

## Along the river Cormor, re-linking landscapes and public facilities in the region Friuli Venezia Giulia

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**Abstract:** In Italy, the drawing of policies for an Urban Agenda has only recently re-gained attention on the national level. However, while the discussion still focuses on metropolitan and inland urban contexts concerned by major transformations or abandonment trends, the ordinary framework of small and medium cities and villages – building the most of Italian territories – tends to remain at the background. These situations prevail in Friuli Venezia Giulia, where the 71% of Municipalities count less than 5.000 inhabitants. Many urban centres stand nearby the system of rivers, which structures a variety of landscapes from the mountains to the sea. Since the 2000s, a number of Municipalities from the valley of the river Cormor have started re-thinking their economies, taking slow mobility as the driver for sustainable tourism. With the support of a citizens' Association, they are now working on a River Contract, a non-compulsory tool for the participatory construction of strategic/planning instruments combining environmental protection with sustainable local development. This is the context of the activities that the Master Course in Architecture of the University of Trieste has recently carried out in collaboration with local stakeholders. The design of the southern extension of a horse and cycle track along the river gave the opportunity to re-frame the issue of tourism in a larger planning perspective, aimed at enhancing the relations between the river, and the small/medium urban centres it goes through. Results offer new planning visions that: interpret the Cormor as the spine of a network of ecological services; foster the reuse and re-connection of existing public facilities; re-define the topic of 'slow tourism' according to the specific characters and lifestyles of these contexts.

**Keywords:** river landscapes; ecological services; slow mobility; public facilities

### 1. Introduction

In Italy, over the last years, the drawing of a national Urban Agenda has re-gained attention (Calafati, 2015, ed.). More recently, and in the view of the 2021-2027 European programmes, the evaluation of the results that have marked the period of policies and projects just behind us has been accompanied by reflections on a growing differentiation of urbanisation features all across the Country (Munarin and Velo, 2016, eds.; Urban@it, 2018). With reference to an increasing variety of development speeds and trajectories, this differentiation will make the *customization to the contexts* of future governance and planning tools a particularly complex task, both on national and local levels.

#### 1.1 'Middle lands'

In Italy, the map of abandonment and of territorial situations in conditions of environmental, economic and socio-demographic fragility is increasingly articulated and widespread. Even urbanised territories

that have historically been at the centre of the dynamics of production and modernization are changing their nature. This process sees the interweaving of trends of selection and decline, of marginalization and slow emergence of new opportunities that, however, struggle to find full expression in new development paths (Borghi, 2017, ed.; De Rossi, 2018, ed.). In the background a broader reflection lies. In Italy and in Europe, today's definition of 'city' lends itself to different interpretations, as evidenced by the analyses of national research networks (Balducci *et al.*, 2017a, eds., 2017b, eds.; Alleanza Italiana per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile [ASviS] and Urban@it, 2018). Many Italian regions are divided into numerous Municipalities. Characterized by a dispersed urbanisation made by small centres, these territories are crossed by practices and rituals that, due to their spatial extension, appear in some ways 'metropolitan', and that with denser urban contexts share the issues of the crises afflicting the contemporary Western world. «Urban planning is fully involved, even shaken by the current mutation: the gradual shattering of proven ways of doing is accompanied by a serious difficulty in questioning its principles in relation to a new interpretation of what happens in the cities and territories, in what is now identified as the urban *tout court*» (Gabellini, 2018)<sup>1</sup>.

In this sense, the case of Friuli Venezia Giulia is representative of situations that recur at national and European levels. In this region there are not real metropolitan cities; the 71% of Municipalities count less than 5.000 inhabitants, with an overall standstill of population and growing aging trends; there is only one medium-sized city (Trieste), and three small capital cities (Gorizia with 34.411, Pordenone with 51.139, and Udine with 99.518 inhabitants) (Regione Autonoma Friuli Venezia Giulia, 2018a). The contexts of Friuli Venezia Giulia belong to the many '*middle lands*' that dot the national territory. With this term we allude to situations that, while consistent and pervasive, do not fall within the parameters and perimeters of the most dynamic *metropolitan areas*, nor within those established for the most marginal *inland areas*, both at the core of the national and regional policies for the territorial cohesion established by the European Union programmes 2014-2020<sup>2</sup>. Our interest in 'middle lands' derives from what in Italy today appears a «strategic, political and cultural disinvestment» in the urban peripheries of small and medium-sized centres, as well as in the many places of a «province that is made of polycentric urban and productive fabrics» (Carrosio, 2019: 13). In these contexts the number of inhabitants and the equipment of services still hold on (albeit with difficulty), the situations of economic crisis and decommissioning are still limited (and therefore, perhaps, easier to govern). Nonetheless – due to the difficulties in identifying and accessing specific financing channels – it is strong the risk of being left alone in the face of increasingly complex environmental and socio-economic challenges, and therefore of slipping into more serious conditions of marginality and hardship<sup>3</sup>.

## 1.2 A different perspective

Friuli Venezia Giulia is the context of the activities that the Master Course in Architecture of the

<sup>1</sup> From here on, all the translations from Italian texts are made by Elena Marchigiani.

<sup>2</sup> The reference is: to the National Operational Program (PON) *Metropolitan Cities 2014-2020*, adopted by the European Commission with Decision C (2015) 4998, and addressed to Torino, Genova, Milano, Bologna, Venezia, Firenze, Roma, Bari, Napoli, Reggio Calabria, Cagliari, Catania, Messina and Palermo; to the National Strategy for Inland Areas (SNAI), which involved 72 project areas (1.077 Municipalities) identified as «peripheral» and «ultraperipheral» with respect to the distance from the poles of urban services (Barca, 2012, 2016; Barca *et al.*, 2018; Carrosio, 2019). For an overview of the purposes and implementation of these programs, see: [www.agenziacoesione.gov.it](http://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it). Date of access: 31/05/2019.

<sup>3</sup> In Friuli Venezia Giulia these risks are made even harder by the abolition of the provinces: the intermediate government bodies between the Region and the Municipalities. By virtue of its autonomous status, Friuli Venezia Giulia was in fact the only Region in Italy (together with Sicily, equally autonomous) to implement the Law no. 56/2014, dealing with provisions for Metropolitan cities, Provinces, unions and merging of Municipalities. Today, there is therefore no intermediate level institution that is able to coagulate the interests and perspectives of territorial development among Municipalities that generally have a few thousand inhabitants.

University of Trieste has recently carried out in collaboration with local actors and Municipalities<sup>4</sup>. In this region, many urban centres stand nearby the system of rivers stretching from the mountains to the sea. The focus of our reflections is the sequence of urbanised spaces, including both small centres along the river Cormor, and the peripheries of the middle-sized city of Udine bordering the watercourse<sup>5</sup>. These areas were selected in order to cover a significant sample of *intertwined river and urban landscapes*: from the northern foothill sector, where the Cormor runs in the middle of the reliefs topped by small villages; to the ‘dry plain’, where Udine conurbation lay, and – apart from the Cormor – the minor water network is mainly underground; to the southern ‘wet plain’, where the water system comes to the surface, and the urbanisation becomes more scattered.

The stakeholders’ request to design the extension to the sea of a partially existing – but lacking of maintenance – horse and cycle track along the river gave us the chance to *re-frame the issue of tourism in a larger planning perspective*. Our aim was to help local stakeholders re-discover hidden and forgotten connections among the water landscapes and the settlement structure, in order to re-imagine the accessibility to the river banks as a driver for the development of new circular economies, services and spatial equipment spreading on wider urban and rural territories. In more general terms, our goal was to re-read the ‘middle lands’ not as ‘hanging’ territories, but rather as an *opportunity to imagine new development paths*. What these places still lack are in fact project-oriented representations, capable of giving visibility to resources that – due to their discontinuous and heterogeneous characters – are still underestimated by current economic and tourist dynamics. With the students, we built maps and pictures that helped us see these spaces in a different way: the river no longer as a simple longitudinal track or a trivial back of cities and rural sites, but as a complex and structuring system, once again linked to the contexts, and able to put into play the many underused areas along its course. In this sense, didactic and research work provided territorial and site specific design inputs to: interpret the Cormor as the spine of a new network of ecological services working in-between the scales (territorial, urban and neighbourhood); reuse and re-connect a rich framework of existing public facilities (green spaces, areas and equipment for mobility, social and health assistance, education and culture); re-define the topic of *slow tourism* in relation to the particular nature, sensitivity and lifestyles of these contexts. Mostly and above all, our aim was to draw *place-based interpretive frames and visions*, helping local actors build deeper reflection and discussion towards future policies and projects.

