:

1. identification of the area surrounding the Naples-Afragola station with the localization of the developed fringes of the towns;
2. reorganization of the road network;
3. protection of the (large) surfaces that are not developed or that are intended for agricultural production;
4. definition of protection measures in order to prevent unauthorized buildings;
5. drawing up those projects that can ensure a high level of permeability of the new facilities in order to reduce the barrier effect by the train lines and the train station;
6. identification and localization of higher-level functions (services and tertiary activities) to address the structural deficit that characterizes the suburban areas that are north of Naples.

1 The assignment has been entrusted to the design team coordinated by Paride Caputi with Stefania Carino, Lorenzo Di Lucchio, Luisa Fatigati, Enrico Formato. The town and landscape design was drafted by Paride Caputi, Luisa Fatigati and Enrico Formato.

2 The objectives of the plan are set by the Regional Resolution No. 5020 - 5/8/1999.

2. THE "PLAN FOR FIVE TOWNS" (2000-2002)

The High Speed Station is considered to be a peculiar metropolitan equipment: the station, along with residual agricultural areas, are intended as an opportunity to provide the hinterland urban sprawl with a large metropolitan park.

It is necessary that the empty areas around the new station are included in an environmental enhancement project that could consider them as a large urban void: the renovation of the settlement's system will follow starting from this void and proceeding outward.

So, this plan considers the "green wedge", that from East Naples goes up towards Caserta, as the new centre of the metropolitan town: an empty centre that can be structured as an opposite pole for the already built areas. The cultivated territory to be protected become an opportunity of transformation of the suburbs starting from a restoration project which reverses the logic of the current dialectic between town and country: the second term of the relation has so far been thought as a place waiting to be involved in a new settlement or production facilities, with no connection to the distinctive values of the area. The extent of the overturning that can occur, can be grasped by analogy with a mechanism that is constant in the construction of the early modern city compared to its archeological areas. The XVIII century Rome, for example, found some new centralities with the rediscovery of the Imperial Fora, so that an archaeological site also becomes a re-foundation: a re-foundation of meanings for the Baroque city. Similarly, the recovery and enhancement of the country landscape, and in particular of the Bourbon hydrographical network, are thought as agricultural archaeological operations and as the foundation of the Campania metropolis.

2.1 THE INTER-TOWNS AGRICULTURAL PARK

Considering the specific resources of this plain, mostly related to the wealth of the archaeological and historical-environmental areas (farms, mills and a hydrographical network which strongly characterizes the landscape), the project suggests the establishment of an inter-towns agricultural park: a consortium of interested towns - along with the City of Naples, the Region

and the Province - might be the managing body of the park.

The Park identifies all the extensive agricultural areas and the areas with wooded gardens in the plain between the five towns, so to reach various objectives: the promotion of historical and landscape heritage; landscape and environmental protection and recovery of the connecting belt between city and country; the connection between agricultural areas and urban green areas; the economic exploitation, protection and development of farming, even by assigning additional and territorial protection duties in relation with the town functions and the environmental assets; the cultural and recreational enjoyment of the environment by the citizens; the urban and services renovation in scattered conglomerations and agricultural villages, preventing phenomena of urban welding due to the localization of the HST station; the environmental improvement and conservation of the soil and water resources to improve the living conditions of the located populations; the reorganization of the areas surrounding the HST station and the creation of a great central location in the metropolitan system.

These targets can be pursued thanks to the localization of the HST station, which, being now included in the plan, is no more, or not only, a disturbing element to a precarious environmental balance or a “sector facility” whose impact must be solved by the town planning research, but, being rethought as a “local infrastructure”, it becomes essential to the development of the area, and an opportunity for a strategic process of actions for the improvement and redesign of the plain’s entire landscape.

Within the areas of the future agricultural park the estimations of the current plans regarding new settlement expansions have been eliminated: particularly the estimation resulting from the still active Consorzio ASI, to build in the territory of the town of Afragola, about 2 km north the future station, a business/production centre, about 200 hectares large, with the establishment of volumes and functions in complete contradiction with the objectives of the environmental protection and preservation of the open space.

