

Antonello Russo  
**Densify / Scale Down.**  
**The archipelago as a response**

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Abstract

The escalation of the health conditions concerning the recent emergency amplifies the problems already expressed by the evolution of the urban organism. The alternation between the appropriate need for confinement of the inhabitants in limited groups and the policies of social distancing aiming at stemming the spread of contagion of a virus that is as lethal as it is peculiar, proposes, in these current times, a general reflection on the composition of the *forma urbis* to refine settlement grammars that, in the face of the expansion and dispersion of the informal city of the twentieth century outlines, on the other hand, in the concentration and discontinuity of the built-up areas, in the identifiability of a finished figure of the settlements, in the control of the void as the primary space of agricultural production and sociability, the operational conditions to define the characters of a plausible urban dimension.

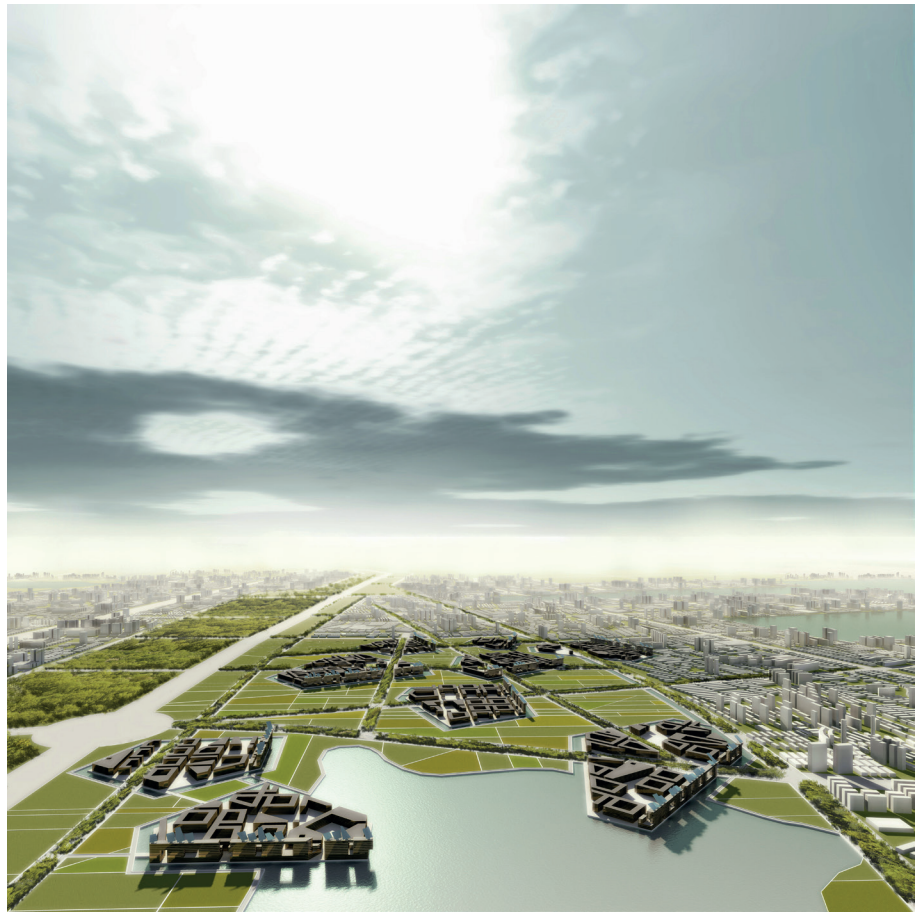
Keywords

City — Isle — Fabric — District — Home

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**The idea of a city.**

The idea of limitless and shapeless urban expansion has revealed to be, in the recent public health emergency, most starkly inadequate, and amplifying its already underlying state of crisis. The need to redress the employment of land, the urgent need to optimise resources, the need to limit the expansion of network services dispersed into capillary streams to reach individual scattered destinations, have today new connections with mandatory health and safety restrictions suspended between a propensity to confinement of urban dwellers in delimited areas on the one hand and on the other, appropriate measures of social distancing between individuals whose provenance is not known. The resulting idea of the city suddenly entrusts new life to marginal places provided they are widely associated with inter-modal links, be them material or intangible, purposeful to the exchange of ideas, goods and people. There follows a reflection on the regulations of the form of anthropized areas capable of powering a critical debate on the evolution urban dwelling. Beyond the idea of a *city by parts* perpetuated in the Modern, along with the additional resolutions of a *polycentric model* which assigned to the satellite cores functions dependent on the consolidated centre, the urban body currently aims to an *antihierarchical* idea of its extension, characterized, in outdoor areas, by the onset of *tensional* balance between the medium-sized cores with independent identities. Like the formal aggregations distinguished on the background of *Campus Martius* by Piranesi, the zenith interpretation of the surrounding areas reads the spontaneous composition of *clumps* seen as intermediate entities between concluded urbanity and fragments of the city. Attributable, in Italy, to the residential settlements characterizing the scope