## 2. Territories on the edge

Coming out of the glacial hills, the river Cormor crosses the urbanized plain and reaches the Adriatic Sea, through a sequence of in-between urban and rural situations. The most evident character of this variety of *intermediate spaces* is the peripheral and residual character of areas, artifacts, practices and uses, with respect to the more compact and central nuclei that give shape to the settlement structure.

### 2.1 Sequences of intermediate spaces

<sup>4</sup> The reference is to the Urban Planning and Design Atelier II (academic year 2018-2019), at the fourth year of the Master Course in Architecture. The atelier was coordinated by Elena Marchigiani, with Paola Cigalotto and Andrea Peraz. The didactic activities were organized in the frame of a formal agreement between the Department of Engineering and Architecture of the University of Trieste, the Municipality of Tricesimo (in the former province of Udine), the Valley of Cormor Association.

<sup>5</sup> Specifically, we worked on 9 Municipalities from the former province of Udine. From the north to the south (the first figure refers to the number of inhabitants; the second to the territorial surface in square kilometres): Tricesimo (7.687; 17,7), Tavagnacco (14.981; 15,4), Pagnacco (5.059; 14,9), Udine (99.518; 57,2), Pasian di Prato (9.363; 15,4), Campoformido (7.891; 21,9), Mortegliano (4.969; 30,1), Pozzuolo del Friuli (9.927; 34,4), Castions di Strada (3.767; 32,8) (Regione Autonoma Friuli Venezia Giulia, 2018a).

Upstream, the initial part of the river course is closed between small hill towns; it forms an environmental mosaic, made of places that are characterized by high biodiversity and a strong topographical articulation. When entering the areas interested by our design explorations – between the Municipalities of Tricesimo and Pagnacco – the built-in path course of the Cormor keeps the buildings at a distance: the water is almost inaccessible, while on the summit of the hills the ancient centres stand; only some of them reach the edges of the river terraces. In the plain section – between Tavagnacco and Campoformido – the stream enters Udine conurbation. Its meanders cross several times the highway, along which large public facilities are located. Urban settlements border the watercourse on both sides: here the riverbed offers a precious pause in the urban structure, and an environmental corridor for the hinterland of the capital of Friuli. Downstream, the landscape opens up and the Cormor flows next to small ancient centres and their most recent expansions. From the Municipality of Mortegliano to that of Castions di Strada, the watercourse is punctuated with abandoned manufacturing buildings (industrial archaeology, mills and spinning mills, former military areas, etc.). In addition to freshwater prairies and natural wetlands, the stream touches the remnants of ancient plain woods and many floods mark its history; for this reason, the final stretch (running through the reclaimed lands) has been channelled to the sea.

The three transects where our design explorations took place – Tricesimo/Tavagnacco, Udine/Campoformido, and Mortegliano/Castions di Strada – correspond to a large variety of river landscapes, with different degrees of urbanization and naturalness. However, they show some common features. Despite the presence of areas of environmental interest, the lack of explicit relationships with the neighboring urban contexts, over time, has contributed to relegate them to a marginal position with respect to the overall functioning and use of these territories. A common character is the location on the edge of a ‘territorial machine’, that here still finds it difficult to reverse on contemporary development trajectories (Maciocco, 2006). At a first glance, there are no exceptional environments, great tourist and cultural attractions. The minute and ordinary elements of spatial identity are weakened by the crisis of the socio-economic conditions that, in the past, have ensured their construction and management. Standing on the border between the city and the countryside, the water and the land, these *counter-spaces of the contemporary city* risk being reductively interpreted as «*places that don't matter*» (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), where transformation puts aside the selective and imaginative abilities of the project, to give space to the inevitability of abandonment and/or anonymous urbanisation trends (Figure 1).

However, these interpretative drifts can be avoided by taking a different approach. Since in these places it is not easy to identify striking aspects with a propelling role, the first move is «*to re-centralize the margin*» (De Rossi, 2018: 6): by making our glance more attentive, we have to search for the local conditions on which to graft *trajectories of internal metamorphosis*. In this perspective, the relationship with the river – that, up to the recent past, was vital for productive activities and communities – can once again become an opportunity to qualify activities (agriculture, tourism, housing, etc.), by focusing on their synergies and capacity to answer the demands for a *better quality of life* (Lancerini, 2005; Marchigiani, 2010). This quality finds today a fundamental ingredient in the landscape (Council of Europe, 2000). Coherently to this approach, our design work re-read the *river landscapes* as a discreet but relevant presence creating well-being conditions; as the pivot of transformations that are rooted in places; as the medium and generator of a plurality of practices, performed by many actors who can be involved in the development of local territorial systems (Lanzani, 2005).



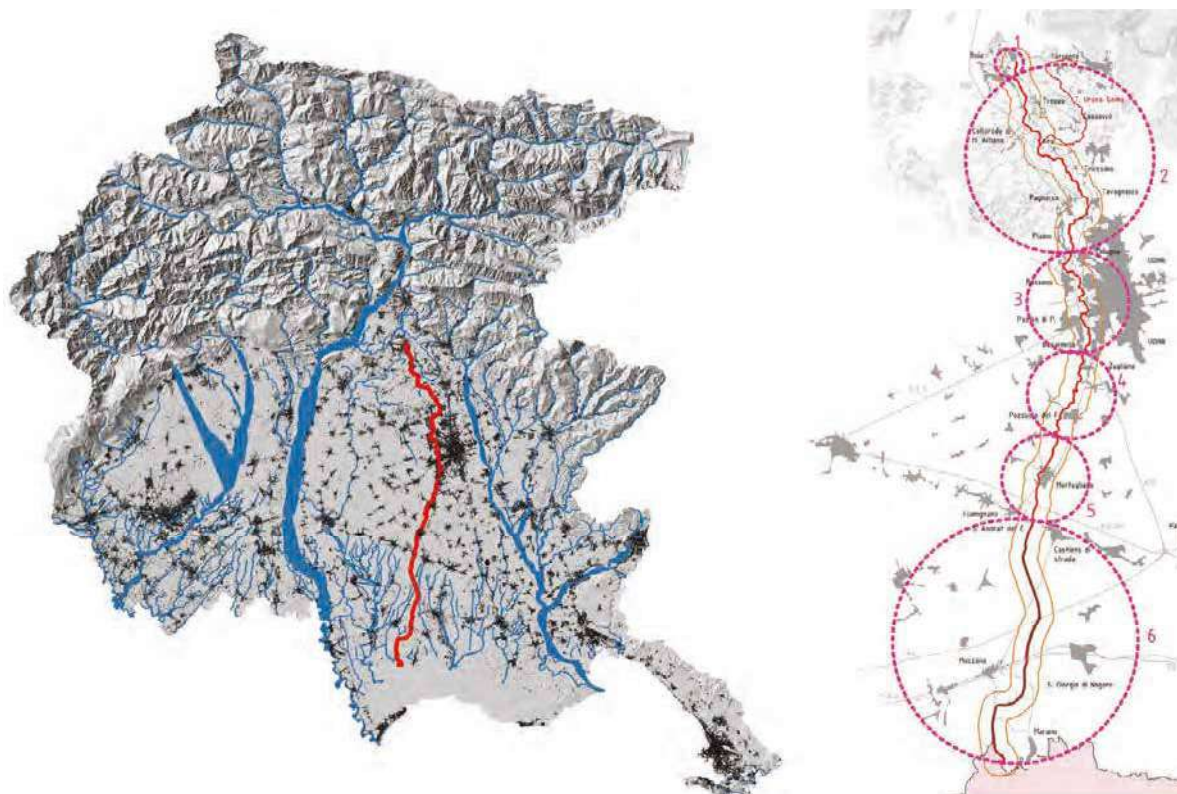


Figure 1. On the left the river structure in the region Friuli Venezia Giulia (in red, the Cormor). On the right, the river Cormor and the settlement structure. The 3 transects of design explorations belong to landscapes 2, 3 and 4-5. Source: P. Cigalotto.

