

# Reversed limes: Palermo's Ringroad

## Cataloguing the urban potential of neglected liminary spaces

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### INTRODUCTION

Since the second half of the 20th century, the theme of liminal or in-between spaces has attracted the recurring interest of many researches in architecture, deriving it from the field of anthropology (van Gennepe, 2009).

In contemporary European cities, many urban forms are defined by dualisms such as centre-periphery, open-enclosed and public-private. In this binary logic, liminal spaces have been realised mainly through the design of the great infrastructures of the last century. They usually have a linear shape and are connected or placed along the urban edges of the great highways. They manifest the proliferation of a scalar complexity (Amin, 2002), which is dynamic in nature, and host transitional practices with innovative repercussions in spatio-temporal terms, which make these boundary spaces willing to transformations.

The image of Solà-Morales' *Terrains Vagues* (2009) -urban terrains with borders to be defined- together with the idea of the *Third Landscape* (Clément, 2004) -in which the architecture of marginal spaces shows the capacity to include natural diversity- identify the potential for spatial regeneration and physical and social re-connection in these places. The liminal space is thus understood as a place in the making of design action, where a new urban, cultural and social meaning can be defined (van Gennepe, 2009).

The hypothesis that we assume is that re-cycling heavy urban infrastructures can define a tool for the regeneration of contemporary cities, identifying their spaces as liminal urban places<sup>1</sup>.

The catalogue is related to the Ringroad which surrounds the city of Palermo (Italy, 600,000 inhabitants), and recognises the potential of the liminal empty areas along the infrastructure as new public spaces. These areas are large, all public and municipally owned, and suggest the layout of a real linear city<sup>2</sup> where to find the limens (door, entrance, passage) through the limes (border, barrier).

Along the Ringroad, the in-between spaces show their potential by imagining new transformative possibilities between human practices and the urban forms (Jacobs, 1961; Lynch, 1964; Gehl, 1971). Palermo's Ringroad, due to the co-presence and intermingling of uses, forms and ownerships, provides an opportunity to rethink the city starting from the unexpressed potential of liminal urban spaces.

### BACKGROUND OF URBAN SPACE

The realization of major infrastructure works in Italy in the 1970s also involved the city of Palermo, the regional capital of Sicily, through the design of a major urban vehicular artery whose construction lasted about twenty years. Palermo's ring road, the city's last major public work, was built in sections, and crosses the city from north-west to south-east,

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<sup>1</sup> We refer here to some international researches on the theme. See: Tesoriere, Z., 2014; 2018.

<sup>2</sup> The theorisation in 1882 of the *Linear city* by Arturo Soria y Mata defined a design interest that spanned the 20th century through projects such as *Roadtown* (Edgard Chambless, 1910), *Project for Magnitogorsk* (Ivan Leonidov, Brigata OSA, 1930), *Plan Obus* (Le Corbusier, 1931), *Kollektivplan* (Hans Scharoun, Berlino, 1946), *Tokyo Bay* (Kenzo Tange, Tokyo, 1960), *Agricultural city* (Kisho Kurokawa, 1960), *Paris sous la Seine* (Paul Maymont, Paris, 1962), *Continuous city for 1.000.000 human beings -from New York to San Francisco-* (Alan Boutwell e Mike Mitchell, 1969). The horizontal character maintains a crucial role, especially between 1969 and 1970 with the project by the radical italian architects Superstudio: *Movimento continuo*. With this projects they introduced the complexity of the in-between as a space for design transformation.

indifferent to the existing urban fabric. By cutting through the city along a line that follows the orographic course of the land, the ring road defines a physical limit for the city, beyond which the city has continued to expand and transform.

The long urban path of the Ringroad<sup>3</sup>, due to the complexity of the subjects involved and the difficult relationships it suggests between the city and the infrastructure, constitutes the backbone of a linear city *within* the city. The Ringroad, at the junction with the Oreto river valley, defines the updating of the relationship between the founding axes of the urban layout, the *cardo* and *decumanus* of the city within the city (Tesoriere, 2018).

