Invisible projects: imagined nearness as a tool to explore long-term transitions of landscape/heritage. The case of the river Tiber in Rome

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Abstract: How to deal with landscapes (and heritage) whose transformation has only been imagined by built environment disciplines for more than a century? How can long-term transitions of landscapes/heritage be explored to better understand a territory? This paper focuses on invisible projects: imagined transformations that have been developed for the Tiber riverbanks, in the historic centre of the city of Rome. The "massive change" determined by the construction of the riverbanks, at the end of the Nineteenth century, is here taken as a starting point for a process of long-term transition for the landscape/heritage of the Tiber, in its relationship with Rome historic centre. Such a change has physically modified the perception of the river in the city, with the construction of two embankment walls along the river. Because of this change, planners and designers have had difficulties in rethinking a role for the Tiber riverbanks. This can be linked to a lack of effective analytical tools to address the (sometimes invisible) existing dynamics that occur in and towards the area. The concept of nearness will be introduced to investigate a number of narratives, representations and collective memories partaking on the construction of positions/points of view of who practices a place.

Introduction

This paper aims to discuss possible ways to explore long-term transition of landscape/heritage in order to better understand transformation processes that are still continuing nowadays. This will be questioned through a case study whose long-term transition includes numerous transformation that have only been imagined by built environment disciplines for more than a century. I will focus on invisible projects: imagined transformations developed for the Tiber embankments, in the historical centre of the city of Rome.

The construction of the embankments of the river Tiber, in its section crossing the historical centre of the city of Rome, might seem to have determined an arrest in designing further transformations for it. Beginning from the early 1900's the river started its life across the city about 10 metres below the new urban level, leaving a physical gap with the rest of the city. The size of this transformation, that many have pointed as a terrible mistake for a synergetic development of the city with its river (D'Onofrio, 1970, Ravaglioli, 1982), seemed to have ended a possible further development, or at least a feasible further transformation.

Nevertheless, ideas, desires and aspirations (most of which impossible to put into practice) were not prevented from being produced, leading to a body of information regarding how such projects faced material and immaterial[1] obstacles to an actual transformation of the river embankments. This paper aims to discuss in which sense looking at projects apparently invisible, since never actually put into practice, can be of interest for built environment studies. The reasons for this are not to be found uniquely among analytical purposes: such a study can also lead to better understand transformation processes that are being carried on nowadays and possibly future processes too.

I will try to focus on these imagined transformations inquiring how material and immaterial dimensions have been integrated into these projects for the river embankments. In particular, I will introduce the concept of 'nearness' to investigate a number of narratives, representations and collective memories partaking on the construction of positions/points of view of who practices a place. This concept will be used as a tool to gather knowledge on how elements like representations and collective memories have been employed in an integrated way with more physical, visible aspects of a same place through time, as well as looking at how this integration has changed through time. Beginning from transformation proposals for the river elaborated between the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the 1900's, I will then look at some proposals from the 1960's and 1980's. I will then draw some conclusions on the concept of nearness for future uses.

A "massive change"

The current appearance of the riverfront running through Rome historical city centre was shaped, in its main features[2] following an exceptional flood occurred in December 1870, only a few months after the city was declared part of the Kingdom of Italy and subsequently capital city of Italy (Pasquali, Rossi, 1987). The first official discussions regarding urban transformations of the new-born capital happened to be about the future of the river in the city, so to respond to the effect of the recent flood. A specific commission was set to examine possible solutions to the river periodically flooding the city (ibid.). The commission focused on two directions of transformation: on one hand the construction of embankment walls high enough to prevent the river to flood, on the other hand options of deviations of the riverbed outside the city. This second option was eventually discarded by the commission, but it nonetheless produced several proposals, among which an idea fostered by Giuseppe Garibaldi, one of the main figures of the Italian unification. Starting from 1872, Garibaldi began to take an interest in the possible future structure of the Tiber, studying, unlike previous projects, a territorial scale solution that would have implied the reclamation of an extended area surrounding the city (Agro Romano). This project focused on the complete deviation of the Tiber and Aniene (its main tributary in the urban area) through a canal that would have crossed the areas east of Rome so to enter the Tiber again south of its urban area, as shown in figure 1. The urban stretch of the river would have been abandoned, with the intent to allow a small amount of water to flow through a complex hydraulic machines system (Pasquali, Rossi, 1987). This proposal imagined a parallel industrial development in the southern part of the city (ibid.) where it will be realized part of the few industrial interventions of the city.

