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Two New Traditional Neighborhoods for the Town of Rozzano, Milan

Dos nuevos barrios tradicionales para el municipio de Rozzano, Milán

Dois novos bairros tradicionais para a cidade de Rozzano, Milão

Abstract | Resumen | Resumo

A town of 42,000 inhabitants in the agricultural belt on the south side of Milan, Rozzano was developed in the 1960s and 1970s on the Soviet suburban model to house migrant workers from the south. The stock of modular cement high-rises is now deteriorating rapidly and will not be restored or replaced with similar buildings. The town council intends to replace this fabric with one that is more livable, following the principles of New Urbanism. Two projects are being developed for new mixed-use, walkable neighborhoods on municipal sites. The projects will become part of the town's Development Plan and the sites will be offered to developers who are to build the new quarters as designed. The results will serve as examples of how to renew Rozzano – using traditional local building models of urban, rural, and agricultural architecture. The initiative is a chance to create a ground-breaking example of suburban sprawl repair.

Rozzano es un municipio de 42.000 habitantes en el cinturón agrícola del sur de Milán que se desarrolló en los años 60 y 70 según el modelo suburbano soviético para alojar a los obreros que habían migrado desde el sur de Italia. Hoy en día, las torres modulares de hormigón se están deteriorando rápidamente y no van a ser rehabilitadas ni reemplazadas con edificios similares. El ayuntamiento quiere sustituir este tejido por otro más habitable, de acuerdo con los principios del Nuevo Urbanismo. Así, se están desarrollando dos proyectos de barrios nuevos de uso mixto y peatonales sobre terreno municipal. Los proyectos serán parte del Plan de ordenación del municipio y los solares se ofrecerán a promotores que deberán construir los nuevos barrios tal como se han proyectado. El resultado será un ejemplo de cómo renovar Rozzano utilizando modelos constructivos tradicionales y locales de arquitectura urbana, rural y agrícola. Esta iniciativa es una oportunidad de crear un ejemplo innovador de cómo rehabilitar las extensiones urbanas.

Uma cidade de 42.000 habitantes na faixa agrícola da zona sul de Milão, Rozzano foi desenvolvida nos anos 60 e 70, com base no modelo suburbano soviético, para albergar trabalhadores migrantes do sul. O estoque de edifícios altos de cimento com estrutura modular está agora a degradar-se rapidamente e não será restaurado ou substituído por edifícios semelhantes. A Câmara Municipal pretende substituir esta estrutura por outra mais habitável, seguindo os princípios do Novo Urbanismo. Estão a ser desenvolvidos dois projetos para novos bairros pedonais de uso misto situados em zonas municipais. Os projetos tornar-se-ão parte do Plano de Desenvolvimento da cidade, e os locais serão oferecidos a promotores, que deverão construir os novos bairros tal como foram concebidos. Os resultados servirão de exemplo de como renovar Rozzano - utilizando modelos locais de construção tradicional, de arquitetura urbana, rural, e agrícola. A iniciativa é uma oportunidade de criação de um exemplo pioneiro de reparação da expansão suburbana.



A new neighbourhood for Rozzano
(Pier Carlo Bontempi, Architettura
civile & Disegno urbano)

Introduction

In northern Italy a process of repairing a piece of modern suburbia has just begun. The result of a new approach, it is an opportunity to present a viable model for such redevelopment that could be engaging and appealing. It is also a chance to show how a setting of little character can be transformed into a place to live in, not just to inhabit.

This opportunity was presented by the municipality of Rozzano, a modern town of over forty thousand inhabitants in the agricultural belt on the south side of Milan. The town administrators commissioned the design of two new neighborhoods that are to serve as models for future development. The one specification was that the neighborhoods respect the principles of New Urbanism.