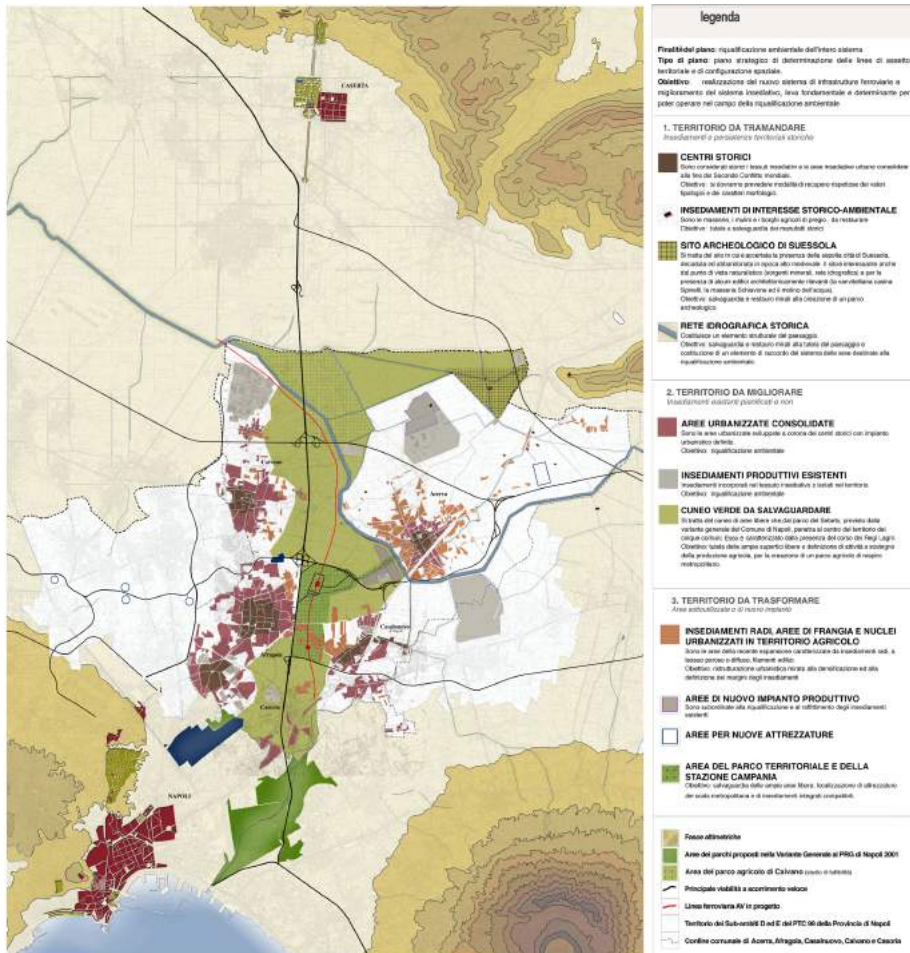


Figure 1 – Masterplan: the “green wedge” as the new centre of the metropolitan suburbia

2.2 THE EQUIPPED PARK AROUND THE STATION

The general design of the agricultural park suggests, for the area around the station, the establishment of a "natural, technology and utility park" in which to locate high-tech laboratories, agricultural testing centres and an entire range of services to the citizens (not just travellers). The quantities and functions to be set up in the park facilities were drawn from studying similar experiences in Europe and they are about 200,000 square meters of gross floor area (less than a fifth of the erased estimate by the Consorzio ASI). For

the entire area of the park, about 300 hectares large, it's been suggested a preventive acquisition by the public party, in order to direct the public investment in infrastructure (the high speed railway and the station) towards a profit in terms of land value of the areas nearby the station and, above all, in order to avoid that more or less legitimate private interests and initiatives would be triggered on them.

