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AESOP
SUSTAINABLE
FOOD
PLANNING
CONFERENCE**

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Papers are organized according to the paper session in which the paper was presented during the Conference.

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CONTENT TABLE

page	PAPER SESSION ROUND 1 — Title — Author(s)
9	PAPER SESSION 1.A — PRODUCTIVE LANDSCAPES
10	Milan's agricultural districts: food landscape laboratories? — Branduini Paola
20	Circular food initiatives and Continuous Productive Urban Landscapes - a critical reflection on the potential of circular initiatives for systemic change in city regions — Viljoen Andre — Thapa Karki Shova
27	New Agricultural Parks regenerating city-region landscapes — Lepkowski Maciej — Fanfani David — Nowysz Aleksandra — Simón Rojo Marian — Storie Joanna — Triboi Roxana — de Vries Jeroen
37	PAPER SESSION 1.B — AGROECOLOGICAL URBANISM
38	Urban rooftop farming in Brussels: an analysis from an agroecological point of view — Dávila Francisco — De Brabandere Léna — Visser Marjolein
47	Agroecologics: Reassess Urbanization Through Agri-Urban Design — Weichold Ivonne
56	Unlocking the agroecological potential of Lucanian farming and food practices — Boniburini Ilaria — Romano Miriam — Gesualdi Ilaria — Mininni Mariavaleria
65	PAPER SESSION 1.C — URBAN AGRICULTURE PRACTICES
66	Agricultural practices in French prisons : towards better agro-ecological environments — Sias Daniela — Giacchè Giulia — Aubry Christine
74	Towards a European Urban Agriculture Policy and Governance Framework. Sharing the Roman experience — Hernandez Lelli Patricia — Luzzi Elisabetta — Bordi Claudio — De Grazia Giusy
81	The City's Low Hanging Fruits — Vardi Neta Levran — Orenstein Daniel Eli
91	PAPER SESSION 1.D — FOOD MAPPING INITIATIVES
92	The University as a Critical Player of the Urban Food Policies. Towards a Food Atlas for the City of Trieste — Rodani Valentina — Venturini Camilla
101	PAPER SESSION 1.E — INTERSECTIONALITY AND FOOD JUSTICE
102	Urban food governance's potential for a gender-just food transition: preliminary results from fieldwork in Milan and Barcelona — Bergonzini Chiara
110	Intersectional Exploration for Food Justice Initiatives in France — Lalliot Manon
119	Narratives of Change: more than individual intentions in the path to a sustainable and socially just food future — Abrantes Patrícia — Zorell Carolin — Moreno Luís

- 131 PAPER SESSION 2.A — CITY REGION FOOD SYSTEMS**
- 132 Global city goes local: State ambitions and societal undercurrents of food localization in Singapore**
— Soh Emily
- 141 Territories of urban-rural hybridisation in the agro-ecological transition. A spatial exploration of agro-ecology initiatives in Veneto plain**
— Marcon Alessandra — Tosi Maria Chiara
- 149 Strategizing regional food systems as pathways towards sustainability transitions: The case of Lisbon's Metropolitan Area**
— Oliveira Rosário — Mourato João — Truninger Monica — Garcia Távora Gabriel — Linares Ceballo Fernanda
- 157 The role of participative foresight in creating a sustainable food supply for the Brussels-Capital Region**
— De Schaepmeester Hannelore — Mathijs Erik
- 169 PAPER SESSION 2.B — MOVEMENT BUILDING ACROSS THE FOOD SYSTEM**
- 170 Addressing the role and policy needs of Agroecology-Oriented Farmers Groups in transforming food systems**
— López-García Daniel — Carrascosa-García María
- 178 Tackling food poverty! Towards healthy, sustainable and socially just food environments through inclusive participation**
— Markoni Evelyn — Smaal Sara — Aeschlimann Lukas — Götze Franziska — Sefu Yassir — Veen Esther
- 187 PAPER SESSION 2.C — COMMUNITY GARDENING**
- 188 Uneven Recognition: Community Gardens or Allotments?**
— Hasson Alban
- 196 Community gardens as a response to the contradictions of sustainable urban policy: Insights from the Swiss cities of Zurich and Lausanne**
— Jahrl Ingrid — Ejderyan Olivier — Salomon Cavin Joëlle
- 203 PAPER SESSION 2.D — DESIGN STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABLE FOODSCAPES**
- 204 The Architecture of Sustainable University Foodscape. Design Strategies and Practices for re-shaping the Food-City Nexus**
— Basso Sara — Rodani Valentina
- 213 Gaps in urban food systems in Portugal: Lessons learned from 91 projects funded by national authorities**
— Archer Pratas João — Delgado Cecilia
- 221 PAPER SESSION 2.E — URBAN FOOD IN TIMES OF CRISIS**
- 222 Transforming Food Systems in Lebanon: A Tale of Two Alternative Food Models in the Time of Crisis**
— Assaf Sherin — Farah Jihad — Yengue Jean Louis
- 231 PAPER SESSION 2.F — EXPERIMENTING WITH URBAN FOOD GOVERNANCE**
- 232 The role of evaluation and learning in innovative food governance**
— Adlerova Barbora — Pitt Hannah
- 239 Navigating Governance Dynamics in Alternative Food Networks: A Case Study of 'La Ceinture Aliment-Terre Liégeoise' in Liège, Belgium**
— Longton Louise — Scholl Christian
- 248 The role of food movements in catalyzing Urban Food Policies. The Punto al Cibo network in Torino**
— Allegretti Veronica — Bruno Riccardo Giovanni — Dansero Egidio