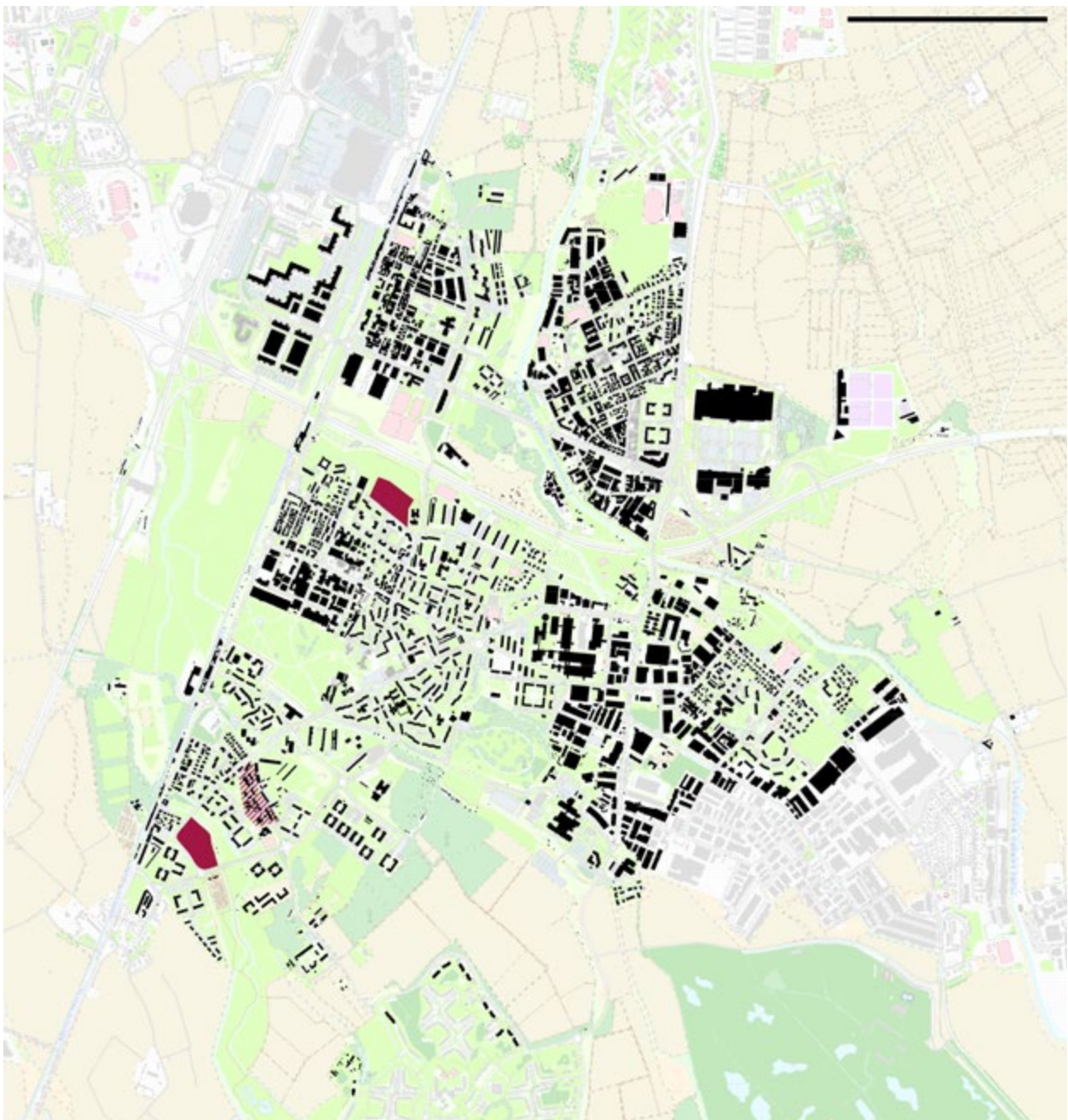
The main street of Rozzano today



Rozzano is an example of the suburban blight typical of much of northern Italy, Europe, and indeed the world. Historically a rural hamlet surrounded by large rice farms, the town grew rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s to meet sudden demand for cheap social housing for migrant workers from southern Italy. Whilst rural populations were diminishing due to the decline of agriculture and the rise of mechanization, Rozzano grew more than tenfold, from 2,700 to almost 33,000 inhabitants. The model for this new development was used worldwide at the time: modular high-rise blocks of prefabricated concrete panels, with ample empty land in between. In a few years, 27,000 people were accommodated in social housing blocks whose construction quality and appeal were poor. Over fifty years later, these buildings have clearly reached the end of their lifespan.

