

## **Intergenerational dialogues in Milan peripheries A research by design applied to via Padova**

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### **Abstract**

**After more than twenty years of contraction, Milan population has returned to growth since 2015, reaching in 2019 the levels of 1991, increasing especially in the age group between 30 and 50 years. At the same time, we are facing the decreasing of new-born residents and the progressive aging of the population, which especially in the peripheral areas can lead to phenomena of social exclusion and marginalization. This can be counteracted through the activation of intergenerational education and solidarity actions. The project explorations applied to the area of via Padova focus on this possibility, assuming intergenerational dialogue as a tool for social and spatial requalification.**

**There are numerous examples in Europe of positive experiences based on solidarity and collaboration between young people and elderly. In reference to these practices, the design experiments concerned specific spaces able to stimulate intergenerational dialogue: urban gardens, co-housing buildings, cultural centres, kindergartens, professional schools. The topic of "intergenerational dialogue" has been assumed as a paradigm for intertwining the social dimension with the spatial one: the desire to "age well" unites people and spaces in the peripheries.**

**How to foster a greater integration through architecture between elderly populations, born or raised for many years in peripheral neighbourhoods, and young populations that have only recently settled? The project explorations presented - both realistic and visionary at the same time, developed within the scope of teaching activities - start**

**from an anthropological, sociological and political reflection on the theme of intergenerational dialogue in relation to the redevelopment of urban peripheral areas.**

This article presents some critical considerations developed at the end of a Politecnico di Milano urban design studio<sup>1</sup> carried out between February and July 2019, as part of the teaching experimentation platform "*Ri-formare Periferie Milano Metropolitana*"<sup>2</sup> (Re-forming Milan peripheries) started to promote research by design on the regeneration of peripheral areas. As architects, we consider the design activity as a form of applied research<sup>3</sup>, to be tested with the students based on precise research questions.

The brief of the design studio was developed based on our interest in the relationships between social issues, linked to the aging of the population (particularly in Italy), and new forms of urban life based on intergenerational dialogue. For pedagogical reasons, it was decided not to consider the determining factors in urban planning such as land and other form of ownership, urban density, economic values, urban mobility plans, to offer students greater project freedom, while forcing them to reason every decision based on direct observation of places and social customs. The aim was not to respond to the immediate problems of everyday life of young and old inhabitants with building projects, but to imagine visionary scenarios of life in the Milan peripheries, giving priority to the design of an articulated buildings and public spaces system.

This research project refers to the area of Via Padova (*Figure 1*), a road that extends from Piazzale Loreto for about 4 km in a north-easterly direction to Cascina Gobba. Via Padova crosses heterogeneous urban fabrics, the result