## 2.2 And yet something moves: towards the River Cormor Contract

The opportunity to work on the Cormor landscapes was given by the collaboration with local stakeholders who, over the last years, have been engaged in the construction of a complex strategic process. Since the early 2000s, a number of Municipalities along the river have started to jointly reflect on the opportunity to work on the enhancement of the basin, the sustainable management of water resources and the settlement of new economic activities. Thanks to European cooperation funds, they succeeded in refurbishing the northern part of a horse and cycle track – named *Ippovia del Cormor* – bordering the river<sup>6</sup>. With the support of the Valle del Cormor citizens' Association, these Municipalities are now engaged in the definition of a River Contract: a large scale tool for a shared construction of long-term strategic and planning instruments, where environmental protection combines with local development, and the horse and cycle track is extended to reach the lagoon on the Adriatic Sea.

The objectives of the EU environmental regulations stand at the core of this tool<sup>7</sup>. In Italy, in 2010, the *National Charter of River Contracts* defined them as «processes of negotiated and participatory planning aimed to reduce the eco-landscape degradation and to upgrade the river basin/sub-basin areas». The contract is built locally, between public administrations, private subjects and citizens involved at

<sup>6</sup> The project *Ippovie In@natura* was financed in 2005 by the EU Programme Interreg II Italy-Slovenia. From Buja to Tricesimo, 35 kilometers of paths bordering the river were re-paved and tourist information billboards were arranged at the entrances to the track.

<sup>7</sup> The reference is, in particular, to: 92/42/CEE (Habitat Directive), 2000/60/CE (establishing a framework for Community action in the field of water policy), 2007/60/CE (floods directive). See: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1559029419256&uri=CELEX:32000L0060>. Date of access: 31/05/2019.

different levels; the intent is to define and implement local development paths, whose «propulsive heart [...] is the reconstruction of a shared vision for the hydrographic basin. This representation has to guide the signatories of the contract in developing a project that is coherent with the real potential that the territory expresses»<sup>8</sup>. Although the River Contracts are a non-mandatory instrument, at the national level they obtained legal recognition with the Law no. 221/2015 (environmental provisions to promote green economy measures and to reduce the excessive use of natural resources), through the introduction in the *Environmental Code* of a specific article (Legislative Decree no. 152/2006, art. no. 68 bis). Even if the focus is the management and protection of water bodies and basins, the awareness of growing territorial fragility and the spread of hydrogeological instability processes (due to the effects of urbanisation, poor maintenance and climate change) are at the base of the progressive orientation towards multi-objective actions, in which safeguard, development and participatory governance integrate (Bianchini and Stazi, 2017).

The process towards the construction of the *River Cormor Contract* was fostered by the adhesion, in 2015, of the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region to these initiatives<sup>9</sup>. A further incentive was the possibility to access regional funds that – although not clearly planned – in the future might be addressed to the implementation of a strategic and shared framework of actions. The process started in 2017, with the organization – by the Valle del Cormor Association – of participatory activities open to local communities. The preparation of the Document of Intents for the River Contract started in May 2018. The agreement with the University of Trieste and the design activities developed with the students between October 2018 and January 2019 strongly interacted with this process. In April 2019 the signing of the Document of Intents was started with the coordination of the Municipality of Tricesimo, and the involvement of the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region, the Reclamation of the Friuli Plain Consortium, and the Valle del Cormor Association; up to now half of the 25 river basin administrations have signed.

The objectives set out in the Document of Intents cover different fields of action. They not only consist in the protection of the environment, the prevention of the hydro-geological risk provoked by the floods that periodically affect the basin, the reduction in the level of water pollution due to urban and agricultural activities. They also deal with the tourist enhancement of these territories, whose location in the proximity (albeit, once again, on the edges) of important regional, national and European cycle routes offers unprecedented perspectives (the reference is, in particular, to the Alpe Adria cross-border itinerary)<sup>10</sup>. Specifically, the ‘Cormor system’ is seen as an opportunity for developing sustainable tourism through the reuse of a network of existing inter-estate roads. The horse and cycle path is interpreted as a *widespread infrastructure for slow territorial fruition*, with a high potential to re-activate local economies: accommodation and catering equipment, also connected to the sale and

<sup>8</sup> The National Charter of River Contracts was drafted on the occasion of the V National Table of River Contracts, held in Milan in 2010. See: <http://nuke.a21fiumi.eu>; <http://www.contrattidifiume.it>. Date of access: 31/05/2019.

<sup>9</sup> The Regional Law no. 11/2015 (about organic regulation on soil protection and water use), defined and structured the process of negotiated planning for the River Contracts; with the resolution of the Regional Council no. 1448, 28<sup>th</sup> July 2016, Friuli Venezia Giulia formally adhered to the *National Charter of River Contracts*, launching activities aimed at promoting and supporting their diffusion on the regional territory.

<sup>10</sup> In the Regional Landscape Plan approved in 2018, the completion of the Cormor Horse Trail up to the sea is part of the project for a regional slow mobility network. The trail is identified as a complementary component to the primary Alpe Adria cycle route, which is mostly already infrastructure, and runs from Tarvisio to Grado. On a wider scale, this regional network is part of the Bicalitalia and EuroVelo routes (Regione Autonoma Friuli Venezia Giulia, 2018b; see in particular document *E3. Scheda della Rete della Mobilità Lenta*).

consumption of typical products; sporting events; trails offering the experience of a variety of landscapes, from the mountains and the hills, to the lagoon and the sea.

### **3. New representations, between the water and the land**

The activities developed with the students aimed to enlarge the design perspective from the areas directly related to the river, to the urban and rural landscapes the Cormor runs through. The Document of Intents is in fact only the first step of a process that should lead, on the one hand, to a Strategic Document where a medium-long term scenario integrates large scale spatial planning into local development policies; on the other hand, to a short-term Program of Actions, where the methods, times and economic resources that are necessary for implementation are defined.

With reference to this process, our contribution consisted in *anticipating spatial visions* supporting the recognition and the regeneration of systems of places and activities linked to the river and to its 'middle lands'. Taking tourism and slow mobility as the drivers for raising the quality of local living conditions, we worked on spaces dedicated to occasional practices and to residents' daily movements, on the reuse of dismissed areas, and on the settlement of new services and forms of production.

#### *3.1 Research by design*

Reflecting with local actors was fundamental. Even within the short time of a semester, the Urban Planning and Design Atelier was conceived as a gradual approach to the contexts, their voices and demands for transformations. The aim was to place ourselves in a hybrid field, between training, action-research and public engagement. What interested us most was exploring *locally rooted opportunities* for economic and social re-development. During this process, professors and students were accompanied by representatives of the Valle del Cormor Association and of the network of Municipalities adhering to the River Contract.

We started by combining the *analysis of local and regional planning tools*, with *participated visits* to the study areas, where we walked, talked to local technicians and politicians, listened to inhabitants, observed and reflected in places. No less important was *moving across the scales* of urban planning and design, to capture different dynamics and relations between the river and the territory. The presentation of intermediate results to local stakeholders prompted us to synthesize ideas into new representations of existing resources and of their enhancement potentials. We were convinced that discussing and, eventually, sharing images for the future had to be essential ingredients of our planning practices.

#### *3.2 River landscapes as complex ecologies*

All through the Atelier, students and local actors were invited to re-read the river contexts as complex ecologies. Going beyond the dimensions of the environment and soil protection, the potentials of these landscapes refer to broader sets of factors that the project is asked to critically interpret and re-arrange.

In order to safeguard, restore, enhance and manage river landscapes it is necessary to recognize and construct multiple correlations among many material and immaterial elements of the territory. By taking the concept of landscape as a general frame for a plurality of systems and processes, this approach allows to recognize the primary value of the interconnections between the river and the urban settlements, the strengths and the opportunities resulting from the synergies between the natural elements and the evidence of local culture. Until a recent past, the water system has been an important

reference for the localization of irrigation ditches, factories, mills, furnaces, economies related to the use of water. Although a large part of this estate has been abandoned, planning its reuse with respect to its identity and historical values can offer new perspectives. When working on the river landscapes, the project must also be able to cope with the weaknesses and threats that specifically affect these contexts. Let us consider the frequent presence in the riverbeds of (mostly abusive) landfills; or the waste of ecological and landscape resources provoked by urban settlements and agricultural activities that often spread to the banks of the watercourses. These processes can be contrasted by giving space to a growing demand for leisure activities to re-appreciate the values of nature; and by re-interpreting the places along the waterways as strategic nodes of new systems of collective spaces and environmental connections to the surrounding areas. In the same way, particularly significant alterations – such as the presence of artificial basins – can be re-read as design opportunities when re-framed in wider scenarios for a sustainable tourist use.