**Fig. 1**

Laura Thermes with Paola Albanese, Fabrizio Ciappina, Alessandro De Luca, Francesco Messina, Antonello Russo, Gaetano Scarcella, project of the new city of Ling Gang near Tianjin, China. Consultation by invitation - Italian Architecture for the Chinese City (sponsored by the National Academy of San Luca for the Universal Expo, Shanghai 2010).

of the *city district* (which recognizes in the late twentieth century an important period of experimentation on the composition of finished parts of the urban system), such concentrations are put forward today as a prospective *waiting* for suitable completing, new additions of services, large and healthy demolition of every shapeless proliferation, as strategies aiming at the establishment of high-density yet more compact cores. In this context, reflecting on the *form* of the urban organism leads to honing a settlement grammar that, in the face of *expansion* and *dispersion* of the urban sprawl, conversely identifies in the *concentration* and *patchiness* of built-up areas, in the *definition of an exact limit* to settlements, in the *distance* between distinct areas, the operating conditions to define the characters of the peri-urban areas also involving, by the same token, the regenerative processes of large discontinued compartments placed inside the consolidated cores. Updating the studies on the *Horizontal City* of Irenio Dotallevi, Franco Marescotti, and Giuseppe Pagano, critical interpretation of the surveys on the *Expanding City* of Giuseppe Samonà, of the *City in the City* of Oswald Mathias Ungers, reworking the scope of the research on the *Urban Plates* of Salvatore Bisogni, the idea of the urban *archipelago* made up by distinct settlements outlines the making of a system from a dense and compact materiality as the operating point of dense relations between organized multi-scope matrices, each, in a spatial order that is varied, stratified and interconnected with the various constituent elements. A critical projection of the potential expressed in the definition of *urban sprawl* by Francesco Indovina, encapsulating and reminding the idea of *ground* as a supportive infrastructure that holds each settlement, already expressed in the Eighties by Bernardo Secchi, such representation defines a model featuring a prevalence of outdoor spaces useful in the materialization, on

farming land, of sudden *coagulation* of fabric determined by the completion of densification and *lumps/districts* existing to provide, at a *critical distance*, of settlement *islands* that can accommodate no more than twenty thousand permanent residents. Distinguishable as finite additions, the urban individuals amplify their presence by virtue of the definition of a *figure*, identifiable as a contrast to the web of the surrounding fields. Located in the vicinity of the infrastructure strips, which as navigable channels ply the agricultural soil, these thickenings define complementary relationships between adjacent *islands* in their arrangement of a settlement *archipelago* characterized by multiple landings. Suitable to interpret a virtuous relationship between city and nature, this model therefore outlines, in the *void*, in the negative *green* between settlements, in the distance between distinct agglomerations, not a residual range but, rather, essential to recognize the physical characters of the hosting nature and the civil value of the city as equal interlocutors of a high dialectic.



**Fig. 2**  
A zenith aerial view of Venice.  
Source: Google Earth

### The Island

At a distance the individual conglomerations materialize their image in the definition of a horizontal *skyline* balanced by vertical counterweights identifiable as *urban landmarks* which, like the towers and bell towers of historical cities, make up the territorial references on a large scale. Within the fabric, the need to maintain a prolific *tension* between the identity of *urban events* and the conformity of the *residential areas* outlines a virtuous conflict between the *permanence*, arranged by the iteration of a measure, and the evolution of a controlled *mutation*, distributed by large typological variations imprinted on the individual elements of the composition. Specialist buildings, services with territorial scope and places for collective work distinguish the accelerations of a metric in which the open space, in its progressive variations - public, semi-public, private - outlines the intervals in the built up areas and the measure of spatiality for the rites of collective appropriation with implications related to *urban proximity* and *neighbouring units*. Mindful of the porous consistency of Louis Sauer's American neighbourhoods of the second half of the Twentieth century, the idea of *scaling down* is arranged as a post-composition of a thick *density* for measuring *gaps* characterizing the polarities and spatial references of the basic layout. Instrumental in controlling an effective *aesthetics of variation*, the squares, the plazas, the courts and the quads, but also public parks, gardens, lay-bys, parking lots, the in-between places, arrange successively the nomenclatures of a type list of *exteriors* that can generate sudden expansions aimed at giving a new lease of life to the density of the fabric. Interpreter of urban discontinuity theorized in the experiences of OMA - in the project for the *Ville Nouvelle of Melun Sénart* around Paris in France and, more clearly, in the plant for *Chassé Terrain* in Breda in the Netherlands - it is the identity of the open space that drives the composition by resorting, however, to a close measurement of its form to define an identity appropriation alternative to the decontextualizing intentions of the *generic city* and the informal dimension of contemporary *junkspace*. As in 18th-century Rome sketched in Nolli's plant, the connection between alveolar *voids* has in the pedestrian crossing, in the informal encounter, in the presence of art, the customs of a more human and civil dimension of urban living. In this framework, analyzing, imagining, composing the architecture of the city from the consistency of the *void* reverberates the need for a more evident intelligibility of the forms of the most representative