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[1] The terms material and immaterial are here understood according to a common sense meaning, for which material would be related to objects, constructions, buildings and, in short, what is tangible, while immaterial would be related to the history, memory, culture and social relations that meet in a particular place.
[2] Some elements of the current layout will be added later, like a riverside walk on both sides of the rive in the 1950's (Insolera, 2011).
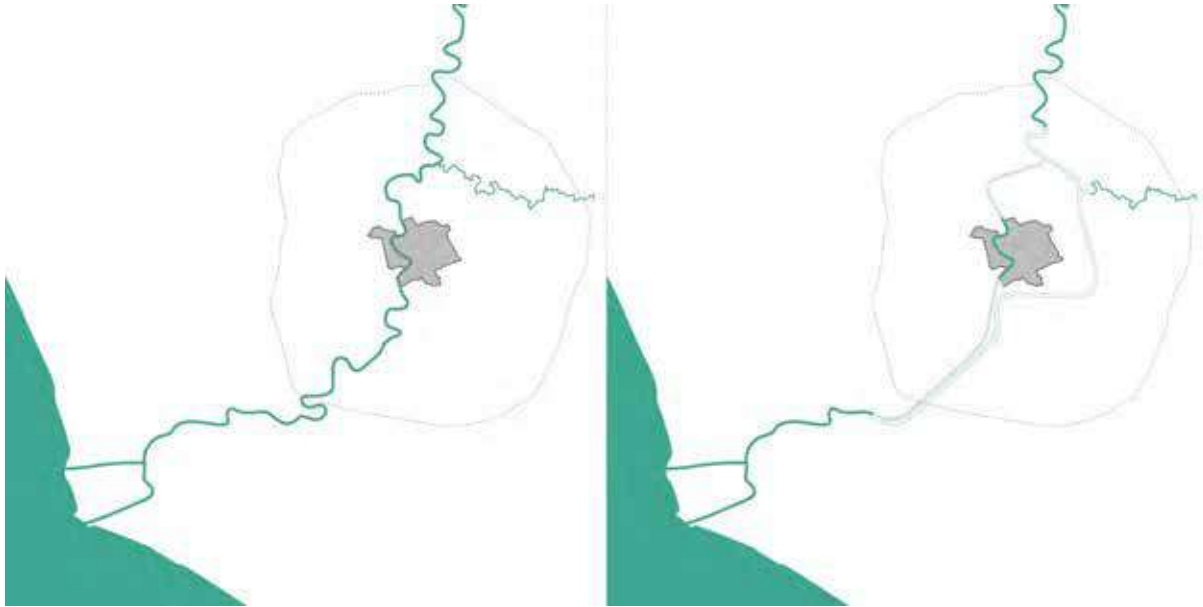
Figure 1. The course of the river as it was preserved (on the left) and the deviations of course of the river as they were imagined by one of Garibaldi's proposals (on the right). Drawing by the author

On that occasion, the construction of the embankment walls was preferred to the development of an industrial future, choosing to focus uniquely on the protection of the city from the river floods.

The approved project included, among others, the following points:

- the construction of 10 meters high walls along the banks;

- the definition of a constant width of the riverbed, fixed at 100 meters;

- the realization of two *lungotevere*, embankment streets at the new urban level (10 meters above the river);

- the construction of two collectors below the *lungotevere* that would have ensured the separation of the inland waters from those of the River (Ravaglioli, 1982).

Despite this, not even twenty years after this decision, a new scenario seemed to reopen for a possible industrial development. In fact, a new river port was planned, less than a kilometre northern the port of Ripetta, now covered by the construction of the embankment walls. This port already present in the Italian Geographic institute map of Roma of 1891 (Segarra Lagunes, 2004), was meant to be a part of a new industrial development, given the presence of a gasometer along the river and industrial settlements like a foundry and a tannery. This development was only for a short period part of the plans of the city: a few years later, the new urban regulations (1909) would have determined a residential end use for that area, leading to the demolition/dismissions of the industrial settlement to be replaced by a new neighbourhood (Flaminio) (ibid.). The river port nonetheless still remains, having though lost its purposes.

The physicality of the embankment walls did not stop, even during the XX century, the production of new urban imaginaries for alternative solutions. Between the 1960's and 1980's several projects were developed to offer

alternative visions to the material "gap" produced by the embankments[3]. Among others, two proposals (one by Paolo Portoghesi and Pierluigi Eroli and the other by Leonardo Benevolo) developed a plan addressing this issue, leading to extremely different conclusions.