The city of the Ringroad hosts monuments<sup>4</sup> and large natural ecosystems<sup>5</sup> and is defined by a large presence of residential and commercial buildings, which articulate fundamental urban cycles and practices. The most interesting element of this great avenue is the large amount of vast open and free spaces, residual and liminal. These areas are public and municipally owned, with great potential for transformation, and are able not only to trigger new relations of proximity, but also to constitute a complex network of places that attract development and innovation at the urban and metropolitan scale.

From the identification of existing architectural matters, which allow to envision new design solutions, the catalogue will identify the areas where to invert the disvalues attributed to the city of the Ringroad through the liminal areas, through new multi-temporal and multi-functional urban centralities.



Fig. 1: The city of the Ringroad within the city of Palermo, ©In\_Fra Lab, DARCH Unipa, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> The Ringroad runs through the city of Palermo for 11.2 km in both directions, and it is possible to 6 km of free frontages.

<sup>4</sup> Among the Ringroad's monuments, we can recognize San Ciro Church (1736), Maredolce (XI secolo), Uscibene Castle (XII secolo), Villa Tasca (XV secolo), Vignicella (1560) and the former Asylum Pietro Pisani (1824). See: Tesoriere, Z. 2014; 2016.

<sup>5</sup> The Oreto riverbed constitutes the *decumanus* of the city of the Ringroad, extending from the mountains that enclose the area of the city, to the sea.

## LIST OF URBAN LIMINAL SPACES IN PALERMO: a Catalogue of potentialities

The areas here shown represent a selection of a broader group of liminal, empty, and public spaces which can be found along Palermo's Ringroad.

### 1. Liminal area along Lazio junction

The area is 3 ha wide and has an elongated shape along the eastern side of the Lazio junction, with a free frontage along the Ringroad of 315 m.

It is a connection area between the Ringroad and the residential tissue, mainly characterised by tall buildings. The area is entirely asphalted and fenced along the edges, lacking spaces and relational elements such as pavements and parking places. Small neighbourhood services can be found in the area.

The area is in continuity with the adjacent turnaround junction, where a rich variety of greenery is planted. The transformation of the area, together with these vegetable areas would allow for the design of a parkway.



Fig. 2: Liminal area along Lazio junction



Fig. 3: Inner edge of Lazio area



Fig. 4: Outer edge of Lazio area

## 2. Giotto parking

The area is 3.6 ha wide and has an irregular shape and a free front along the ring road of approximately 190 m. The main frontage is covered by a tree line, which runs partially also along the perimeter. The area is entirely paved and fenced along the main edge and is mainly used for car parking and bus terminals, although it lacks benches, shelters and other basic street furniture.

During the week it is used for proximity commercial activities and sometimes for temporary markets and fair activities.

The area is in continuity with the one urban park along the ring road, Uditore Park. The transformation of the area and the union of the two spaces would allow the realisation of a fragment of a parkway.



Fig. 4: Giotto parking area and Uditore Park along the Ringroad



Fig. 5: Giotto parking during the weekly market



Fig. 6: Giotto area used as a parking

### 3. Perpignano parking

The area is 5.5 ha wide and is L-shaped, with approximately 150 m of open frontage along the Ringroad. It is located in a section of the Ringroad served by the tram line, a bus stop and a pedestrian crossing overpass. The area is almost entirely paved -except for a fallow area in the middle- and entirely fenced around the perimeter by walls, bars and gates.

It is mainly used as a car park and bus terminal, although it lacks benches, shelters and other usual street furniture. During the week it is used for proximity commercial activities and rarely for temporary markets and fair activities. The area is surrounded by schools and its transformation would allow for a new type of public space, with flexible service buildings.



Fig. 7: Perpignano area along the Ringroad



Fig. 8: Perpignano area used as a parking



Fig. 9: Perpignano area during the weekly market

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