The municipality's vision is to gradually replace these obsolete blocks with urban fabric of a human scale and character that is welcoming and provides the sense of place and identity lacking in the Rozzano of today. Two seven-acre plots of public land have been supplied to show examples of how this may be done. Part of each site overlooks adjacent parkland.

The extent of Rozzano today. Project sites highlighted in red. Historic center highlighted in red hatching





Schematic plan of the Southernmost new neighbourhood

Urban form

At an urban level, the unwelcoming and anonymous nature of present-day Rozzano posed a daunting challenge. The natural solution would be to draw examples from nearby historic rural villages, but how is one to integrate a close-knit, walkable, traditional neighborhood into an existing fabric of low-density, high-rise blocks? The risk would be to create secluded islands that not only fail to engage with the context but that could also form barriers to the one valuable commodity possessed by Rozzano: green space.

The response to this problem was to create neighborhoods around piazzas rather than streets, with sequences of clearly defined public spaces that provide permeability, leading from one to another and

A secondary, more intimate piazza in one of the new neighborhoods (Pier Carlo Bontempi, Architettura civile & Disegno urbano)



to the parkland beyond. Greenery would be present in any vista and the spaces and buildings would be positioned in such a way as to invite exploration. The urban form of iconic “ideal” Renaissance towns such as Pienza and Sabbioneta was examined. The centers of both are similar in size to the new neighborhoods for Rozzano, but they are densely built, street-based towns with one or two central public spaces. The centers of towns such as Padua and Mantua offered more suitable inspiration, with their sequences of market squares, parade grounds, and civic and religious venues, providing a variety of spaces, calibrated from intimate to magnificent. The inner gardens and courtyards of the individual blocks of the new neighborhoods are a private counterpoint to the public urban spaces, in communication with and overlooking the adjacent parkland.

A New Vernacular for Rozzano

The lack of historic architecture representative of Rozzano was another challenge. Of the scarce existing historic buildings, few possess characteristics interesting enough to be taken as precedents. We had to look further afield to compile a library of precedents so as to identify a new, more humane way forward for Rozzano and give the new neighborhoods a sense of place and identity.

Vernacular architecture is inherently sustainable and representative of its setting. It is made with local materials and methods and responds to the characteristics and climate of the place. It also reflects the uses and culture of the society that inhabits it. In some cases it is not only utilitarian but borrows elements from more elevated precedents. As well as being decorative, these elements can also express the aspirations of builders and inhabitants.

A new vernacular would have to be shaped for Rozzano, able to express a way of life to aspire to. The architecture of small rural Lombard towns was examined. Rather than the simplest farm workers’ dwellings, houses incorporating a modest level of decorative elements as well as aspects from non-vernacular sources were documented. Buildings of more elevated types were also studied, such as rural villas and modest *palazzi*.

But the needs of today are not the same as a century ago. The vernacular dwellings of rural Lombardy tend to be almost devoid of external features such as terraces, balconies, or loggias, as the life of traditional rural society was communal and took place in the public arenas of courtyards and piazzas. In modern Italian society, communal gathering spaces are still important but there is a greater need for privately inhabitable outdoor space.

Houses in the historic center of the rural town of Pieve del Cairo, Pavia





Cascina Guardia di Sopra, Corsico,
Milan

As the most characteristic architecture of Rozzano is that of the surviving buildings of some large local historic farms, the architecture of a variety of Lombard farms was also examined. This type of architecture is of interest for two reasons in particular. The first is that Lombard farm buildings typically make references to non-vernacular precedents. In the rural economy of Lombardy the cowshed, pigsty, and granary are specific building types that are celebrated as representing major sources of income. By understanding how these buildings incorporate decorative and iconic elements and characteristics of more monumental architecture, we may better see how to apply the same principles to the simple rural Lombard dwelling.