255 PAPER SESSION 3.A — PUBLIC FARMLAND AND PUBLIC POLICY

256 Public urban agriculture equipment for sustainable food systems: the necessary mobilization of multiple public policies
— Saint-Ges Véronique — Jacobsohn Antoine

263 Roles of Local Governments in the Governance of Agricultural Land in France
— Perrin Coline — Leger-Bosch Christine — Martin-Prevel Alice — Dif Roxane

271 PAPER SESSION 3.B — STRATEGIES OF MOVEMENT BUILDING 242

272 Thinking through landscape frictions: unlocking the transformative power of permaculture projects
— Chakroun Leila

279 PAPER SESSION 3.D — URBAN FOOD ENVIRONMENTS

280 Food desert of alternative consumption spaces in European cities
— Karakaya Ayalp Emel — Fernández Casal Laura — Öztürk Sevim Pelin — Pinedo Gil Julia — Geçer Sargın Feral

287 PAPER SESSION 3.E — FOOD PROCUREMENT, REDISTRIBUTION AND WELFARE

288 Re-imagining foodspaces-welfare nexus across scales: building proximity networks
— Venturini Camilla — Basso Sara

296 Greening school meals: towards a public food system? Case studies from Normandy (France)
— Esnault Morgane

305 PAPER SESSION 3.F — ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

306 Navigating Urban Food Governance: Insights from Food Policy Councils in the United States
— Owen Maureen

315 Food system transformation pathways on hold. Why can local food policies get stuck?
— Vasile Maria — De Conno Arianna — Arcuri Sabrina

322 The Thematic Partnership on Food from Urban Agenda for the EU: Catalyzing Local Food System Transformation
— Triboi Roxana — Rotaru Irini — Păsărel Adina

- 331 PAPER SESSION 4.A — PERI-URBAN DYNAMICS**
332 Proximity Agriculture in Underdeveloped Urban Areas: A Case Study in Matosinhos, Northern Portugal
— Antunes Heloisa Amaral — Martinho da Silva Isabel — Costa Sandra
- 341 PAPER SESSION 4.B — MOVING WITH THE FARMERS**
342 Building food self-sufficiency from a territory of conflict
— Miglio Alessandra
- 349 Promoting Farmers' Innovation for Food Security and Agrobiodiversity**
— Ghimire Saurav
- 358 How Farmers Disentangle from Convention and Develop Social and Ecological Objectives in Lincolnshire, UK**
— Weinberg Yonatan
- 367 PAPER SESSION 4.C — FROM INFORMAL TO FORMAL URBAN AGRICULTURE**
368 Reviving the educational garden – unfolding an ambiguous pathway for political recognition
— Carstensen Trine Agervig
- 377 Grey areas and green spaces: revealing the conflicts and gaps in the formalisation process of urban agriculture in Bogotá**
— Manente Valentina — Caputo Silvio
- 387 PAPER SESSION 4.D — TRAINING AND POLICY LEARNING**
388 New Actors in Food Governance. The Potential role of Museums and Ecomuseums
— Borrelli Nunzia — Koch Pamela — Azzarito Laura — Mura Giulia — Addis Ginevra
- 396 Raising urban planners' awareness for integration better food and agriculture-related measures into Climate Strategies and Plans – Lessons learned from the Portuguese campaign**
— Delgado Cecília
- 403 PAPER SESSION 4.F — EXPERIMENTING FOR FOOD EQUITY**
404 Urban Gardening Valuation: Unraveling the Nexus with Food Justice in Dortmund, Germany
— Bakunowitsch Julija
- 413 Traditional public markets: inclusive hubs for a just food systems**
— Gonzalez Sara — Bridge Gemma
- 421 Urban Agriculture, Land, and Environmental Justice in San Diego, California**
— Joassart-Marcelli Pascale
- 429 Post-Growth Metabolism: Rethinking Urban Planning and the role of Open Municipal Markets**
— Carrasco Bonet Marta — Fava Nadia

LIST OF AUTHORS

A

Abrantes Patrícia 119
Addis Ginevra 388
Adlerova Barbora 232
Aeschlimann Lukas 178
Allegetti Veronica 248
Antunes Heloisa Amaral 332
Archer Pratas João 213
Arcuri Sabrina 315
Assaf Sherin 222
Aubry Christine 66
Azzarito Laura 388

