

Cristina Pallini
Rural modern. Themes and contexts

Abstract

Modernity is almost always associated with cities, where urban planning and architecture have contributed to rationalizing space. However, the rural-backwardness binomial cannot be taken for granted: throughout the 20th century, rural modernization overturned the physical and settlement geography of many regions in different geopolitical realities. The role of architectural design in these processes must be examined on a case-by-case basis. The contributions of this issue embrace some of the most significant ones: from the management of refugee emergency in Greece in the 1920s, to the better-known *ruralisation* of Fascist Italy. In Portugal, as in Italy, rural architecture offered a contextual counterpoint to the dictates of the Modern Movement. In the countries of the Soviet Bloc, collectivization brought with it the *urbanization of the countryside*: prefabricated condominiums with standardized collective buildings, at least until the *thaw* of 1956. Experimentation resumed, in the 1970s and 1980s, with the large administrative centers of collective farms, trying to give expression to diverse identity demands.

Keywords

Rural modernisation — Inner colonisation — Rural settlements

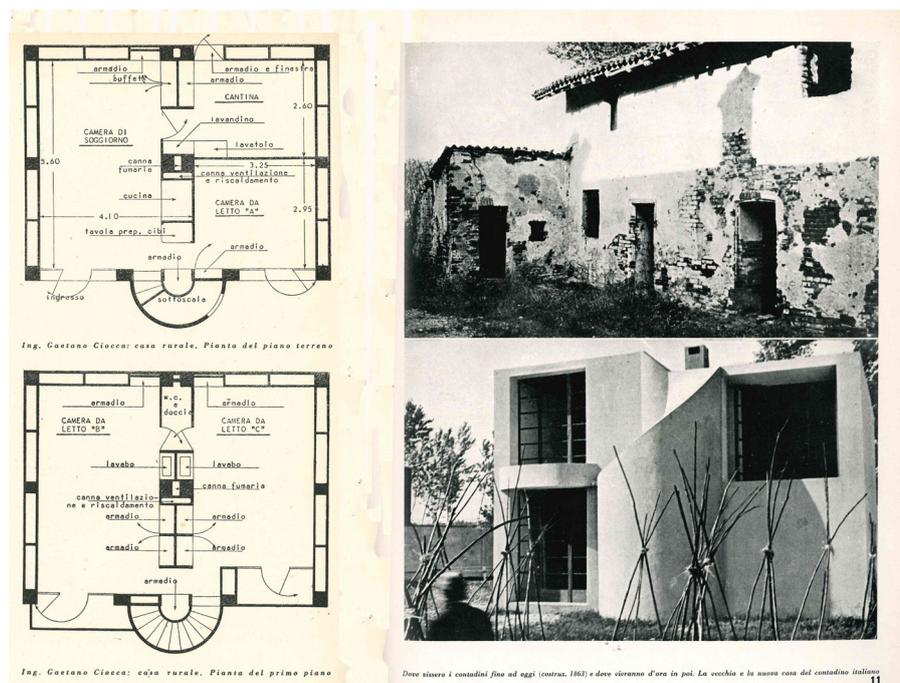
If, as Eric Swyngedouw argues (1999), modernity was basically a geographical project, one wonders to what extent rural modernisation is necessarily also characterised by a technical landscape, a direct outcome of the synergy between settlement strategies, political will, scientific knowledge, and technological innovations. A confirmation seems to come from rural modernisation schemes framed into nation-building processes, a common testing ground for experts from various disciplines: agronomists, geographers and hydraulic engineers, physicians and sociologists, architects and town planners, artists, and landscape architects.

According to Le Corbusier, the *era of roads* was to favour a return to the land, especially where new villages would foster better living conditions for farmers (Le Corbusier 1934a, 25; 1934b). His *village radieuse* was to provide scattered farms with basic services, aggregated in line across the main road to rationalise handling and storage of agricultural products (Simone 2018). In the same years, Giuseppe Pagano was extolling the various traditions of rural Italy as an immense «dictionary of man's constructive logic» shorn of celebratory intentions. Addressing a world in which necessity prevailed, Italians would finally distance themselves «from a time chronologically defined by stylistic attributes» and find their own path towards modern architecture (Pagano 1935). This *dictionary* finally materialised at the 6th Milan Triennale in the section on rural architecture (Pagano and Daniel 1936).