Due to all these considerations, building new visions for the river landscapes meant focusing on the different functions (and values) that these contexts can specifically perform:

- *ecological functions* (rivers as excretory systems; ecological corridors; areas where to govern risk factors and territorial fragility);
- *social functions* (rivers as spaces perceived and enjoyed by local communities; common goods; components of systems of equipment and services addressed to stable and temporary, static and moving populations);
- *economic functions* (rivers as places of economic activities, different from intensive production and agricultural exploitation);
- *cultural functions* (rivers as gates through which re-discover and enhance the history and the identity of the territory, and as attractors of new tourist flows).

### 3.3 Not only tourism and cycling... but also collective equipment and services

During the Urban Planning and Design Atelier, the local actors' request to draw the extension of the Cormor horse and cycle trail was integrated into a more complex vision. Working on the relationships between tourism and cycling forced us to define extensive *re-equipment strategies*. In this sense, our investigations searched for areas and materials for *light 're-infrastructural' projects*, that had to be pertinent to the sensitivity of the contexts on which we were operating.

The territories crossed by the river Cormor were re-interpreted as components of a *network of greenways*: «communication routes reserved exclusively for non-motorized journeys, developed in an integrated manner which enhances both the environment and quality of life of the surrounding area» (European Greenways Association, 2000). This key emphasizes the many potentials of slow mobility: from its being a means to favor access and enjoyment of those 'minor' and 'undercurrent' landscapes that only a slow fruition allows to appreciate; to its being an opportunity to encourage *loisir* practices, oriented to re-activate and to 'put into circle' sustainable territorial economies. In our region the growing of cycling supports this reading: between 2015 and 2017, along the Alpe Adria cycle route, transit increased by the 46%<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> These figures were disseminated by the Association Ulisse-FIAB, with reference to the 19<sup>th</sup> report on German cycling tourism prepared by ADFC (German Cyclist's Association). See: <http://www.ulisse-fiab.org/?p=9277>. Date of access: 31/05/2019.



However, *cycling is not just a tourist practice*. As in the past, and now again – due to the economic crisis and to a growing (albeit in Italy still timid) environmental sensitivity – moving by bicycle (and on foot) fosters tourist tracking on dispersed urban territories. Moreover, by observing the practices that are generated from a daily use of the bike, we often «recognize specific and new uses of space [...] that mix tradition, innovation, trends and multiculturalism». In our Country, the growth of these seasonal and daily movements «is tracing interesting geographies telling how economic realities, local administrations, stakeholders and individuals [...] have been able to respond and re-propose products and services of particular innovation and excellence» (Velo, 2015: 1663). When specifically working in urban contexts of thin and polycentric grain, «dirt roads, river towpaths, informal landscapes between buildings, areas of programmed floods, drainage basins and collective open spaces become the elements that constitute an additional *layer* of porosity within the city» (Velo, 2016: 332).

According to these issues, we invited the students to integrate the green and blue network of the greenways with the *system of collective equipment and services* that punctuate the edge territories of Cormor. In this way, the aim to re-embed the river to its contexts merged into the more general objective of making «cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable», at the core of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (United Nations, 2015), and of the next season of European funding programmes. Thanks to our surveys, we could see how the fragility of the territories along the river and of the communities that inhabit them were also connected to growing deficiencies in the maintenance of public spaces and equipment for daily living; to their inadequacy to answer to the needs of moving and changing populations; to their being closed to the contexts (i.e. the fences that generally surround the schools), and difficult to access. Moreover, re-designing and re-framing this – still implicit and not effective – *public city network* into new territorial visions could offer new solutions to face the current chronic scarcity of public funds, through more systemic urban regeneration actions.

Working in an integrated manner on the banks of the river, on the edges of urban settlements, on rural spaces, and on the leftovers of peri-urban agriculture was therefore a stimulus to take the project of the cycle route as one of the main ingredients of *a new spatial structure*. The importance of the cycle route was increased by its capacity to hold together different populations and social practices, and to foster the definition of new services both for outsiders and insiders. Moreover, the design of the route was a prompt to re-think the uses of existing public spaces and of their spatial connections; to update the legacy of urban policies that, over time, have built the «material quality of welfare»: green areas, areas for mobility and parking, social-assistance and educational-cultural services. In this sense, our design explorations also provided inputs to re-furbish large quantities of equipped spaces that have been provided by *planning standards* since the last century; spaces where the «individual and collective practices that give body to the ‘quality of life’ of women and men in their daily experience of inhabitants and users of the city» take place today (Pasqui, 2017: 139). Identifying the itinerary for the cycle route therefore stimulated us also to imagine new types of standards, in order to face climate and environmental emergencies through the planning of *ecologic services*, and to give answers to social demands and requests for economic re-development<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> The anniversary of the Interministerial Decree no. 1444/1968 on planning standards offered the opportunity to reflect on this pillar of urban planning and on its possible evolution. Many research groups have dealt with these issues; among them, the *Standards Laboratory*. With the support of the Italian Society of Urban Planners (SIU), it involves: University of Trieste (Sara Basso, Elena Marchigiani); Politecnico di Milano (Cristina Renzoni, Paola Savoldi); IUAV Università di Venezia (Alessia Franzese, Stefano Munarin, Maria Chiara Tosi); Università di Roma Tre (Mauro Baioni, Giovanni Caudo, Nicola Vazzoler). See: Renzoni, 2018, ed.; Marchigiani, Savoldi, to press, eds.; <https://standardurbanistici.wordpress.com/eventi-attivita> (last access: 2019/05/11).

## 4. Tailor-made design, across the scales

Our investigations in the Cormor 'middle lands' continuously moved between different scales and observation perspectives. If developing strategies and projects rooted in the contexts was necessary to reveal their latent identities, we did not want to fall into a 'localistic' approach.

We therefore started from a large scale, in order to draw a general master plan holding together the landscapes between Tricesimo (to the north) and Castions di Strada (to the south), and synthesizing the many functions – ecological, social, economic and cultural – that the river system, as a whole, can play. At the same time, we focused on a site-specific scale. Our aim was to recognize the territorial components with which the different transects of the river landscapes enter into contact; the risks of their degradation and simplification; the opportunities that their enhancement can offer to re-activate local resources and energies.

### 4.1 Tailors and jewellers

In the process of continuous displacement of our gaze, we have been encouraged to re-think not only the forms of the project, but also the role of the designer.

In the 'middle lands' the «centre/periphery, or city/countryside *cleavage*» which «seemed to have largely gone out of use in mature modernity» (Revelli, 2017: 45) still appears firmly present, not only in the spaces but also in the imaginary of actors and local communities. By making our externality a point of strength – and trying not to slip into the banal re-proposal of recipes that had been elaborated elsewhere – we imagined ourselves as tailors, called to mend fabrics of material and immaterial relations that time had consumed. As artisans engaged in a patient work of re-copying, unstitching and re-putting in place the contexts we were investigating. We were aware that *these territories needed a particular care*: similarly to the clothes put aside – but we are attached to – they had to be re-worked in order to respond to changed aesthetic and functional needs.

During our surveys we also cultivated the awareness of moving across places that are very rich of resources: the river first, but also the variety of landscapes, the diffused fragments of naturalness, the environmental networks developing along the minor hydrographic network, the many artefacts of a history of land construction and of economic and social investment. We therefore also imagined ourselves as jewellers, committed to re-nestle the little gems we had encountered. Our task was to define favourable conditions for *embedding into the tales of these territories* processes of innovation, new daily wanderings between the river and the cities, practices of an 'ordinary tourism' that takes the distance from the acritical importation of standardized models.

### 4.2 A new infrastructure for a collective city

Some specific questions addressed our design explorations: how to imagine the Cormor landscapes as the backbone of ecological and functional strategies aimed at structuring and 're-infrastructure' the territory; how to draw a spatial framework capable of re-composing a collective city on a vast scale; how to contribute to the overturning of hierarchies, and to the transformation of the watercourse from a back to a centrality generating new connections and public facilities. The overall vision drawn by the students' master plan outlines original geographies, in which the Cormor re-gains the role of reference for living and moving in contexts of varying thickness which, perpendicularly to the river, creep into

urbanised and rural areas. In this way, a new complex infrastructure of spaces for collective use takes shape, branching out in a sequence of side transects and chains of equipped places.