3. RESEARCH FOR THE SETTING UP OF A SOCIETY OF URBAN RENOVATION

The reasoning expressed in the Plan for five towns, although being evidently consistent with the ministerial objectives and the public interest, has been ignored both by the real estate development company of the State Railways, and by the Campania Region: paying hundreds of millions of Euros to build the high-speed railway – already working - and another hundred million for the construction of the station-building (assigned to the starchitect Zaha Hadid) and not to invest in the preventive purchase of the agricultural lands whose value is multiplied by the above investment is an aporia that cannot be explained with the power of reason.

The only concrete act promptly put in place in the above mentioned direction (it is evident that the timing of the transaction, that is buying the land before the construction of the railway began, was a necessary condition for the feasibility of the operation) was promoted by the City of Afragola whose Technical Department developed, in April 2002, a feasibility study for the establishment of a Society of urban renovation that, following what happened in the 90's in Bagnoli (Naples), would purchase the areas near the future HST station.³ The feasibility study, based on the hypothesis of a park that's strongly anchored to the pre-existing environment and to the improvement of the historic agricultural landscape, was submitted to the Ministry of Infrastructure, even though it didn't financed the establishment of the SUR or gave place to any alternative course. Yet, clearly, the proposed transaction was highly advantageous to the public coffers. Besides, it was in line with the ministerial objectives of defence and protection of a territory that's precious because it's rare in the metropolitan area of Naples, strongly at the

3 The Feasibility Study was prepared by Salvatore Napolitano with Luisa Fatigati and Enrico Formato.

risk of being transformed and over-built.

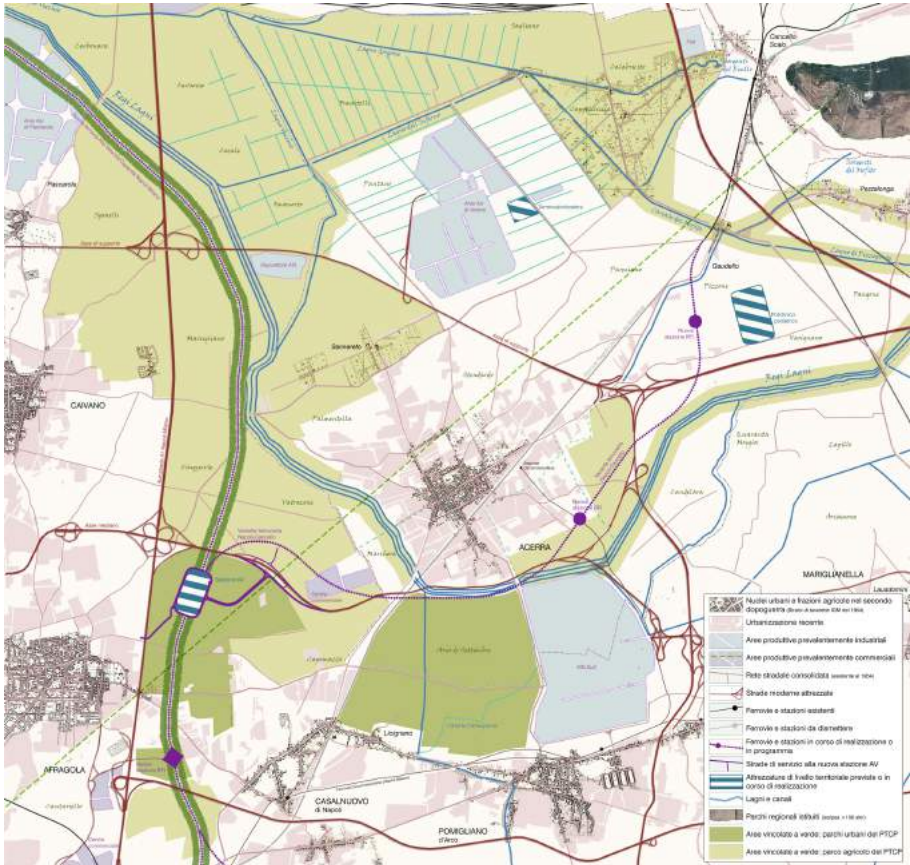


Figure 2 – The feasibility study for the establishment of a Society of urban renovation: a system of parks around the new station