In the now numerous studies on the export of Western models to other contexts, adjectives such as *other*, *hybrid* or *border* modernism often recur. According to Maiken Umbach and Bernd Hüppauf (2005), by looking beyond the cornerstones of European architectural rationalism, some

Fig. 1

Gaetano Ciocca, rural house in prefabricated elements built near Garlasco (source: Quadrante 16, June 1935, pp. 10-11).

**Fig. 2**

Gaetano Ciocca, the central trough of the model pigsty at Cascina Capannelle, 1938 (source: Schnapp 2004, p. 98).

concrete experiences of many quality architects have come to the fore, showing the continuity of vernacular traditions. This enduring presence is even more relevant in processes of inner colonisation (Sabatino 2010; Chyutin and Chyutin 2016; Dremaité 2017; Lejeune 2021; Sezer 2022). In his monograph on the villages of Franco's Spain, Jean-François Lejeune quotes Mies van der Rohe about the historical development of architecture. In a 1926 lecture, Mies outlined two fundamental areas of intervention: buildings animated by spiritual atmospheres and those integrated into the landscape and more responsive to concrete needs (Lejeune 2021, p. 15). Taken as a whole, the settlements entrenched in rural modernisation schemes raise a series of questions. Firstly, one wonders what their novel features really were, and whether the underpinning models of social organisation found full architectural expression. A common feature laid undoubtedly in the relationship between the rationalising order introduced by town planning (also for a better circulation) and the position of the main public buildings. In the Italian case, they overlooked public spaces conceived to enhance new behaviours patterns, on political rallies as well as in everyday life (Falasca Zamponi 2003). *A modern day* (Lupano and Vaccari 2009, p. 10) was in fact marked by working in the fields, but also by going to the post office, to the Casa del Fascio and the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (Workers' Club).

The concrete needs of the rural world did trigger many inventions, such as Gaetano Ciocca's prefabricated rural house, model pigsty, and the concrete road (*betonvia*), between the farmsteads and centres of the Pavia countryside (Meriggi 2002, Schnapp 2004). [Fig. 1-2]

In many cases, as in the rural schools of the Roman countryside, the symbolic-iconological dimension resurfaced prominently. Built in the 1920s, these schools were equipped with a bell-supporting structure and decorated with ceramic bowls: both features made them look like miniature churches (Morpurgo 1921, 364; Bonfante, Lombardini, Margione, Monica 2019; Cantatore 2021). [Fig. 3-4]

In the villages for Italian settlers in Libya, vertical elements signalled the presence of a church, market, and fountain to those driving along the new

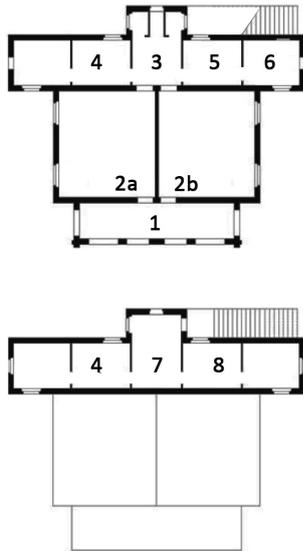


Fig. 3

The rural school at Casal delle Palme with teacher's quarters (1922). Ground and first floor plan (source: drawing by E. Margione). Legend: 1. Portico; 2a. Schoolroom; 2b. Kindergarten classroom; 3. Changing room and toilets; 4. Kitchen; 5. Pantry; 6. Administration; 7. Entrance hall; 8. Living room.

Fig. 4

The rural school at Casal delle Palme seen from the Appian Way (photo by C. Pallini, May 2022)



coastal road (Gresleri 2007). [Fig. 5-6] Equally emblematic of a return to the symbolic dimension is the sovkhos of Juknaičiai in Lithuania, with its gabled-roofed health centre and monastery-like retirement home. [Fig. 7] Despite the specificities of each individual case study, village design necessarily addressed new imagined communities (Anderson 1983). From this point of view, the identity traits of the new rural settlements were often entrusted to an orchestration of space capable of enhance the collective dimension. [Fig. 8] While in Italy buildings and public spaces emerged simultaneously as the manifesto of a functional and cultural programme, in Greece public space consisted of plots left vacant while waiting for funds to build a school and a church.