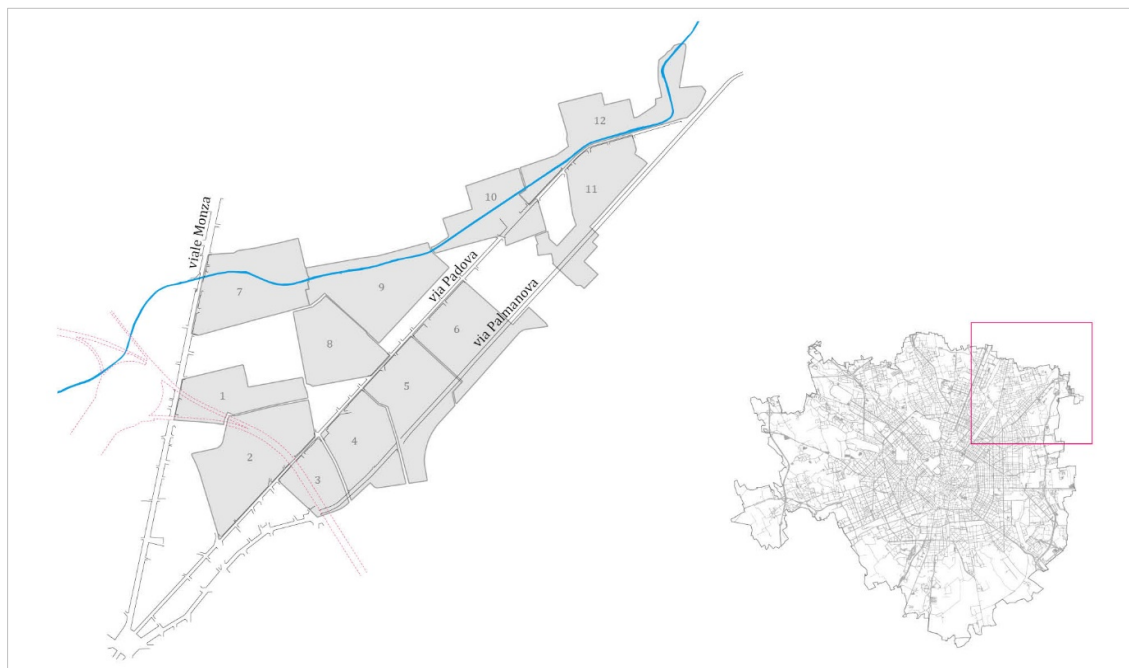


Figure 1. Via Padova area and the 12 “islands” identified along the urban sector.

of a historical stratification due to the historical centers of Turro, Gorla and Crescenzago. These were originally autonomous municipalities and are now fully incorporated into the urban structure. Despite its differences, the area crossed by Via Padova has long been presented as socially problematic, as it is characterized by significant conflicts related to the strong presence of foreign populations. It is an example of multiculturalism in Milan, with more than 80 different countries of origin<sup>4</sup>.

### Demographic framework

The current Italian population demographic structure has changed radically compared to the past. This change is based on a sharp drop in the birth rate with a simultaneous progressive ageing of the population, corresponding to the increase in life expectancy.

Comparing the 2017 ISTAT data with 1987 (Cederna, 2018), there is a substantial reversal between the distribution of the youngest and oldest population in the last 30 years. While in 1987 the percentage of young people aged between 0 and 17 years was 23.2 per cent of the total population, in 2017 it dropped to 16.3 per cent. In 1987 a percentage of people over 65 years was equal to 12.6 per cent, this rose to 21.2 per cent in 2017.

Within this national demographic decline

framework, the Milan population returned to growth in 2015 after more than 20 years of contraction. In 2018 this reached 1,395,274 (the same 1991 levels when the population stood at 1,367,733 inhabitants)<sup>5</sup>. In September 2019, the number of inhabitants exceeded 1.4 million<sup>6</sup>, benefiting from an increase in the active population, linked to domestic migration, mostly for work reasons. However, Milan is not immune to the consolidation of the negative trend of new-born residents (10,693 births in 2018 compared to 12,606 births in 2010 and 27,427 births in 1964) and the progressive aging of the population, which, in peripheral areas, can lead to social marginalization and exclusion. In recent years, the increase in population has been accompanied by a strong growth in inequalities and different forms of social vulnerability.

The demographic condition appears to be completely different if we look at the foreign population living in Milan, the distribution between the elderly and the young is reversed compared to the Italian population: in 2018, children under 18 years represented 20.4 per cent (compared to 15.1 per cent of the Italian population). This was larger than the population over 65 years, which represented only 3.9 per cent (compared to 27.5 per cent of the Italian population).

Overall, the foreign population partially reduced the demographic decline. Foreigners in Milan represented 19.8 per cent of the city population,

the demographic breakdown by age group showed that young foreigners between 0 and 18 years represented 24.9 per cent of all young people in this age group. Only 3.4 per cent of the over 65s were foreigners. These values are greatly increased if we look at the Via Padova area. In this context, foreigners were more numerous (34.5 per cent compared to 19.8 per cent for the entire city), with a strong incidence on the share of young foreigners between 0-18 years, which rose to 44.6 per cent, while for those over 65 years the percentage remained low (only 5.1 per cent were foreigners). If today this percentage of foreign elderly people is low compared to that of Italians, in the next 20 years the percentage of foreign elderly will increase significantly, resulting in an additional demand for social and health care that will require great supervision and attention.