Secondly, for practical reasons traditional Lombard agricultural buildings incorporate abundant external space. Covered porticos and loggias allow fresh air to reach produce and livestock while



Cascina Grande, now the municipal
library of Rozzano



La Spinosa, Mantua, the granary of the Gonzagas' lucrative rice farm, built by Giulio Romano in the 1530s. One of the first uses of a temple front on a secular building

offering shelter from the elements. Solariums serve to dry and preserve produce in the sun. In the Lombard plains, covered open-air spaces are particularly suitable for residential purposes, as they may be enclosed with netting to keep out insects and in particular the voracious mosquitoes from the surrounding rice fields.

The identifying characteristics established for the architecture of Rozzano's new neighborhoods were duly implemented. Each project site has an urban side and a rural side, facing parkland. The character of the new neighborhoods was calibrated accordingly, with a more urban aspect on the town side and a more rural, almost agricultural aspect on the other.



Cascina Casalta, a farm in the Royal Park of Monza, built in the eighteenth century by Luigi Canonica



Shops in the centre of Rozzano today

Other issues

There were also more prosaic obstacles to overcome. At first the town administrators were skeptical regarding the introduction of mixed-use and commercial units. They were concerned that existing neighborhood retail outlets in Rozzano had failed to prosper and that people preferred to drive to malls rather than shop close to home. On seeing these shops, it is easy to understand why: most are in isolated, poorly built single-story buildings, in an urban context devoid of form or quality. Not surprisingly, many are derelict. Eventually the administrators were persuaded of the symbiotic qualities of local shops and services together with urban space of character: if a place is engaging and welcoming, commercial activity can thrive and provide a neighborhood service, helping to nurture a complete community. Conversely, a beautiful space without any daytime activity will gradually lose its charm and fail to function as a center of a community, just as shops will fail if they are located in a hostile environment. Although luxury subdivisions and gated communities that are purely residential may be able to maintain their appeal with intensive maintenance fueled by high service costs, this solution is not feasible in urban environments intended to be economically sustainable and not reserved for the socio-economically privileged. Societal activity and well-defined urban space are essential for one another to allow both to thrive, especially in Italy.

View of the northernmost neighborhood from the adjacent parkland (Pier Carlo Bontempi, Architettura civile & Disegno urbano)





Plan of the northernmost new neighborhood (Pier Carlo Bontempi, Architettura civile & Disegno urbano)

Another obstacle to contend with was that of parking minimums, and this is likely to remain a problem as long as society remains so car dependent. The new neighborhoods are mainly closed to vehicle traffic, with public parking on perimeter roads. Private parking is located underground, with basement windows providing ventilation. The neighborhood ground level rises gently, and in the northernmost quarter a piazza overlooks the adjacent parkland from a raised vantage point reached by a staircase that connects to a footpath traversing the park.

Conclusions and next steps

The design process for these neighborhoods was challenging but offered insight into how to develop a method to address the problem of urban and architectural design in places with low-grade contexts and little material to build on. Applied with care, thorough documentation of the various levels and origins of a region's vernacular architecture together with an understanding of history and present-day uses can permit the creation of places that are representative of a society and address its practical and aspirational needs.

A new neighborhood for Rozzano, view D-D (Pier Carlo Bontempi, Architettura civile & Disegno urbano)



View D-D

The next step for the two new neighborhoods is to incorporate the projects into Rozzano's development plan and then to put the sites to tender for builders to acquire and develop as designed. The new neighborhoods will mark the start of a gradual remodeling of Rozzano as a whole. An overall masterplan will also be drafted to define the centers of the regenerated town and the extent, nature, and form it will have. In time, Rozzano will turn into a new town with its own identity, building on the area's past but able to satisfy the needs of the citizens of today and of the future. The aim is that Rozzano may finally become a welcoming community able to offer its inhabitants quality of life, close to Milan yet in harmonious communication with the surrounding countryside.

Biography | Biografia | Biografia

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Jonathan is an Associate Professor in the Rome Program at the University of Notre Dame School of Architecture. He runs his own practice in Italy and has also collaborated with 2014 Driehaus laureate Pier Carlo Bontempi since they met in Milan thirty years ago. His professional experience has spanned the genres of Modernism and Classicism in a range of fields from industrial design to restoration and urban planning. He is inspired by the timelessness of the rural vernacular and the elegant equilibrium of architectural language of the past. His work is the result of an eclectic education informed by his varied experience and a comprehension of local reality through on-site and archival investigation.