4. STUDY FOR A RAILWAY BYPASS IN NAPLES

During the drawing up of the "Plan for five towns", in 2001, the Province entrusted the task of drafting a feasibility study for the construction of a local railway bypass in Naples⁴. The hypothesis, also included in the above mentioned ministerial requirements expressed in the EIA, derived from the

4 The task was entrusted to a temporary joint venture (the Centre for the Transport Systems Studies, the Progin Spa, the Engeco srl., the Steer Davies Gleave) that engaged Paride Caputi, Luisa Fatigati and Enrico Formato for the drawing up of the town planning and landscape plan.

objective of making the Afragola station a *hub* of the local railway transport and an interconnecting node with the High speed train station.

The plan of the new railway has been studied as closely related to the landscape design, taking into account a town planning that repeats the reasoning about the Afragola "green wedge" related to a set of urban gaps identified within the conurbation that from Acerra (East) reaches the sea of Giugliano (West). This conurbation has a population of about one million, but it's totally lacking in necessary higher services and facilities.

Along the route of the new local railway (which becomes a new element of the structure of the urban sprawl, just like the *Asse Mediano*) the plan suggests the creation of eight urban parks to be structured as new centres for the existing clusters; the stops and the main stations of the new local line will be located in relation to them. The park is thought, here as in Afragola, as a morphological unit where the gap is predominant on the full: the redesign of this area aims to redraw the fringe areas and to the re-balancing, in terms of equipment, quality of spaces and quality of life. If the "integrated" park includes the building areas that are still part of the town planning instruments in force, a qualitative variation to the GTPS is proposed: in the case of residential areas, for example, the design of the residence is considered in its relation to the open space, by developing the housing quantities with intensive housing types to ensure the soil saving.

The bypass railway in Naples has never been funded. The only outcome of the feasibility study was the partial acknowledgment, in the current (not approved) Provincial Territorial Plan, of the urban voids as a system of parks.

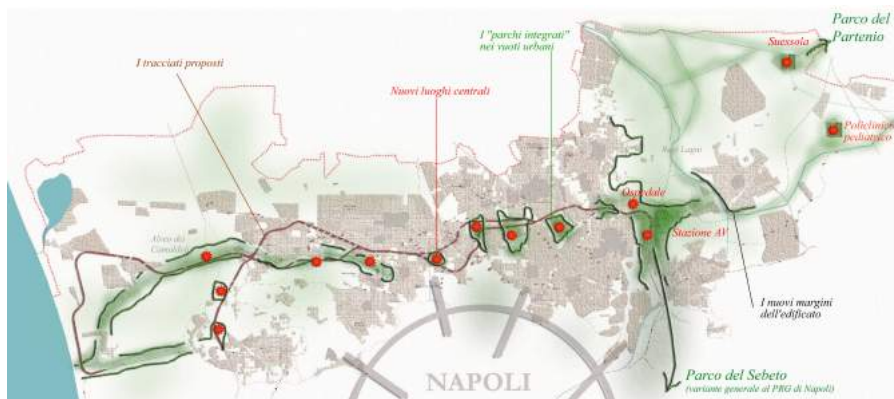


Figure 3 – Study for the construction of a local railway bypass in Naples: new centers for local clusters

5. TEN YEARS LATER

The *Asse Mediano* was opened in 1993; it was built in the 80's, when the current conurbation didn't exist yet and the big country towns of the Province were separated from the countryside; it has no straight tracks because its route needed to follow a certain balance of interests: a balance made of expropriations (to be avoided or facilitated) and lands, probably permanently polluted, to be forgotten under the roadbed.

Since a few years ago a new viaduct, indicatively with a wider track (three lanes instead of two: evident sign of a future proliferation of the road sections), has allowed the passage of the high speed trains between Naples and Rome. Since a few months ago, you have been able, while driving on this viaduct, to see the evolution of the road yard of the new high speed train station (for now no sign of the local ones): the concrete modelled by Zaha Hadid stands in an eerie empty that hasn't been cultivated for some time now. A space that seems to belong to no one, crossed by the absurd repetition of the railway bridges and colonized by natural vegetation marked by posters and by concrete or metal fences which marks the taking possession of the waiting land. Waiting, of course, for the station and possible future compatibility planning; these are lands that are likely to be a future bargain, but certainly for now, they have brought profits to those who have in recent years passed the properties from hand to hand (dividing them at each passage).