Starting from this demographic framework, which shows the increased ageing of the population, we have suggested to our students that they carry out the project using a sociological and political approach on the intergenerational dialogue as a tool for social regeneration of peripheral areas. They should then use the architecture project as a contribution to encourage intergenerational education and solidarity. There are many examples in Europe of positive experiences based on solidarity and cooperation between young people, children and the elderly<sup>7</sup>. Based on these examples, students were invited to design spaces conceived to stimulate dialogue between generations. These included urban gardens for intergenerational gardening activities, co-housing buildings for young families and elderly people, cultural centres for "generational video" production to preserve the memories of everyday life in the suburbs, nurseries run by grandparents and young educators, vocational schools where elderly workers can pass on their technical knowledge. In this way, the intergenerational dialogue could become an *intercultural meeting* using activities and spaces that can bring the young to the elderly, thus bringing memories, stories, skills and different backgrounds into contact, in line with the highly migratory tradition of the neighbourhood. If the main incoming migratory flows come presently from European and non-European countries, in the past, and especially in the years between 1950 and 1970, the Via Padova area underwent internal migration, particularly from the southern and eastern regions.

## The research by design approach

The design studio began with a series of inspections and meetings with operators active in the neighbourhood and in the elderly and child assistance field, to offer all students an initial overall picture of the Via Padova area, which was enriched by reference texts.

During a second phase, each group of students was entrusted with an in-depth survey of a specific urban sector, to carry out a series of sociological explorations. They had the methodological assistance of a group of anthropologists from the University of Milano-Bicocca<sup>8</sup>. Students were asked to make a series of direct observations about places, interview the elderly, children and parents, paying attention to the interaction between places and people, and the different uses of space. The movements and flows of people had to be observed, including socialization activities, especially in some places, such as bars, shops and shopping centres, bus and metro stops, parks and gardens, recreation areas, religious spaces, and waiting areas for mothers and children outside schools.

After this initial exploration and knowledge phase, 12 sectors were identified along the urban system formed by the three axes of Via Padova, Martesana canal and Viale Palmanova (*Figure 1*), intersected by the railway embankment. Each sector was part of an archipelago, to be transformed into a "Community island" where intergenerational exchanges and solidarity could be fostered. The perimeter of each sector was based on the principle of guaranteeing a complete set of existing and planned buildings for the elderly and children. They would be linked by defining a sequence of public spaces (gardens, squares, vegetable gardens) crossed by a network of car traffic-protected pedestrian paths. In this way, the aim was to favour the use of pedestrian paths, encouraging walking as a healthy physical activity<sup>9</sup> for the elderly and children, imagining that walking became a privileged activity of intergenerational dialogue. Within each island, students had to provide a minimum programme of welfare services. This included at least one nursery school and one primary or secondary school, a day centre for the elderly, with recreational and health care functions, a protected residence for the elderly, and a shared-use public building for young and old (e.g. gym, bowling alley, ballroom, and indoor play area).

The perimeter of the different islands did not follow the traditional neighbourhood subdivision corresponding to the distribution of

services, but was motivated by an intention to create pedestrian connection routes within the individual island. We wanted to overcome the physical barriers such as the Martesana canal, the high-speed urban road in via Palmanova, or the railway viaduct, to eliminate all physical segregation, which often coincides with social segregation. It is no coincidence that the most interesting projects have innovatively addressed the issue of how to transform a boundary, a barrier, into a place of transition and urban connection. This included suggesting the construction of new pedestrian bridges on the Martesana canal, reopening the railway viaduct arches, and a profound transformation of the Cimiano and Crescenzago subway stations replacing the current poorly lit, undersized and dangerous underpasses with spacious bridges. The most interesting projects suggest different urban strategies and ways of interpreting the intergenerational dialogue theme. Two projects brilliantly addressed the issue of crossing the railway. The first project (students Chiara Battini and Riccardo Bondioni) transformed a triangular industrial site, segregated between two railway viaducts, into a large courtyard-square dominated by two residential towers: the first for the elderly, the second for students, which were connected by a continuous basement with services. The northern railway viaduct is made permeable by reopening some spans, used for commercial and recreational activities and pedestrian crossings (*Figure 2*). The second project (students Dimitry van Ruiten and Bosco Tamayo Chapa) suggested to focus the multi-functional programme in a single curved building leaning along the railway