Le Corbusier's studies demonstrate once and for all that rural modernisation posed new themes of architecture. Many ventured into these themes: from academics with a solid theoretical profile to technocrats with no artistic culture, from local professionals to employees of large planning offices. In Maoist China, for example, simple technicians drew up the necessary plans to realise collectively discussed projects. In the face of this plurality, it may seem reductive to merely distinguish textbook solutions from authentically original works, without going into the merits of individual case studies.

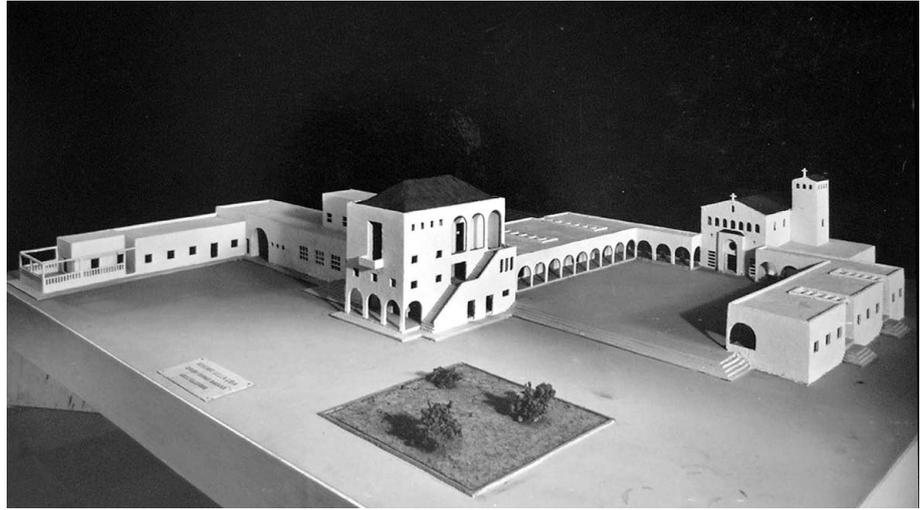
Contexts

For a better understanding of differences and similarities, the contributions in this issue are associated in relation to contexts, starting with Italy and the new settlements built in the Agro Pontino followed by two essays on Greece, selected as the 1933 CIAM venue while refugee settlement was still in progress. The article on Portugal dwells on the exploration of the rural hinterland by architects who, alongside geographers and anthropologists, followed the lines advocated by Giuseppe Pagano. The Albanian case straddles Italian events and collectivisation: in the Soviet Union of the 1920s, Lithuania and Latvia after the Second World War. The last two contributions expand the discussion to the United States and the People's Republic of China.

The international resonance of the Agro Pontino venture, ever since the outset, has given rise to a long tradition of studies by scholars from various

Fig. 5

Giovanni Pellegrini, model of the central core of Baracca village (today al-Farzugah) in Cyrenaica located along the coastal road about 50 km from Benghazi, 1938 (Archive of ISIAO, Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, Rome). This nucleus included the church, the Casa del Fascio, the town hall, the school, the post office and a pharmaceutical dispensary; it was to serve about 1,500 settlers from the farms scattered in the surrounding area producing wheat, grapes and olives.

**Fig. 6**

Giovanni Pellegrini, Casa del Fascio at Baracca, 1938 (photo by V. Capresi, 2009).

**Fig. 7**

Stanislovas Kalinka, plan of the heath centre at Juknaičiai (Lithuania), 1978. Legend: 1. Music room; 2. Disco; 3. Space for art exhibitions; 4. Rest rooms for visitors from other villages; 5. Winter garden; 6. Swimming pool. (source: Dreimatė 2017)