**Fig. 3**

Antonello Russo. The city by Islands Educational experiments in the Roman countryside. G.C.Gigliotti's undergraduate dissertation, Mediterranean University of Reggio Calabria, AY 2018-19.

buildings which, as massive and heavy *cornerstones*, propose themselves as sudden material solidifications that anchor to the ground the idea of a *weak monumentality* of the composition arranged, in the contemporary, as new exegeges of the tectonic dimension of the artefact.

### The home

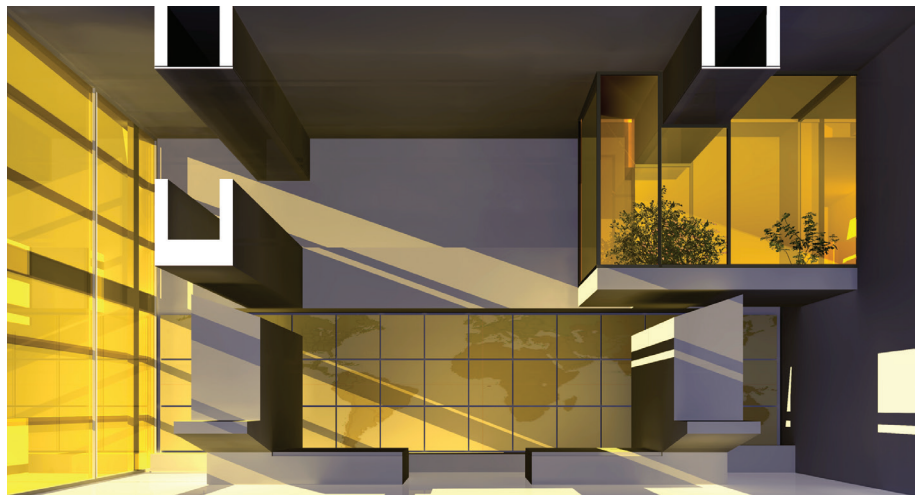
In this context, the domestic space acquires new importance, recording in the measure and variations of the housing core the *elementary primary unit* of the fabric. Primary spot for shared conviviality, the urban residential interior records the instances of every *performative* action of the individual, contrasted by the growing demand for *indoorness* capable of reserving the character of ultimate *haven* of living to the home. As in the Miesian studies of the 1930s, in this ambiguity, the demand for a progressive dilation of the spatiality of the domestic interior corroborated by the provision of open spaces – lodges, terraces, gardens – confluenced in a progressive weakening of the threshold of passage between interior and exterior space of the residence. Silent and assertive, suspended between exhibition and introversion, between the *density* of its functions and the *scaling down* arranged by the presence, inside, of large open *voids* pointing to the sky, the space of the house outlines in the *patio* its *type* of reference.

### Provisional conclusions

With the conviction that only by adhering to a broad and general theory about the city it is possible to proceed to manipulate even the smallest of its parts, the proposition of an idea of the *shape* of the urban organism identifies in alternating *density* and *rarefaction* as the primary actions of an articulated syntax aimed at interpreting a scalar sequence that combines the characters of the territory and the landscape, involving the urban dweller down to the spatiality of their household interior. The result is an attitude to a specific attention to what is already available, for marginal areas, for the aggregations already present at district level, for smaller villages, as active participants of a dialectic operating between urban aggregations and natural spaces such to determine through *void* the information of a real, positive, appropriation.

**Fig. 4**

Antonello Russo with Moduloquattro Architects. Study of a housing unit for one person in Layers-Vema, Italian Pavilion X, Venice Biennale 2006.



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Antonello Russo (Messina 1972), gained an honours degree in Architecture under the supervision of Laura Thermes in 1999, and has been carrying out continuous educational and university research activities since 2000. He has authored volumes, essays, and contributions published in texts and journals including *Elementare e Complesso* (Lettera Ventidue, Siracusa 2020), *Vuoto e Progetto* (Lettera Ventidue, Siracusa 2018), *Dall'immagine all'etica. Riflessioni sull'abitare urbano* (Gangemi, Rome 2012), *Sequenze didattiche* (Iiriti, Reggio Calabria 2012). His drawings and projects have been exhibited at the Parma Architecture Festival, the Venice Biennale, the Academy of San Luca, The M.A.C.RO. Museum of Rome, and the Shanghai World Expo. Part of his design activity is published in the monograph *Moduloquattro-Spazio Misura Structure* (EUno Edizioni, Enna 2012, author Maurizio Oddo)