viaduct, forming a covered gallery that connects via Padova with a new entrance to the Trotter Park in via Angelo Mosso. This explores the possibility of enhancing the value of a site that is currently "unbuildable" due to the railway urban constraints (*Figure 3*). The third project (students Andrea Brenna, Emanuele Gré, Erika Sezzi) suggested two strong urban connection actions. The first action replaced the current Crescenzago station underpass with a new pedestrian walkway along which a bridge-building was constructed to house the middle school. The second action connected the subway station with the redeveloped and expanded Oratory of Santa Maria Rossa, along a tree-lined pedestrian avenue, in the heart of the Crescenzago historic centre. This became the residence for the elderly as a hinge between the two parts of the path. These settlements have a territorial value, allowing the Crescenzago district to be linked to Lambro Park (*Figure 4*). The fourth and final project (students Virginia Aste, Daniele Bana, Francesco Caputo) was based on an interesting functional mixture of new and recycled industrial buildings, using a clear and compact urban form. The new structure completed the existing school complex and connected with the other neighbourhood services with a network of cycle-pedestrian routes (*Figure 5*).

**Conclusions: the role of research by design in public universities**

What lessons can be drawn from this project experiment? Rather than suggesting solutions that can be implemented immediately, the

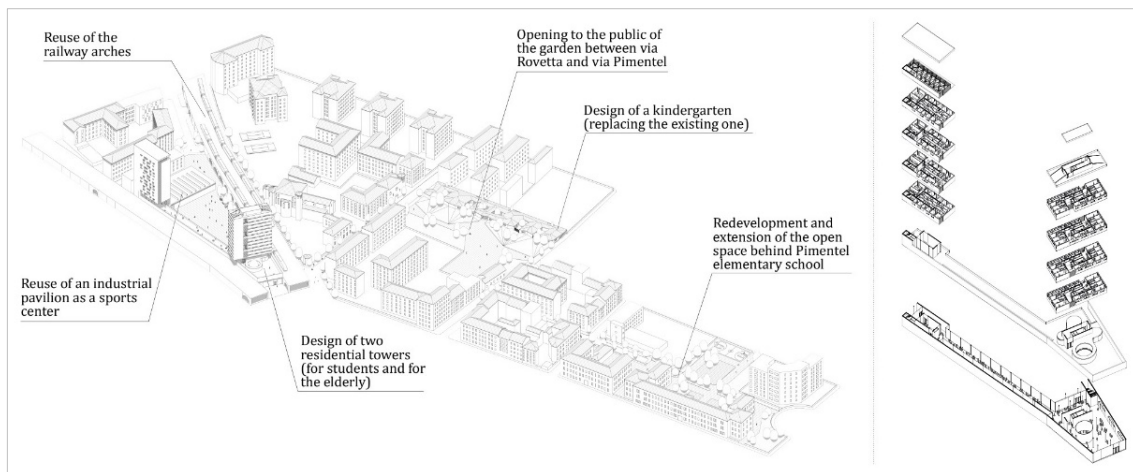


Figure 2. Project by Chiara Battini and Riccardo Bondioni (Island n. 1).