The project by Portoghesi and Eroli is part of a collection of projects elaborated in individual and collective ways during their careers (Eroli and Portoghesi 1984). This collection produced through the years is meant to create a dialogue between the actual form of the city and "a second city. Conceived by the same architects of the first, made by their ideas, tensions, secret passions accumulated over time". The purpose of this dialogue would be to "reduce the distance between these two cities" to "bring the world of aspirations closer to that of reality" (ibid.: 7, my translation). This collection aims to formulate a proposal to imagine a transformation strategy for the city of Rome. This strategy finds one of its main principles in the development of the Tiber into an "equipped" urban axis (figure 2). The banks of the river are imagined in most of the cases without the walls built in the Nineteenth Century so to give space to the "reconstruction" (ibid.) of buildings (for both residential and service/commercial use) along the banks, that are removed in order to proceed with the embankments. Removing the embankments was also meant to allow the resurface of parts of the city that were covered by the embankments, like the old river port of Ripetta, which in this project is reconstructed as it used to be.

Figure 2. The strategy along the river according to Eroli and Portoghesi (1984).

In 1977, Leonardo Benevolo proposed, within the book "Roma oggi", a strategy of intervention for the historical centre of Rome, containing a specific strategy for the river. This consisted in the elaboration of a linear park that would have replaced the entire length of the embankments walls (figure 3). Such operation would have brought back on the surface not only the old river port of Ripetta, but also traces of the ancient Roman roads, now

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[3] For more design proposals addressing the river embankments see Muratore, 1983 and Purini et al, 1987.

hidden. The author describes this proposal as a "liberation" (Benevolo 1977) of the riverbanks, aiming to connect the city level with the river level through a long park for leisure activities.
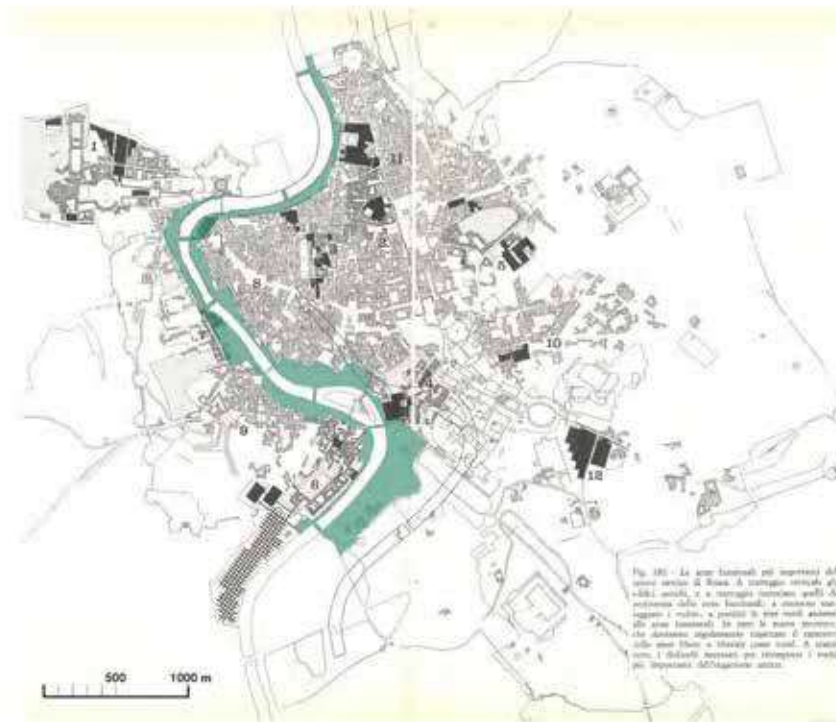

Figure 3. The strategy along the river according to Benevolo (1977).

Even though always trying to imagine alternative functions and roles for the river in the historical city, proposals have always struggled to balance the definition of new uses for the river with its historical and memorial value, leading to a reinforcement of the latter in the ways the future of the river has been thought. How can we better understand the relations underneath these proposals so to gain useful information for nowadays processes towards an actual (and not only imagined) transformation of the river? In the following section, a possible methodological tools will be discussed so to question what types of relations can be found between who have practiced the riverbanks in different ways (beginning from planners/designers who have tried during the last century to imagine a future transformation of the banks) and the place itself. The concept of nearness will be introduced to investigate a number of narratives, representations and collective memories partaking on the construction of positions/points of view of who practices a place.