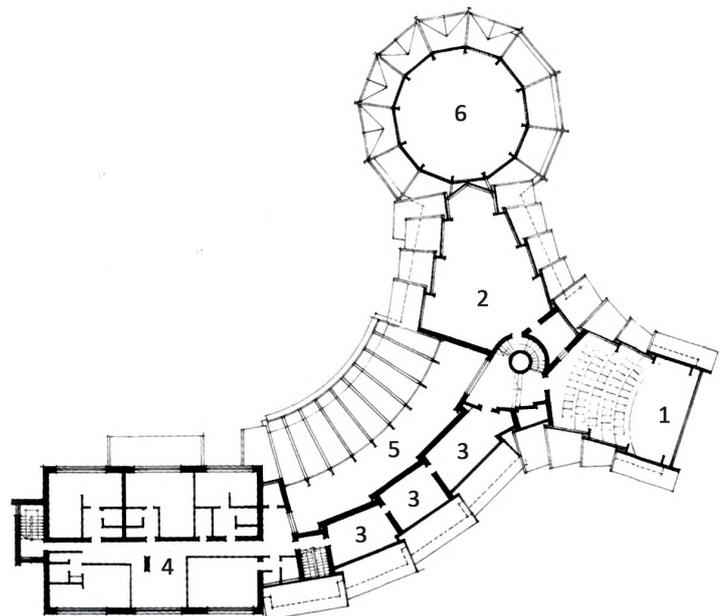




Fig. 8

Resting at the miradouro in the agricultural colony of Martim Rei, ca. 1944 (source: Guerreiro 2018).

disciplines (Mariani 1976, Nuti, Martinelli 1981, Ghirardo 1989, Besana, Carli, Devoti, Prisco 2002; Pellegrini 2005, Caprotti 2007, Pennacchi 2008). Francesca Bonfante and Luca Monica focus on planning problems posed by the construction of new settlements in the redeemed countryside, while framing the hierarchy between farm, village, and town within the corporate structure of the Fascist state, according to which all settlements were to be tiered by size and functions. In the 1950s, this approach gave way to a new relationship between town and countryside, with new architectural interpretations marking different points of balance between *rationalism* and the picturesque. Emanuela Margione goes into the new building types experimented in the new towns and villages of the 1930s. The Casa del Balilla, Casa del Fascio (House of the Fascist Party), Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro, and the new welfare institutions – such as the Casa della Madre e del Bambino or the Casa del Contadino – may all be considered *ante litteram* complex buildings. Aleksa Korolija deals with piezometric towers, technical artefacts standing on the edge of town and country, while giving monumental expression to the presence of water as a key modernising element: from that of the water table raised in the tank-towers, to that channelled from the marsh into the sea.

Vilma Hastaoglou-Martinidis and Cristina Pallini concentrate on the emergency measures implemented by the Greek government with the help of international institutions – such as the League of Nations – to deal with the arrival of refugees from Asia Minor. The difficult balance between the mass of destitute people, available resources, and limited time, paved the way for new prefabrication methods and standard solutions, also for village layouts. Athens hosted the 4th CIAeM at a critical time when the boundary between architecture and mere construction was blurring, and present problems were overshadowing any glory of the past. Luisa Ferro presents the Athenian scene of the early 1930s. The housing shortage, added to the difficult management of urban expansion, led Dimitris Pikionis to reassess the value of tradition and advocate the architectural quality of the new neighbourhoods.

The Pontine Plain and northern Greece may help us highlight some fundamental differences, such as the significance of internal colonisation – and of the regions concerned – in the nation-building process. Other differences concern the sequence of land transformation interventions, the number of settlers and new settlements in relation to the national overall population and, above all, the role of architecture and town planning in the process.

Helena Maia and Alexandra Cardoso take as their starting point the early-20th-century rediscovery of the Portuguese hinterland, a common experience for architects, agronomists, geographers, and anthropologists which laid the basis for the establishment of seven rural colonies and of the Junta de Colonização Interna within the Ministry of Agriculture. The time span between the late 1920s and the late 1950s was long enough to experiment with different alternatives concerning the settlements layout and the architectural characterisation of collective endowments. The farmhouse, however, remained a central theme, quite distinct as it was from the houses for technicians and administrators in residence.

The fifteen years between the first Italian landings (1914) and the military occupation of Albania in 1939 were dense with studies and projects: on the physical geography and resources of the country, its communication routes and main cities, the ethnic composition of the population. Several key institutions were established in the region of Vlora: the Agrarian Office (1916), the Agronomic Observatory, the Babizza Piccola experimental estate and the first Agrarian School (1927) (Gresleri 1993). In 1939, Albania had still a feudal economy and a population of peasants and labourers. Federica Pompejano traces the country's transition to the socialist model, based on the mechanisation of agriculture and the collectivisation of land. The attempt to eliminate the gap between town and country involved the adoption of new settlement models: the newly built socialist agricultural centres and cooperative settlements integrated existing villages with newly founded ones.