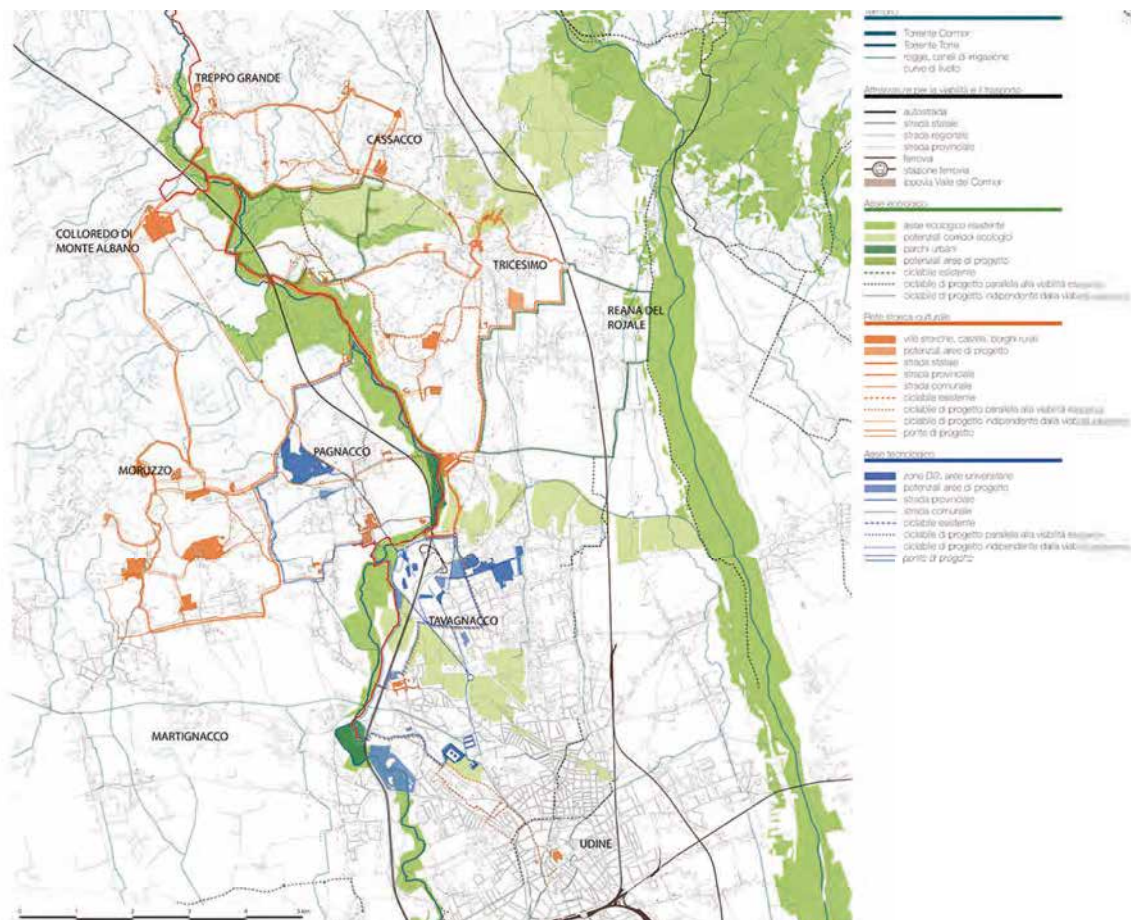


Figure 2. The master plan (transect 1: Tricesimo/Tavagnacco). Source: P. Barbiani, M. Caiffa, M. Collenz, S. Di Ferro, L. Lauricella, I. Morgera.

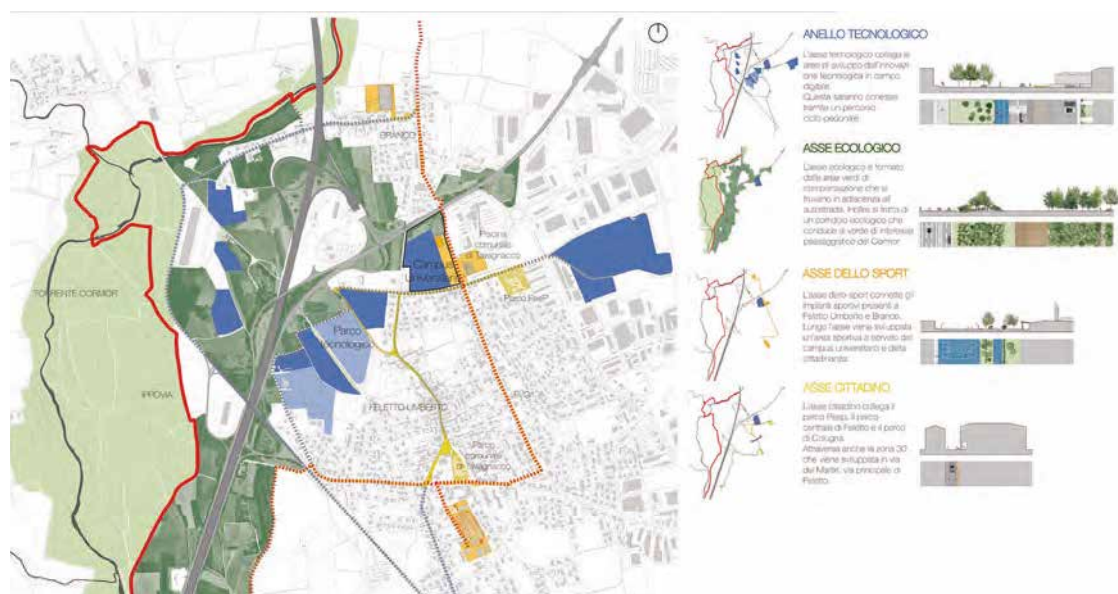


Figure 3. Axis of innovation. Source: M. Collenz, S. Di Ferro, L. Lauricella.



In the northern section of the 'Cormor system' the master plan proposes an image made of *arches and buttonholes*. Two green transects (the 'arches') overwrite the sequences of crops and areas of landscape interest that, by crossing the plain, ecologically connect the rivers Cormor and Torre. They are integrated by a circuit of cycle paths (the 'buttonholes'): a system of links between the main path (already built) on the river bank, the rural villages, the villas and the castles on the hills, the small railway stations in the area (Figure 2).

Within the conurbation of Udine – in the Municipality of Tavagnacco – this circuit finds a graft in what the Town Plan identifies as a new system of services and centrality of territorial scale: an '*axis of innovation*' comprising a succession of areas perpendicular to the river, intended to host a science-technology park and a university campus. The circuit connects the new campus to the existing equipment (neighbourhood parks and sports facilities), and becomes the occasion to transform the streets that penetrate the densest residential fabrics into '30 km zones'. Even more importantly, the definition of new territorial and ecological connections addresses the choice to design the campus according to sustainability criteria (from water management, to the use of devices for saving and producing energy from renewable sources); as a space that is permeable to the city and to the landscape, where one can find new sports and cultural activities, designed for a flexible use by students, tourists and residents (Figure 3).

The aim to *overcome the functional and spatial separation from the contexts of large plots for territorial equipment* similarly directs the work on the surroundings of the 'citadel of sports', to the north of Udine. In the riverbed of the Cormor river, the design of the landscape bordering the cycle lane is meant to reduce the impacts of the nearby highway, through the creation of drainage basins, reed beds, and the insertion of wood strips. These green infiltrations further extend, to scratch the impermeable surface of the paved areas around the citadel of sports. Not far away, along the cycle path, a sequence of shared vegetable gardens, areas for the sale of agricultural products, recreational and sports activities, draws a new type of public space, whose articulation helps to bridge the functional and perceptive gap with the huge scale of the existing equipment (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Citadel of sports. Source: P. Barbiani, M. Caiffa, I. Morgera.

In the central section of the watercourse, the cycle route passes from one side to the other of the Cormor, often keeping a distance from the river banks. In its waving movement, the path frequently approaches the edges of the city of Udine, where strong differences in the grain both of residential fabrics, and of urban and neighbourhood equipment can be recognized. In these contexts, the master plan proposes the image of a *necklace of parks*. The strategy of re-coupling the cycle itinerary to the places of everyday living translates into the identification of a network for soft mobility, connecting the suburban track to the main city centre. Along the network, the reuse of a series of still vague open spaces concurs to re-design the fringes of Udine, Pasian di Prato and Campoformido. Structured like a comb, the green itineraries form a sort of 'bicycle ring road': a fast connection for tourists and citizens, who can thus reach the leisure areas along the river avoiding the busiest radial roads, and enter the city moving along safe routes to access to urban equipment and services. What makes this journey attractive is precisely the variety of urban situations and collective spaces – new and existing – that it intercepts (Figure 5).