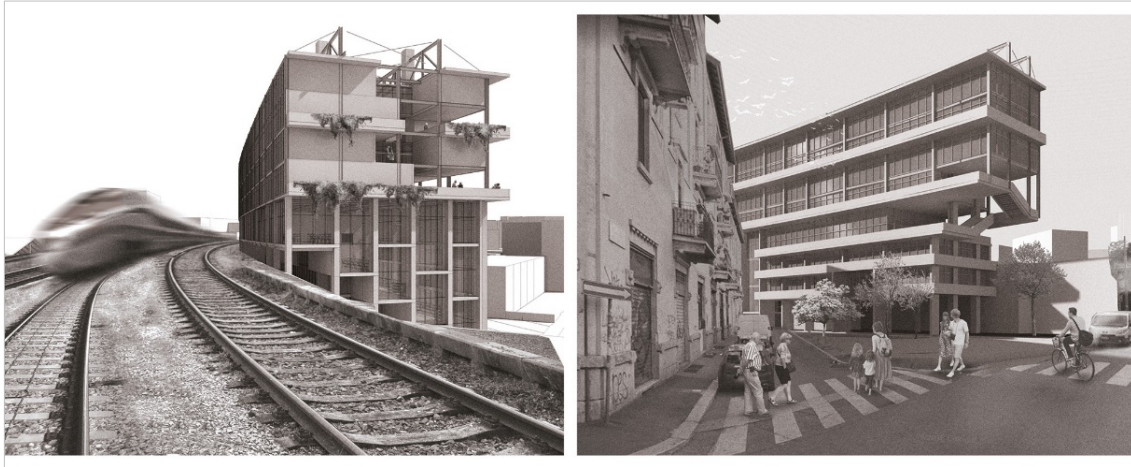


Figure 3. Project by di Dimitry van Ruiten and Bosco Tamayo Chapa (Island n. 2).

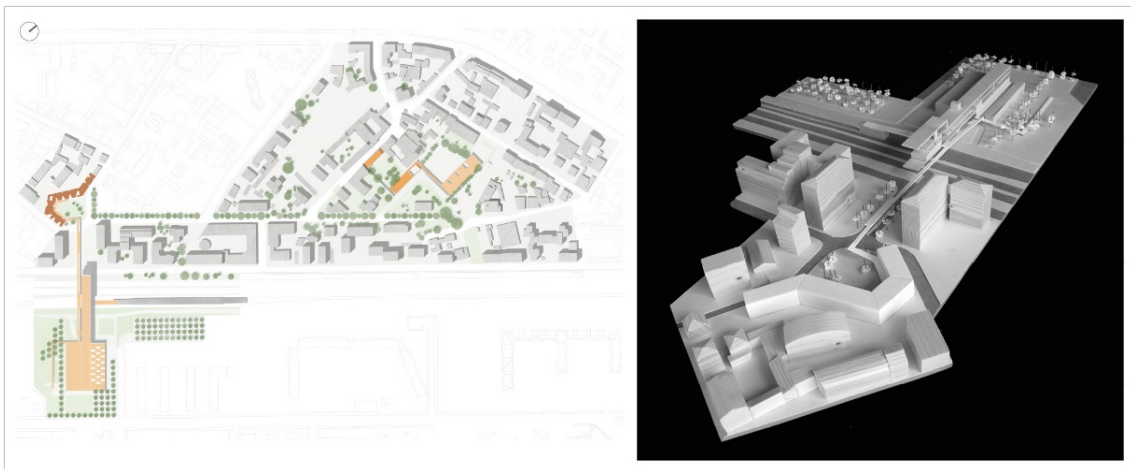


Figure 4. Project by Andrea Brenna, Emanuele Gré, Erika Sezzi (Island n. 11).