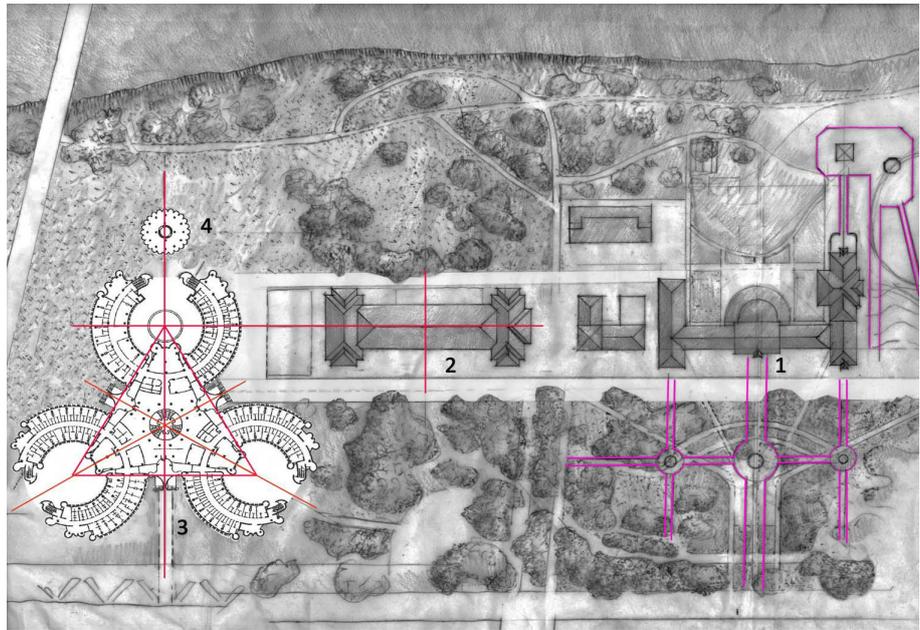
The three contributions on Eastern Bloc countries cover a time span from the 1920s to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Maurizio Meriggi discusses the dialectic between *old* and *new* (from the title of Sergei Ejzenštejn's film) in the transition between the New Economic Policy (1921-1928) and the First Five-Year Plan (1928-1932), arguing that, in the early years of rural collectivisation, collective buildings and housing met the canons of constructivist architecture.

Marija Drėmaitė discusses Soviet Lithuania (1940-1990) by relating spatial planning to new architectural problems. While the design of farmers' residences could rely on a series of precedents, the overall configuration of collective farms and their provision of services posed new problems. Over time, the presence of the administrative centre became increasingly important and functionally complex, with solutions which revived forms and styles of local architectural traditions in the wake of post-modernism. In Latvia, too, administrative centres went beyond standardisation. Yuliia Batkova and Laine Nameda Lazda examine the case of Nakotne, a special one both for the articulation of the overall layout, functional density and architectural configuration of the sports and cultural centre.

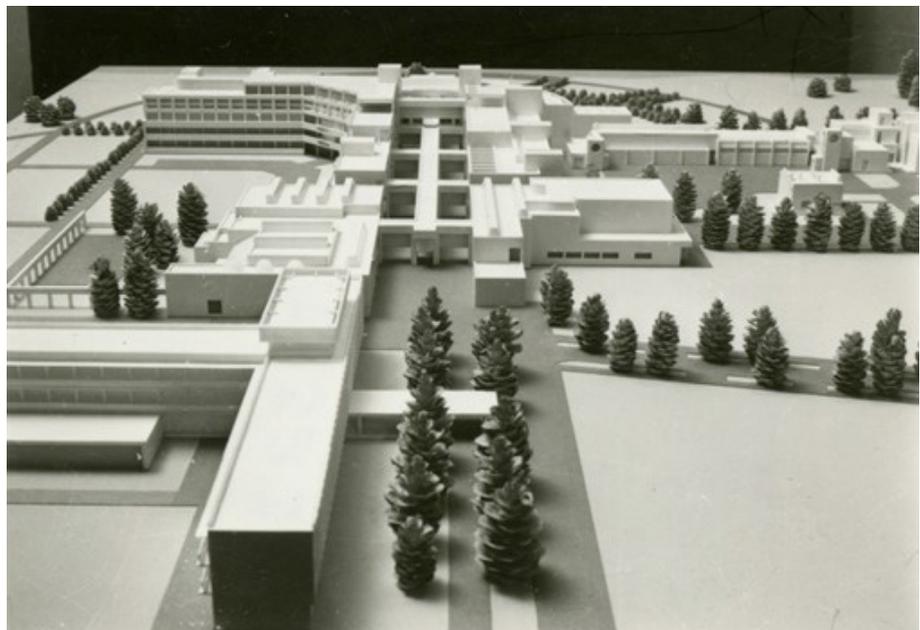
Addressing new problems of architecture related to rural collectivisation, one cannot overlook the large sanatoriums for *kolkhoz* and *sovkhos* workers built in the main holiday resorts of the Baltic republics (Dremaite 2017). Conceived as mass hotels in exceptionally scenic locations, Soviet sanatoriums catalysed new behavioural patterns. During their holidays, workers had access to free medical care and state-of-the-art health treatments, alternating rest with recreational activities and gaining self-awareness in a new society. Indeed, Tijana Vujošević (2017) claims that public healthcare was decisive in the construction of the Soviet new man. After the productivism of the early years, a representative ethos emerged, within which public baths, as well as sanatoria, encapsulated the social order as microcosms of