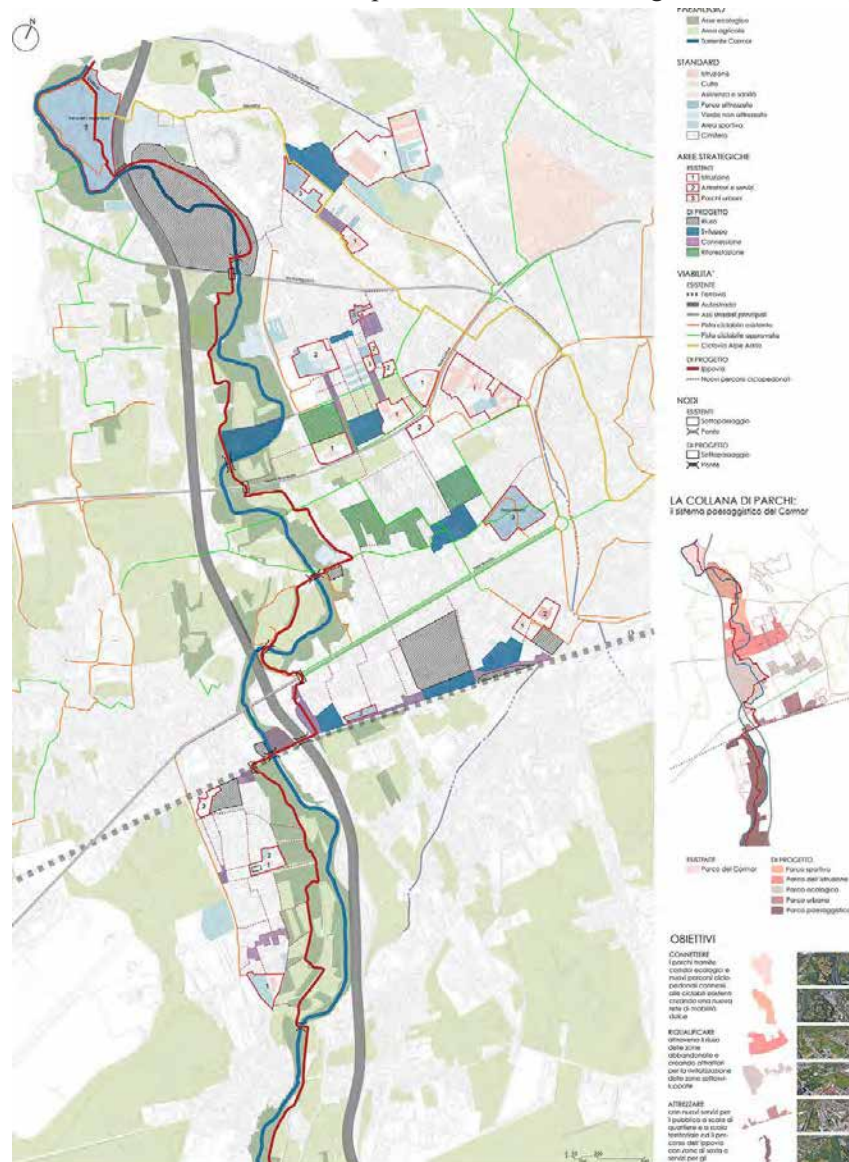


Figure 5. The master plan (transect 2: Udine/Campoformido). Source: G. Bearzotti, G. De Conz, T. Linternone, T. Lippiello, M.T. Manzara, V. Novello, N. Pigat, G. Zei.



In the north, the choice to place one of the new parks nearby a large social housing district ('Peep Ovest') is supported by a generous presence of areas realized as planning standards (gardens, schools of different levels, social and health services), and by the project to further develop an existing centre for higher education. Stretching from east to west, the new green spine is connected to the river by a branch of the main cycle path, which is obtained by re-sizing and re-arranging the section of the road that currently divides the schools from the housing district. Additional mending elements are given by the extension, in a north-south direction, of strips of open spaces from within the neighbourhood to the sports areas and the vegetable gardens conceived as *services complementary to the school cluster*, open to tourists and residents. What comes to light is a green carpet, where the Cormor plays again the role of primary frame (Figure 6).

Moving to the south the focus is, even more explicitly, on the urban extensions of public facilities, on the '*spatial chains*' where daily movements take place between dwellings, work spaces, services and leisure (Basso, Marchigiani, to press). Radiating out into peripheral tissues that are characterized by reduced articulation and limited spatial quality, the *design of a new soil* (Secchi, 2000) builds new ecological services. It is starting from the recognition of a fragmented presence of green plots that, again in the outskirts of Udine, students' design explorations propose a widespread park, linking a large garden (parco Moretti), the cemetery, schools and sports fields, abandoned areas. The park is made of different types of forest which are meant to improve air quality and microclimatic conditions; in the middle of urban woods, a further branch of the bike path runs, finding new equipment for children, youngsters and tourists near the riverbed (Figure 7).

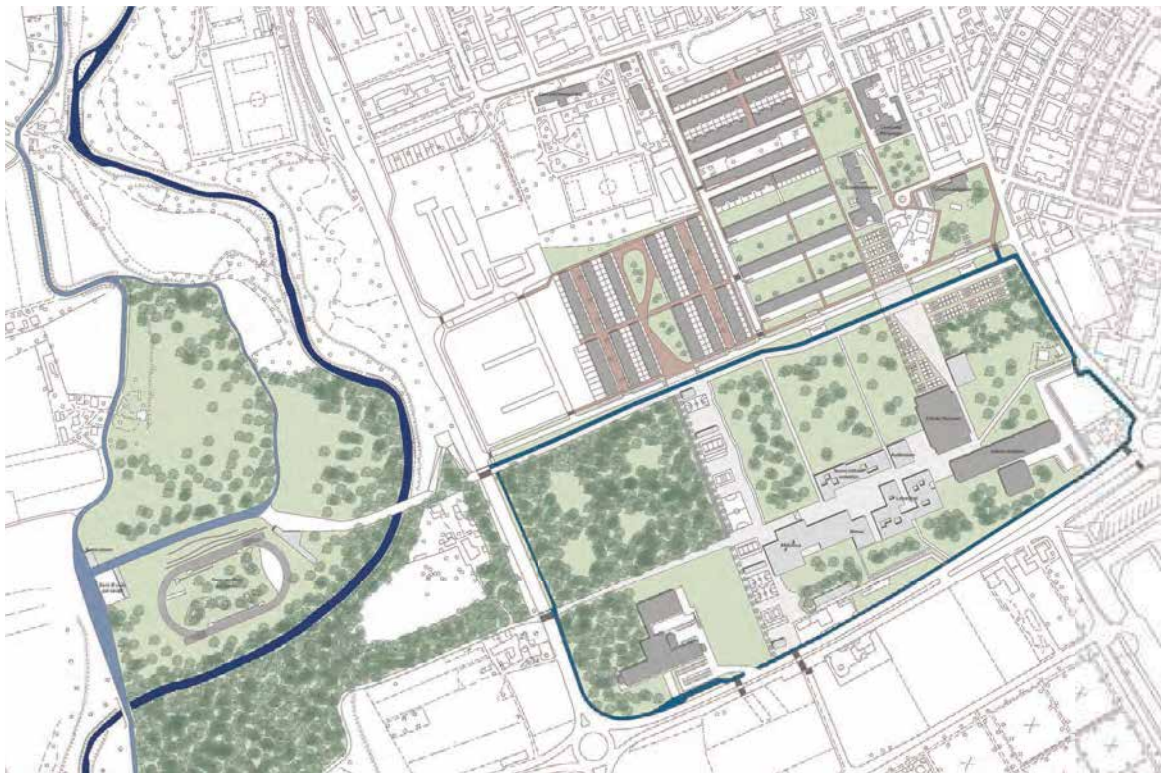


Figure 6. Peep Ovest. Source: T. Lippiello, V. Novello, N. Pigat.

In the current economic and demographic standstill, *dismantling processes* pierce the settlements, affecting buildings and surfaces of different sizes, that are in competition the ones with the others with respect to a possible re-insertion into the 'city life cycles'. In Udine – as in the rest of the region – many military areas are today waiting for reuse. The proposal to create a third urban park concerns an area that, perpendicular to the river, intercepts a settlement of barracks to be discarded. Extending

immediately south of one of the main access roads to the city (viale Venezia), the military site overlooks a large void spreading along the railway. In this neighbourhood, the lack of equipped open spaces combines with the presence – in the direction of the city centre and near a minor network of urban streams – of important public facilities (schools, offices, a museum), that the park concurs to make more accessible through slow mobility. When reaching the barracks, the *green filament* attacks their fence; it *triggers the regeneration* of the large plot through the location on its edge of public spaces and services, as outposts for the future development of businesses and light production activities within the whole area (Figure 8).



