



Rural-Urban Outlooks: Unlocking Synergies (ROBUST)
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Snapshot: Expressions of Urban – Peri-Urban – Rural Relationships

Coltiviamo la città – Cultivate the City

Province of Lucca, Italy

1. Brief Description

Coltiviamo la città (Cultivate the city) is the result of a laboratory undertaken in the A.Y. 2013/2014 by 83 Architectural Engineering and Environmental Science students at the University of Pisa. It was sponsored by the City of Lucca and Tuscany Regional Government. The initiative was focused on developing new ideas to regenerate the rural-urban interface and adopted an approach that integrated contributions from different actors (farmers, consumers, citizens, civil servants, etc.). The study evaluated current and potential strengths and weaknesses of eight diverse and previously selected areas, within and around the urban centre of Lucca. The objective was to identify good planning practices from which to draw up project ideas and guidelines for the regeneration of urban and peri-urban open spaces. For these purposes, engaging local communities was necessary and a survey was carried out to investigate people's perceptions and preferences. In particular, the initiative points at the necessity, for planning, to both provide ecosystem services and to address the demand for local food. Short supply chains not only increase the availability of local fresh food, but also allow urban dwellers to return to the origins of food, reconcile with the environment and take back a sense of the place. These aspects are connected with the role of agriculture in maintaining cultural heritage through systems of land use, production traditions, and experience-based knowledge on resource management. As such, 'Cultivate the city' represents a cross-cutting example for the three Communities of Practice themes.

2. Questions and/or Challenges

- > How can urban/territorial planning identify forms of regeneration while addressing the needs of urban/rural dwellers in an innovative way?

Urban and territorial planning should not be limited to regulating land use but needs to assume a broader "strategic role". To achieve this, the direct involvement of local communities has to be promoted and implemented through participatory practices. In the case of 'Cultivate the city', the importance of participation was recognised, and a

survey was carried out in order to get a sense of people's perception of peri-urban areas and issues related to ecosystem services. However, time and resource constraints limited the scope of the survey, which only addressed urban dwellers.

- > What are residents' preferences about initiatives to be undertaken at the rural-urban interface?

Surveyed residents (N=316) demonstrated a strong preference towards creating parks and green spaces for recreational purposes (e.g. sport). However, with reference to potential productive uses of peri-urban open spaces, initiatives connected to urban agriculture were the most championed, which was consistent with the stated appreciation of local food. [Main results described in section n.3].

Research questions for the WP3/living lab

- > Are the projects results still valid today? What has happened since the project was developed? How can these findings contribute to urban planning and development in connection to the peri-urban and rural territories?
- > How could local actors collectively rethink the functions/role of peri-urban spaces?
- > What are the main social practices (with respect to growing, mobility, recreation and others suggested by surveyed residents) already carried out in peri-urban spaces? How do they affect urban-rural interactions?
- > What is the role of a local food policy in the revalorisation of peri-urban spaces?

3. Main Insights

The study originates from the recognition that sustainable territorial development needs the interaction between urban and rural areas to be rethought and the urban-rural dichotomy to be abandoned. One of the main consequences of urban sprawl has been the fragmentation of open/agricultural spaces. These have lost their productive function and are more and more in a condition of land abandonment and degradation. Peri-urban open spaces, such as those selected for 'Cultivate the city', often result from such processes. However, for urban regeneration and looking at new needs of urban and peri-urban dwellers, peri-urban areas should be seen as spaces for valorising ecosystem services, rather than for buildings and infrastructure expansion.

A survey was carried out to gain a deeper understanding of 1) the social perception of peri-urban areas, and 2) issues related to the provision of ecosystem services at the local level. More specifically, the demand for rural services was investigated (social gardens, educational farms, agro-kindergartens, areas of custody of biodiversity, etc.). The aim was to understand how to provide an adequate response to the needs identified and which services should be taken into account for the new planning instruments.

This section will provide the main insights from the survey, as well as indications for further development of similar initiatives.

The survey carried out confronted the theme of public green spaces, which more than one third of respondents (35%) declared using regularly and frequently, mainly for recreation and relaxation (about 40%). More than half of respondents consider the quality of available spaces sufficient or more than sufficient. With respect to the development of agro-urban projects, a key question focussed on the perception of the aesthetic and functional quality of peri-urban spaces. Seventy-four percent of the respondents reported worsening conditions of deterioration and/or abandonment. Urban sprawl has been identified as the main reason for such phenomena, in that it produced a gradual fragmentation and reduction of open spaces, which further encouraged the abandonment of agriculture.