Nearness

How are we "near" things or places? How the design proposals introduced in the previous section made emerge a relation with a place (the riverfront). Such relations cannot be limited to physical ones: the imagined solutions necessarily dealt, for instance, with historical and memorial issues. Through the idea of nearness, physical, material instances of the design proposals will be put in relation with immaterial, "invisible" aspects nevertheless present in those proposals. The concept of nearness will be here discussed through the work of Buchli (2010, 2013) on propinquity, Hall (1966) on proxemics and Low (2011, 2014, 2017) on embodiment and Altman and Low (1992) on place attachment.

The word nearness in used by Buchli (2010, 2013) to explain the ways a person or a group can feel attached to a place or thing. To explore this, he theorises the concept of propinquity (Buchli, 2010, 2013). This concerns not only a spatially referred nearness but a wider range of relationships with a specific place. Propinquity can be linked to nearness of personal relationships, of association, affinity, time, but it can also be related to narratives, stories (ibid.).

To understand the concept of nearness, it is useful to look at Edward T. Hall's (1966) concept of proxemics. This highlights the spatial distances people use according to different social relations. Analysing the distance receptors of our senses, being eyes, ears and nose (Hall, 1966, also quoted in Gehl 2011), Hall theorized four types of interpersonal distance: intimate (between 0 and 45 centimetres: the distance of personal feelings), personal (0,45 to 1,30 metres: the distance we use with close friends and family), social (1,30 to 3,75 metres: the distance we use for conversations with friends, colleagues, people we meet on the street) and public distance (over 3,75 metres: the distance for formal contexts) (Hall, 1966).

The concepts of embodiment, and embodied space[4], (Low, 2011, 2014, 2017) and place attachment (Altman and Low, 1992) are also useful concepts to understand nearness. Embodiment, (ibid.) expresses "the location where human experience and consciousness take on material and spatial form" (Low, 2011: 467). The focus is centred on the actor, rather than on space: the actor's feeling, past experiences and thoughts are a means to give meaning to a place (ibid.). Place attachment (Altman and Low, 1992) underlines how place incorporates both individual and collective experiences and memories (ibid.). Place is not necessarily considered the final aim of attachment, but rather a mean that incorporates our experiences, with no distinction between the individual and the group (ibid.).

The word nearness has been chosen for its ambivalent stance between the physicality of place and its "intangibility", allowing to decline it as the set of knowledge, competences and resources on which the position of those who practice a place with respect of the same is constructed. It is therefore a feeling of appropriation and at the same time a proxemic of the individual towards a place. One's nearness to a place, therefore one's own position, also determines one's own point of view and, consequently, interpretation of a place, also generating the possibilities of use which have been imagined for it. This concept will be now put to the test on the case study of the river, as introduce in the previous section.

Invisible projects

In this section, the concept of nearness will be discussed through the analysis of two design proposals for the river, one by Eroli and Portoghesi (1984) and one by Benevolo (1977) previously introduced. In both cases, the focus will be drawn on the specific proposals for the area surrounding the Ripetta river port, covered by the embankment walls. The analysis will underline the main elements of the proposals in relations to the uses that these imagined transformations would have brought and some of the immaterial qualities that have fostered those material changes. This will help to understand a network of relations, "nearness", some tighter than others, representing the positions one could have, according to the proposals, towards material and immaterial qualities of the place.

Eroli and Portoghesi's proposal focuses on five main elements: the first is the Tiber river; the second is obviously the port of Ripetta, which is rebuilt since its archaeology; the third element that we can identify are the boats, which in the intentions of the designer should cross the river making base on the renewed port; the fourth element is the construction of dwellings and services conceived by the authors to replace the current

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[4] Low explains that "the body (bodies), conceptualized as embodied space(s), incorporates metaphors, ideology, and language, as well as behaviours, habits, skills, and spatial orientation derived from global discourses and faraway places [...] and yet is grounded at any one moment in an urban location" (Low, 2011: 464).

embankment walls; the fifth element is finally constituted by the same embankment walls, which are partially kept to constitute the boundary and the visual horizon of the area drawn in the view (figure 4).

Figure 4. The reconstruction of the Ripetta river port (Eroli and Portoghesi, 1984).

Through a nostalgic reconstruction of the river port of Ripetta this element is reconnected to the hypothesis of commercial and leisure uses, as the presence of boats also. The dwellings along the river have the clear purpose to be inhabited and to provide services to the surrounding areas. The walls on the other side, seems to remain the visual horizon of this scene, without however seeming connected by any kind of use to the river or other spatial elements present. Looking at the uses related to each of these spatial elements, we can then try to imagine what immaterial qualities, according to the proposals, should have been connected or incorporated to the various elements.