Figure 7. Urban woods. Source: G. Bearzotti, T. Linternone, M.T. Manzara.

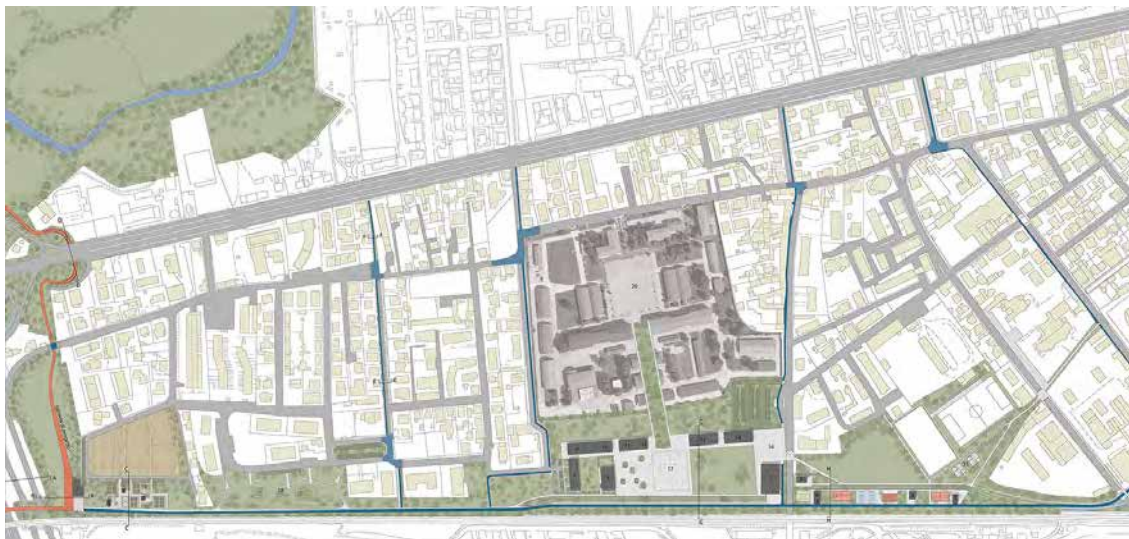


Figure 8. Former barracks. Source: G. De Conz, G. Zei.

In the territories of the Municipalities of Pesian di Prato and Campoformido the urban landscape is completely different. It tells the story of a residential enclave (Villa Primavera), originally conceived as a neighborhood of high building and space quality, and today impoverished by the abandonment of those small private commercial and sports facilities that were meant to enrich daily life in a green suburb. However, the legacies of public policies remain: a swimming pool, a church, schools and a sports area. On the western edge an articulated mosaic of landscapes borders the Cormor basin:



agricultural plots, stable meadows, protected natural areas and biotopes. Looking at the neighborhood from the point of view of the river, the project for the last park of the ‘necklace’ fosters an *articulated – even though minimal – regeneration strategy*. The main cycle lane finds space in the dirt roads running in the riverbed. Its branches enter the neighborhood; stimulate the re-thinking of the spatial and functional organization of the residential roads network; put into a system and enhance a multiplicity of small green areas, hedges and tree-lined rows that currently appear as offcuts without any meaning or use (Figure 9).

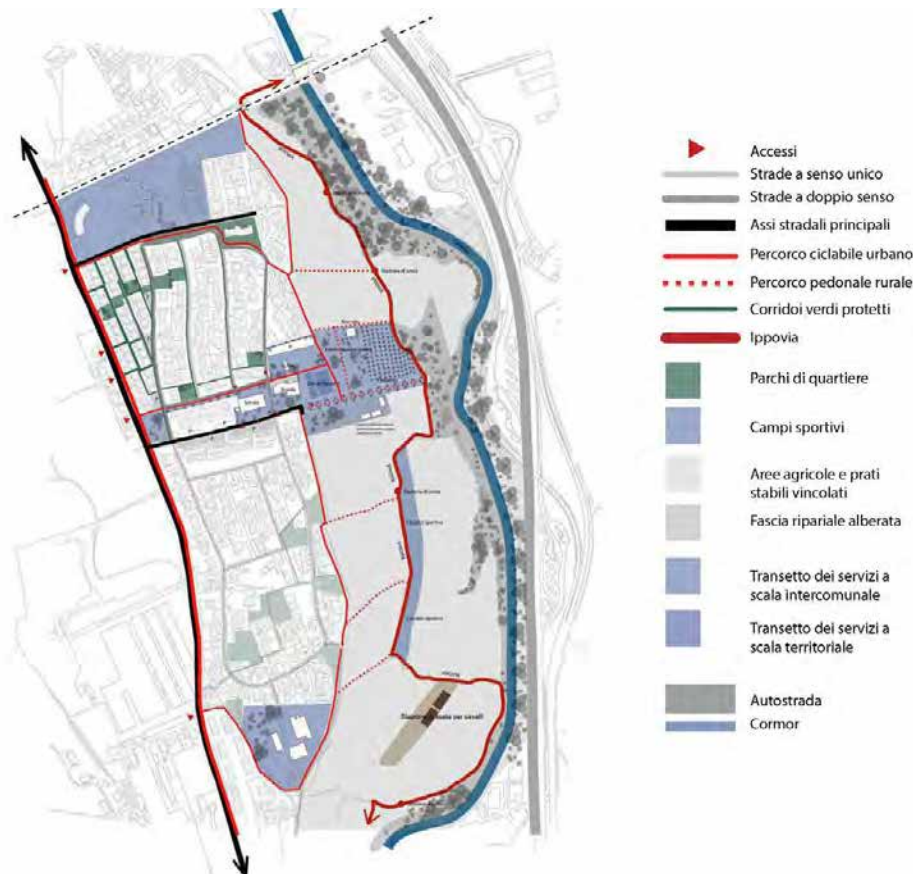


Figure 9. Villa Primavera. Source: L. D’Onofrio, P. Ridolfi.

Before reaching the lagoon and the sea, the Cormor relates again to urban landscapes in three Municipalities of the the lower Friuli: Pozzuolo, Mortegliano and Castions di Strada. Still full of meanders up to Pozzuolo del Friuli, the river flows channelled to the south. Its course blends into the minimal frame of the rural landscape. The settlement structure consists of small-sized centres, whose ordering principle is given by the frame of the roads. In this section of the watercourse the bike path is still to be traced. Building representations that could orient its design proved to be a particularly complex operation. To identify resources, these territories had to be *read in braille*, through layers that only a very careful examination, a 'tactile' approach and slow walking can unravel. However, here more than elsewhere, the project of the cycle route offered the opportunity to demonstrate how tourism and slow mobility can be a driving force for imagining «new development models, consisting of circularity of processes, self-organization and co-presence of diverse economic forms» rooted in the rural history of these territories (Carrosio, 2019: 30). To this end, the master plan proposes an image made of *stitches and mending*. The main cycle route follows the frame of dirt roads next to the Cormor; a network of secondary routes innervates in the surrounding contexts, to grasp places and points of view, break the monotony of the landscape, and re-construct ecological corridors between the areas of environmental interest (Figure 10).



building, where the installation of a small covered market, rooms for events and accommodation facilities are foreseen (Figure 11).

Equally attentive to the rediscovery of agricultural tradition is the project for the territories north of Mortegliano where, until the most recent past, the landscapes of the cereal production could count a lot of varieties. The northern entry point to the cycle route is once again a pole of sports facilities (a horse centre), built inside a former military powder magazine. Riding towards the urban center, the itinerary meets a new *agricultural and educational park* dedicated to the organic farming of many species of corn. The park follows the geometry of the existing fields; arranges the crop varieties according to their heights so as to orient the eye towards the most valuable visuals; thickens the hedges and the trees on the sides of the internal paths, where equipment supporting pedestrian and cycle use is settled. In contiguity with the park and a secondary canal running between Udine and the sea, the presence of a small abandoned mill offers the opportunity to create a bar and a resting point, exhibition spaces and research laboratories (Figure 12).



Figure 11. Spinning mill. Source: C. Furlani, G. Tomasin, F. Zotti.