Regarding possible strategies and opportunities for reusing abandoned land, the majority of respondents suggested developing parks and public spaces for recreation and sport. In addition, participants overall demonstrated great interest in innovative neo-rural maintenance/management solutions, such as social/family gardens, licenses to farms oriented to direct sales, and experiences of “agrocivism”¹, among others.

When asked about their level of appreciation of different productive uses of urban green space (social gardens, community gardens, multifunctional farms, etc.), the majority agreed on the food production solution, in that they were strongly supporting/interested in local food consumption. In addition, 39% of respondents identified themselves as hobby farmers.

3.1. Indications of the application of the new concept of 'New Localities'

The 8 sites selected for the study provide classic examples of a hybrid rural-urban interface (Figure 1).

¹ “Agrocivismo” is an Italian term by Ingersoll et al. (2007) which relates to “the use of agricultural activities in urban areas to improve civic life and environmental/landscape quality”. Agrocivism provides for the coordination of multiple agricultural activities in the city, extensive integrated participation, widespread environmental awareness.

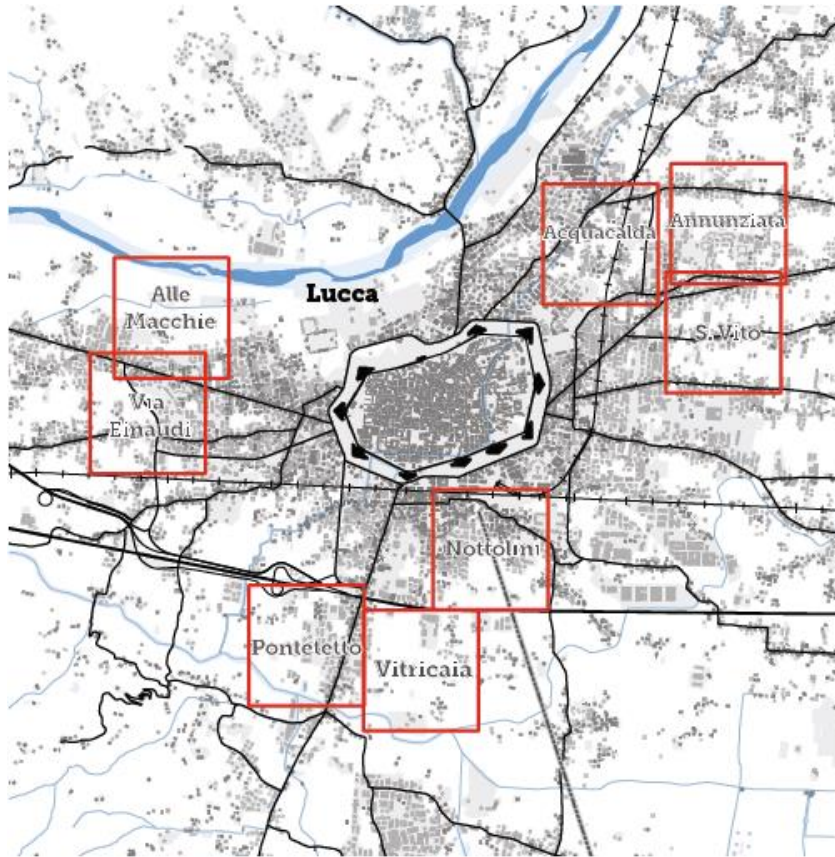


Figure 1 - Areas selected for the study. Source: Coltiviamo la città

In all of the selected areas, distinctively rural features coexist with evidence of recent urbanisation, as these spaces are close to the old city walls. However, all of the sites appear as presenting strong identity elements as well as peculiar landscapes, which ‘Cultivate the city’ aimed at promoting. Agricultural land abandonment and the fragmentation of agricultural production are particular to these areas. To a lesser extent, high nature value sites (plain woods, wetlands, perfluvial areas, etc.) are important markers of rural proximity. Following the loss of value due to land abandonment and to a weakened productive function of “the country”, these open spaces are currently looking for new significance. Appreciation by the city could, according to this study, come to the rescue of such spaces for the benefit of city dwellers’ wellbeing, thus reconfiguring – and balancing – the relations between urban and rural spaces.