It is probably too late to intervene: the station will be just another fold of an occasional and fragmented space. Being one of the many commercial centres of the plain, it will be served by a parking lot connected to the freeway; from its windows you will see only houses, warehouses, billboards, maybe a few hotels testifying an idea of confused modernity, as if Las Vegas was now the real scenario of everyday life.

A bunch of packaged documents is all that remains of the park, the landscaping of the railway line and the attempt of redistributing, in terms of public utilities, the public expenses on high speed – in short, of the town planning and landscape design.

In the last decade no one has worked to pursue or at least refute what was developed between 2000 and 2002. The documents are just there, waiting

for a choice that politics, at best, is unable to make. Meanwhile, in this decade, housing congestion has increased enormously and, thanks to public funding, new, incredible commercial centres have colonized much of the Marcianise countryside, where the Agricultural park of the “Plan for five towns” was supposed to be the hinge with the Vanvitellian structures.

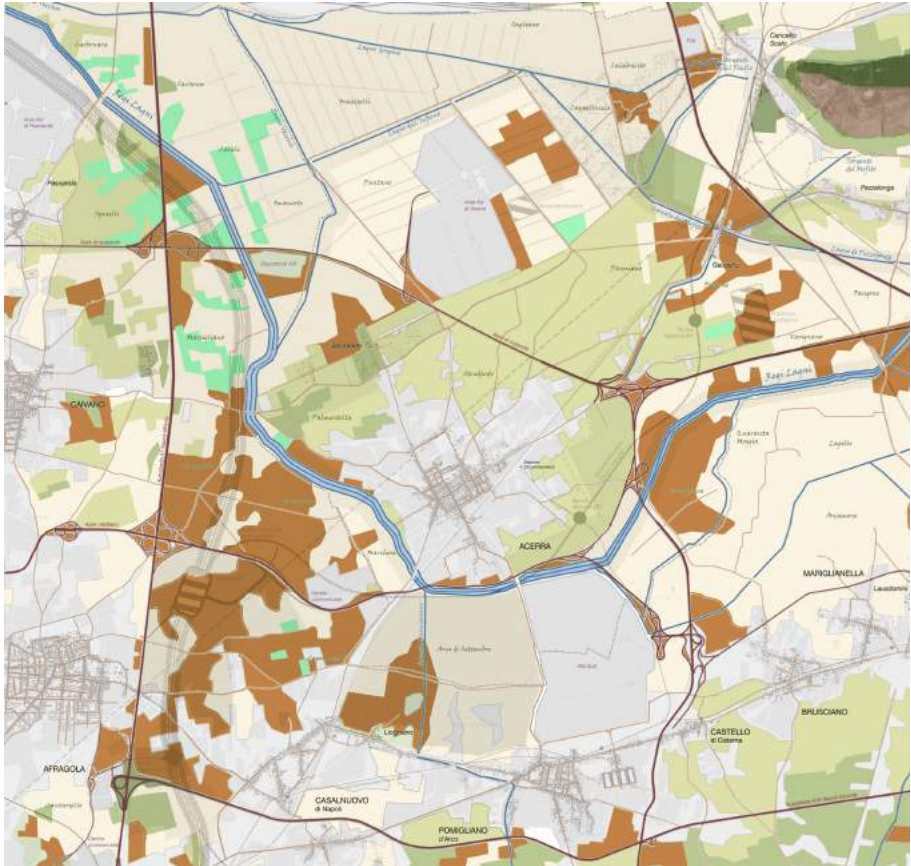


Figure 4 – The end of Campania felix: map of abandoned agricultural areas today (brown)



Figure 5 – Work in progress: the new station and the local landscape

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