Fig. 9

A section of the Druskininkai riverfront (Lithuania). Legend: 1. Sanatorium built on the site of Tsar Nicholas I's residence; 2. Balneotherapy Centre, Vsevolod Ulitko, 1954; 3-4. Hydrotherapy Centre and water tower, Romualdas and Aušra Šilinskas, 1976-1981 (source: drawing by C. Pallini, 2023).

**Fig. 10**

Kalju Vanaselja and Ell Väärtõnou (first phase 1966-1970) and Vilen Künnapu (second phase, 1976-1988), model of the Tervis Sanatorium in Pärnu (Estonia). (source: Eesti Arhitektuurimuseum).



collective intimacy for physical and spiritual transformation. [Fig. 9-10] The last two contributions focus on the United States and China. During the 1930s, the southern Great Plains of the United States were devastated by a series of sandstorms caused by decades of inappropriate agricultural techniques. This ecological disaster forced farmers to migrate; just as Greek Orthodox refugees had to leave Asia Minor to face an uncertain future in the countryside of northern Greece, so American farmers, deprived of the means of subsistence, were forced to move west. The problem of mass resettlement emerges in its cyclical nature.

Filippo De Dominicis examines the interventions promoted by the Farm Security Administration, including projects by Vernon DeMars, Garrett Eckbo, and Fran Violich. With the demand for spaces capable of stabilising closer relations, the difficulty of finding a balance between American settlement culture and the principles of new architecture affirmed by Le Corbusier came dramatically to the fore.

The case of China presents clear analogies with the experiences of the Soviet republics: the first three decades of the People's Republic (1949-1979)

were in fact characterised by a collectivist and planned economy, in the context of which the countryside underwent a veritable metamorphosis: forests were cleared, lakes drained, and slopes terraced. Anna-Paola Pola reconstructs the story of the Dazhai village during that thirty-year period. Completely rebuilt by its inhabitants, Dazhai became an example for hundreds of collectivised villages, which reinterpreted the ideas and models of the party with all available means. The modernity of the new villages was expressed in their regular and compact layout vis-à-vis a landscape shaped by man.

Editorial note

This issue builds on the MODSCAPES project (Modernist Reinventions of the Rural Landscape) funded under the HERA call Uses of the Past (grant 5087-00420A). MODSCAPES covered the three-year period 2016-2019 and, in addition to Politecnico di Milano, involved the Université libre de Bruxelles (Project Leader), the Cooperativa de Ensino Superior Artística do Porto CESAP, the Eesti Maulikool (Estonian University of Life Science), and the Technische Universität TU Berlin, with the participation of DOCOMOMO International, CIVILSCAPES (Bonn), ECLAS European Council of Landscape Architecture Schools (Vienna).

The centrality of the Pontine case in the project also depended on additional funding from the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst DAAD obtained by TU Berlin and Politecnico di Milano for the joint seminar Rethinking the Rural Landscape (Pontinia 28 April - 6 May 2018).

MODSCAPES involved 22 senior researchers, 6 PhD students and 4 research fellows and ended with the exhibition Enter the Modern Landscape (Bozar Brussels 29.11.2019 - 12.01.2020)

After the closure of the project, the course Composition and reality: investigating the tools, coordinated by Elvio Manganaro and Henrique Pessoa Alves at the AUIC School of the Politecnico di Milano (a.y. 2020-2021), included the Thematic Seminar Rural Modern, a testing ground for architectural design coordinated by C. Pallini.

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