Figure 5. Project by Virginia Aste, Daniele Bana, Francesco Caputo (Island n. 12).

projects imagine the spaces of the future life of a city where there will be an increasingly elderly population, with complex assistance problems. In this design studio students learnt how important it was for an architect to imagine long-term solutions, for example tackling the rapid change in the elderly health, education, and social condition. What will happen when the foreign population, today mostly young, will age? What will be the impact of increasing familiarity with digital tools among the elderly? This leads us to reflect on the role of research by design in public universities, which cannot and must not replicate the design activities of professional architects. To develop a "realistic" project for the places around the Via Padova area, architects and town planners should start a consultation process with the Municipality, citizens and social workers. This should be based around project hypotheses that would be continuously and extensively discussed to obtain the best shared solutions. However, in universities, research by design follows other aims, anticipating the future urban condition based on statistical and demographic projections, and suggesting concrete images of a "possible world" that the current regulatory, legal, economic and political framework would probably not allow. University research does not provide immediate solutions, but suggests working hypotheses that shift the attention to new themes and programs. Ideally, our students' projects could give rise to a future pilot project to be developed in one of the "islands" we have identified, creating an intermediate scale between urban and architectural design. Let's imagine a renewed role of the architect as a social activist and not only a designer, who can experiment interacting with Milan's community of residents and social services to combine spatial and social innovation. Only if this experiment is successful will it be possible to replicate this model, as a basis for developing future standards and policies for better elderly and childcare through intergenerational dialogue.

## Endnotes

1. Architectural Design Studio "*Dialoghi intergenerazionali nella periferia milanese*" (Intergenerational dialogues in the Milan periphery), instructors: Pierre-Alain Croset, Elena Fontanella, Fabio Maroldi; tutors: Francesca Diano, Marcello Galiotto, Lorenzo Guzzini, Marianna Nigra (Politecnico di Milano, School of Architecture Urban Planning Construction Engineering, Master of Science in Architecture and Urban Design).
2. The "*Ri-formare Periferie Milano Metropolitana*" teaching project, promoted by the Politecnico di Milano School of Architecture, Urban Planning Construction Engineering, continues and renews the "*Ri-formare Milano Progetti per aree ed edifici in stato di abbandono*" (Re-forming Milan - Projects for abandoned areas and buildings) experience. This was conducted between 2013 and 2017 in partnership with the City of Milan and the Metropolitan City's Administrations, the Politecnico di Milano DASTU and ABC departments, Polisocial, the Milan Province Professional Association of Architects Landscape Planners and Curators, the Milan Triennale, Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia - Sede Lombardia. <http://www.riformaremilano.polimi.it/>
3. See EAAE Charter on Architectural Research approved in 2012 by the European Association for Architectural Education (EAAE) which cites: "In research by design, the architectural design process forms the pathway through which new insights, knowledge, practices or products come into being. It generates critical inquiry through design work. Therefore, research results are obtained by, and consistent with experience in practice". <http://www.eaae.be/about/statutes-and-charter/eaae-charter-architectural-research/>
4. Source: <http://sisi.comune.milano.it/> Section: Population and households (Resident population recorded in the Registry office).
5. All Milan demographic data reported here comes from the Integrated Statistical System of the City of Milan <http://sisi.comune.milano.it/> Sections: Population and households (Resident population in the Registry, Foreign population in the Registry), Demographic estimates and population projections (High, Central and Low Scenarios).
6. [http://www.ansa.it/lombardia/notizie/2019/09/30/milano-raggiunti-14-mln-abitanti\\_27f7ed57-25c0-4a76-8e5e-ec592do42fcf.html](http://www.ansa.it/lombardia/notizie/2019/09/30/milano-raggiunti-14-mln-abitanti_27f7ed57-25c0-4a76-8e5e-ec592do42fcf.html)
7. Börsch-Supan, Brandt, Litwin, Weber, 2013; Da Roit, 2007; Saraceno, 2008.
8. With Prof. Roberto Malighetti's assistance (University of Milan-Bicocca, Department of Human Sciences for Education "Riccardo Massa"), the following took part: Sara Bramani, Paolo Grassi, Giacomo Pozzi, Luca Rimoldi.
9. There is a wide scientific literature on the principle of active ageing and the benefits of moderate and continuous physical activity for better ageing from a psychological point of view. For example: Katz, 2005; Plouffe, Kalache, 2010; Timonen, 2016; World Health Organization, 2002.

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