The idea is to change the vision of a rural separated from the urban and to interpret it as a unique and continuous system. The image of such "new localities" should not entail traditional green infrastructures and ecological corridors. Rather, it is represented as a continuum of agricultural spaces supporting the city and making it more sustainable (see also “Snapshot: Expressions of Urban-Peri-Urban-Rural Relationships. Soil consumption, role of open spaces in peri-urban areas and ecosystem services”, Province of Lucca).

3.2. Insights related to the broad area of 'Smart Development'

The second part of the survey concerned respondent suggestions about their preferred solutions for the regeneration of peri-urban spaces. The study refers to concepts such as “smart city” and “smart rural” as strongly interconnected terms in the areas under investigation. Specifically, the approach looks at small interventions as a way for participatory planning to both increase citizens’ involvement and transform urban spaces for multiple activities, according to residents’ needs. For instance, new activities/objects are needed to develop peri-urban agriculture, compared to the type of agriculture carried out in typically rural contexts. These new objects and activities include spaces for growing food (for both farmers and hobby farmers), for marketing (farmers’ markets and direct sales in general), as well as for educational functions (bringing children in contact with animals and the fields, school farming, visiting facilities, etc.). The necessity to locate these spaces at the intersection between urban and rural emerged, in that it would ensure proximity and accessibility for both urban and rural dwellers. Interventions and projects must also become a design component embedded into urban and rural spaces.

The concept of smart rural links to organic farming capacity, local and high-quality products to create and sustain the conditions for saving resources, promoting sustainable consumption, and creating networks for maintaining rural and urban areas. Those who live in peri-urban spaces must become aware of being themselves nodes of a network by which either directly (farmers, growers) or indirectly (service users, consumers) have a role in maintaining the territory.

3.3. Other insights that could be relevant for further work

The potential for more beneficial relations and synergies

The primary opportunity for creating synergies is the integration of urban and rural functions within initiatives at the peri-urban interface. These initiatives have the potential to address both ecological and environmental objectives, as well as social.

Peri-urban spaces in Lucca have been identified by surveyed residents as providing many opportunities for social inclusion and community building, as well as growing food and providing valuable ecosystem services.

Peri-urban agriculture initiatives, as well as educational and recreational activities, have the potential to promote cultural exchanges, social inclusion of deprived and/or marginalised social groups, empowerment and intergenerational interactions. To achieve this, forms of inclusion need to be designed through bottom-up processes, involving both rural and urban stakeholders in the beginning of participatory planning. Such a process would benefit municipalities and other planning institutions by ensuring higher public acceptance and legitimisation of projects put in place, while at the same time considering the needs and requests of residents and service users. In this regard, the survey respondents have showed a widespread willingness to get involved in the decision-making process concerning their city.

The role of innovation

The study provides a small-scale example of cooperation among stakeholders – ranging from institutional actors to students to local communities – which is desirable that be adopted to identify and implement innovative solutions with a view to resilience and sustainability.

4. Data Sources and Indicators

The students involved in “Cultivate the city” carried out a GIS diachronic analysis of landscape change (in 1954, 1978, 2010) in the preliminary phase of the initiative. The survey was distributed – both in-person and online – between April and May 2014. It addressed 316 city residents and aimed at understanding how they perceived the quality of peri-urban areas. Respondents confronted several topics, namely: use of public green spaces and perception of relative level of quality; perception of the abandonment of peri-urban open spaces; quality of available services available; role and potential use of productive green areas; food supply; and willingness to get involved in taking decisions concerning the city. Several indications emerged from the questionnaire and eventually resulted in the project proposals developed by the students. These projects have been exhibited to the public in Lucca.

Table 1 Data used

Data / Indicator	Source
Name of data source / indicator	Citation, website link, organization
Diachronic analysis of landscape change	Elaboration from OPENDATA Toscana – Land use 1954, 1978, 2010 and Land registry.
Interviews and results of the survey undertaken (2014)	Available on request (in Italian)

5. Critical Appraisal of Data Use

Data available from this study need to be updated and integrated during the Living Lab. Current relevant planning instruments must be identified and analysed. Possible interactions with existing policies (above all potential sources of financing) need to be identified, with the purpose of implementing projects for urban-rural reconnection.

6. References

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