The last section of the cycle track runs in the territories of Castions di Strada, where the Cormor splits into two arms, forming a drainage basin to be further extended. Here, with even more evidence, the design of the network for slow mobility becomes the engine of an *ecological 're-infrastructuring' process*. The creation of new water basins offers the opportunity not only to imagine reed beds for the treatment of pollutants produced by agricultural activities, but also to design a more extensive landscape project, aimed at enhancing and re-linking the wetlands that characterize this section of the river landscape. Reforestation actions give thickness to the system of environmental connections, and capillary radiate in the new rows and hedges along the roads and the dirt roads. Also in this case, the *green and blue network is integrated with territorial re-equipping strategies*, and the private management of new services is targeted towards occasional users and inhabitants: an old hydraulic booth is converted into a refreshment area; on the edges of the urban centre, a small residential expansion provides additional places for outdoor sports, education and culture services; entering the



agricultural landscape, a visitor center finally offers the opportunity to learn the history of the territory and to practice educational activities for schools (Figure 13).



Figure 12. Corn park. Source: D. Buccino, A. Romanzin, G. Vallone.

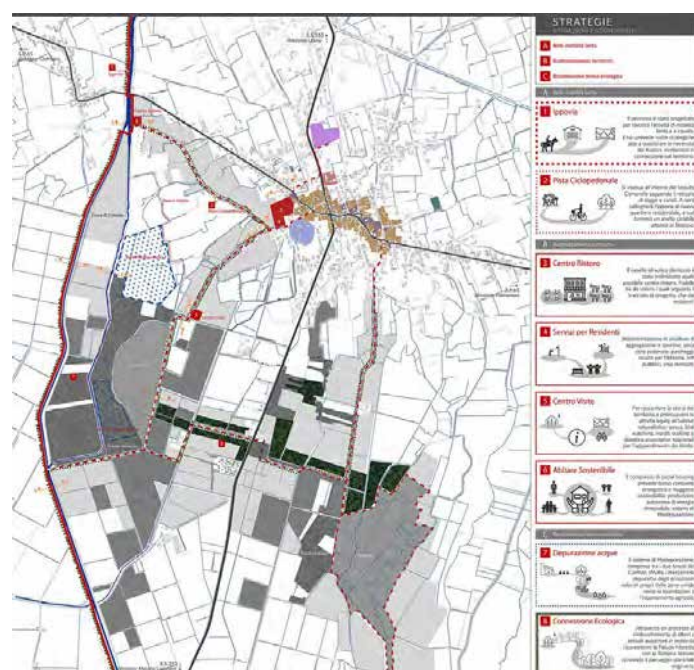


Figure 13. Wetlands. Source: S. Maiello, N. Zucchiatti.

## 5. And the reflection goes on

The *learning by doing* process we have described offers many clues for reflection both on teaching and making research through the project, and on more general issues related to spatial planning in the 'middle lands' .

### 5.1 The utility of trespassing

Taking sustainable tourism as the engine of territorial ‘re-infrastructuring’ and ‘re-equipping’, what we developed with students and local actors was a twofold exercise: on the one hand, we tried to break the boundaries between single spatial and functional areas, in order to identify new possible relationships among places, uses, activities and economies; on the other hand, we set aside ordinary teaching methods, to put us in direct tension with the contexts, with those who inhabit them and are engaged with imagining a possible future. Thanks to this exercise, the approach of *research by design* taught us much: most of all, the need to update the education of an architect and an urban planner, by working both inside and outside the university classrooms.

Through a *learning process based on border crossing* we developed competences that are no less important and complementary to those of spatial design. Diving ourselves in the contexts, listening to common expertise, building empathic relationships with the places and with the people, cultivating the willingness to self-discard our positions, spurred us to reflect on how design-oriented knowledge can also make use of forms of collective learning, supporting technical data collection and elaboration. We often learn *by trial and error*, when we abandon situations and roles that are more familiar (the ‘comfort zones’), to enter lands that we have not explored yet. For this reason, the reduction of transversal, reflexive and communicative competences – those that today are defined as *soft skills* – to theoretical and codified formulas of teaching and learning seems counterproductive. On the contrary, widening the field of training contexts is a fertile way to reason on how to cultivate the sensitivity to innovate our tools through the direct interaction with increasingly problematic (*wicked*) spatial, environmental and social conditions. This sensitivity marks the difference between the acquisition (and transmission) of simple technical expertise, and the development of the ability to perform a professional practice that must be as competent, as relational and critical.

Nonetheless, during our experience, we often experienced the inadequacy of our (verbal and graphic) languages to translate and to communicate in a clear and effective manner what we had learned, and we wanted to deliver to a public discussion. No less strong was the students’ frustration in understanding how their prefigured spatial arrangements were nothing more than tentative and temporary proposals, within a much longer and articulated path of *framing and re-framing* of actors and points of view, situations and problems, solutions and tools. However, experience strengthened our awareness that building collaborative contexts, where the issues of complex and integrated design can meet those of teaching and active research, can be very useful. Even though difficult, these opportunities can in fact stimulate processes of collective imagination, build new synergies, points of contact and hybridization between the energies and the knowledge of the university, and the questions, the practices and the competences emerging from the territory.

### 5.2 Towards and Agenda for the ‘middle lands’?

These synergies are even more necessary when we work in contexts that are similar to those we were investigating, and whose features recur in many other situations in our Country. In similar territories, the conditions in which the local subjects – first and foremost institutional – today act appear to be far from favoring a strategic thought. For many Italian Municipalities it is difficult to access the funds finalized by the European Union to promote sustainable trajectories of urban and territorial development (Cappello, 2015, 2016). Even when addressed to inland areas – as happened in the programming season that has now come to an end – these funds have in fact excluded the here described ‘middle lands’. The

limited dimensions of the administered contexts and of the technical staff within the local authorities, together with the contraction of resources for the outsourcing of projects, inevitably create further and significant factors that impede participation in exceptional and complex financing channels. However, it is our conviction (and of the actors with whom we are still collaborating) that, even in the coming years, the resources allocated at European level (together with their wished national and regional integrations) will constitute one of the few effective levers to aggregate dispersed territories around projects for a sustainable development.

It is starting from these considerations that our work took as guiding principles the sustainable development objectives established by the *United Nations' 2030 Agenda* (United Nations, 2015), and now assumed as the basis of the European programming 2021-2027 (European Commission, 2018: art. 4). These objectives set a reference for the construction of spatial and environmental regeneration programs and projects, joining actions aimed at reactivating abandoned places, governing decline of population dynamics and migration flows, awakening dormant economies.

Nonetheless, these are far from simple tasks: they push the administrations of different levels to perform a complicated exercise of rethinking the future, of building medium and long-term visions that can enable them to effectively use both ordinary financing resources, and the extraordinary ones that hopefully will soon be destined for cities and territories.

Although it is clear that, without adequate support – both procedural and financial – the small Municipalities of the ‘middle lands’ will find it very difficult to go far, planning the future requires high doses of commitment and trust.

It is precisely with this obstinate and positive approach that we joined local administrations and civil society's actors in the construction of a vision for the River Cormor Contract. In this vision, the green and blue infrastructures where the slow mobility network is settled do not only constitute the structuring principles of a new environmental project, but they also equip a spatial support for imagining new and different development trajectories. These trajectories are aimed at promoting quality and well-being, combining the creation of new services and economies for both tourists and inhabitants. With our design explorations we proposed new representations, in which the territories on the edge – of water and countryside, small and medium urban centres – could regain centrality, while remaining far away from the «'having to be' [...] that have been determined inside the cities», as well as «from the typical urban projections on these territories, depicting them as a kind of *friendly society* with traditional, patrimonial and tourist values» (De Rossi, 2018: 8).

The Cormor master plan and the in-depth studies on the spatial transects that mark its course also offered further insights to reflect on how the guiding vision of the River Contract can find concrete implementation, even independently of the uncertain access to extraordinary financing channels. Due to their often minimal and incremental nature, the project actions defined with the students are not disconnected from the themes and methods that are typical of ordinary urban planning. We would therefore like to think that the work done, if shared by local administrations, may constitute an invitation to convincingly cross the boundaries between the fields of urban planning and of territorial development programmes, and to use the procedures and tools of local planning to try to *anticipate large scale and integrated visions*. In the current «wandering phase» (Gabellini, 2016: 144), when ever faster and complex environmental, social and economic changes associate with increasing political and financial uncertainties, helping territorial actors construct in advance project agendas is a contribution that universities and research can (and must) deliver to the territories that welcome and stimulate them.

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