In the description of the whole "renovatio urbis" operation (Eroli and Portoghesi, 1984), the two authors make a broad and clear reference to memorial issues, to the (re)foundational meaning of the place constituted by the restoration of a precise ancient monument or archaeological finding, that is the port of Ripetta. The latter therefore seems clearly to be distinguished by the ability to evoke an evenemential history, that is the city's past, but also to evoke collective memories of a past that, even at the time of the proposal, was not so recent but still deeply present in narratives of the relationship between the Tiber and the city. These capacities to evoke the history and memory of the place held by the port are shared with the river, which is an integral part of this narrative. To some extent, also the walls play a role in this process, playing, according to the authors, the "negative" role of having erased testimonies of how life along the river used to be (ibid.).

Collective memory of citizens is also embodied in these elements in different ways: if the river and the walls share the same memorials experiences and a common narrative, the port is only tangentially linked to them, as a "spectre" (de Certeau, 2001) of something that was no longer there and which must be recalled nostalgically.

The port and the boats are clearly connected by the idea of a possible exchange, mainly in a commercial sense but also in a broader sense of movement, while an idea of everyday life seems to unite the buildings on the river with the boats , which would share a same routinary "landscape" of use, even though they would not necessarily be connected otherwise. At this point, it is possible to understand the positions, both physical and ideal, that the individual could occupy within this so designed place, observing then that degrees of nearness the place would have offered him/her, who would then have to re-elaborate them based on his/her personal experience. The project seems almost divided into two blocks, with history, memory and nostalgic practices to have a preeminent part and struggling to integrate the physicality of buildings that are only a form landscape, having little effect on everyday experiences.

As the second proposal is concerned, the key element underlined by Benevolo (1977) is the idea of a linear park on both sides of the river, to replace the embankment walls. The main elements of this project are: first of all, the spatial element constituted by the park; secondly, the embankment walls themselves, paradoxically present in this proposal through their absence; an additional element can be identified in the port of Ripetta, which is also restored in this intervention; finally, the traces of ancient paths, also made reemerged as the river port.

The relationship with the walls becomes clearly non-existent given the disappearance of the latter in favor of the birth of the linear park, with which instead comes to constitute a connection through uses related to leisure. The same type of use related to free time and a nostalgic re-enactment connects the river with the ancient paths and with the port. The immaterial qualities to which these elements seem to be related are primarily aspects evoked by leisure: ideas of everyday life but also of affectivity towards a long river park that seems conceived to create a special experience in the everyday lives of the Romans. If the port is once again evoking ideas of exchange, it is the history and collective memory of place to have a prominent role, through the reconstruction of streets and ancient monuments, but also through the disappearance of the embankment walls that remain part of a memorial narrative of the place (and with its disappearance it becomes part of its past).

The history of Rome is proven once again to be one of the strongest traits uniting most of the spatial element of the proposal, building a symbolic link between the river, the port and the reemerged ancient paths. Tangentially, also the embankment walls are part of this relation, entering to be a part of the past, even if a less ancient past and, in a certain sense, less (rhetorically) prestigious. As mentioned earlier, great importance is given to the construction of a park which builds a strong connection with the river in terms of naturality, as well as in terms of daily use and no longer in terms of exceptional use. The work on the historical qualities of the place tries to connect with an attempt to build a daily atmosphere of use, defining a nearness to the place that is based on the combination of daily experience and historical re-enactment.

Conclusion

After a closer look to these "invisible projects", it is interesting to point out how they are not only design proposals remained on paper, but they are also part of processes that through the concept of nearness can be unveiled. Nearness is then a tool not only to analyse the qualities of those never realised projects, but also to underline ongoing processes that architectural and urban design are not able to grasp, like "involuntary" design processes that have a long-term development.

In the case of the river Tiber, the concept of nearness can be useful to highlight a predominant point of view that have been adopted (in more or less voluntary ways) to look at the river, especially the part crossing the historical centre of the city, which sees it "only" as a monument, symbolically and socially important, but almost impossible to "dwell". In order to think of a future for the river, it will be necessary to find a compromise between its monumental state and the declared necessity to use it, to inhabit it and stay close to it. In this sense, the concept of nearness is not meant to be only a tool for retroactive analysis, but also a tool to be put at work in contemporary and future designs.

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