B

Bakunowitsch Julija 404
Basso Sara 204, 288
Bergonzini Chiara 102
Boniburini Ilaria 56
Bordi Claudio 74
Borrelli Nunzia 388
Branduini Paola 10
Bridge Gemma 413
Bruno Riccardo Giovanni 248

C

Caputo Silvio 377
Carrasco Bonet Marta 429
Carrascosa-García María 170
Carstensen Trine Agervig 368
Chakroun Leila 272
Costa Sandra 332

D

Dansero Egidio 248
Dávila Francisco 38
De Brabandere Léna 38
De Conno Arianna 315
De Grazia Giusy 74
Delgado Cecilia 213
Delgado Cecília 396
De Schaepmeester Hannelore 157
de Vries Jeroen 27
Dif Roxane 263

E

Ejderyan Olivier 196
Esnault Morgane 296

F

Fanfani David 27
Farah Jihad 222
Fava Nadia 429
Fernández Casal Laura 280

G

Garcia Távora Gabriel 149
Geçer Sargın Feral 280
Gesualdi Ilaria 56
Ghimire Saurav 349
Giacchè Giulia 66
Gonzalez Sara 413
Götze Franziska 178

H

Hasson Alban 188
Hernandez Lelli Patricia 74

J

Jacobsohn Antoine 256
Jahrl Ingrid 196
Joassart-Marcelli Pascale 421

K

Karakaya Ayalp Emel 280
Koch Pamela 388

L

Lalliot Manon 110
Leger-Bosch Christine 263
Łepkowski Maciej 27
Linares Ceballo Fernanda 149
Longton Louise 239
López-García Daniel 170
Luzzi Elisabetta 74

M

Manente Valentina 377
Marcon Alessandra 141
Markoni Evelyn 178
Martinho da Silva Isabel 332
Martin-Prevel Alice 263
Mathijs Erik 157
Miglio Alessandra 342
Mininni Mariavaleria 56
Moreno Luís 119
Mourato João 149
Mura Giulia 388

N

Nowysz Aleksandra 27

O

Oliveira Rosário 149
Orenstein Daniel Eli 81
Owen Maureen 306
Öztürk Sevim Pelin 280

P

Pășărel Adina 322
Perrin Celine 263
Pinedo Gil Julia 280
Pitt Hannah 232

R

Rodani Valentina 92, 204
Romano Miriam 56
Rotaru Irini 322

S

Saint-Ges Véronique 256
Salomon Cavin Joëlle 196
Scholl Christian 239
Sefu Yassir 178
Sias Daniela 66
Simón Rojo Marian 27
Smaal Sara 178
Soh Emily 132
Storie Joanna 27

T

Thapa Karki Shova 20
Tosi Maria Chiara 141
Triboi Roxana 27, 322
Truninger Monica 149

V

Vardi Neta Levran 81
Vasile Maria 315
Veen Esther 178
Venturini Camilla 92, 288
Viljoen Andre 20
Visser Marjolein 38

W

Weichold Ivonne 47
Weinberg Yonatan 358

Y

Yengue Jean Louis 222

Z

Zorell Carolin 119

Territories of urban-rural hybridisation in the agro- ecological transition. A spatial exploration of agro- ecology initiatives in Veneto plain

— MARCON Alessandra
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Territories of urban-rural hybridisation in the agro-ecological transition. A spatial exploration of agro-ecology initiatives in Veneto plain

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While Food Planning has long been interested in food spaces related to urban and metropolitan contexts, there are few case studies today that consider territories and processes of diffusion and dispersion, where urban settlements and infrastructures mix and hybridise with the rural tissue. However, in recent years, there has been a renewed interest in the territories of urban-rural hybridisation, in an attempt to overcome those spatial categories that continue to structure much of western urban thought (city-country; urban-rural, etc.). In fact, beyond food production and the city-countryside distinction, some scholars question the renewed relationship between urbanism and agriculture and the latter's role in determining the future of inhabited territories in a necessary phase of agro-ecological transition. If numerous urban statistics and policies promote the prospect of a global urban destiny of humanity, the new processes of reterritorialisation of food systems and some traces of back-to-the-land movements, re-interrogate their universality and give rise to the first hypotheses of an urban exodus. The observation of agro-ecology initiatives and the exploration of related emerging tensions, conflicts and imaginaries could help confirm or refute these hypotheses and sketch new scenarios of the future of inhabited territories. Starting from these reflections, the contribution will focus on the construction of the methodology for the research project entitled "Territories of urban-rural hybridisation in the agro-ecological transition", financed by the Vinci program of the French-Italian University (UFI) and built between the École d'architecture de la Ville & des Territoires Paris-Est (Ensa Paris-Est) and the Iuav University of Venice (Iuav). The project stems from the desire of the two partners to collaborate in the construction of a shared knowledge of the territories of urban-rural hybridisation in Europe and in particular on the transformations affecting the spaces of emerging agro-ecological initiatives in the Italian case of the central Veneto plain. How can the emerging agro-ecology initiatives help us rethink the culture of urban and spatial design? What tensions, conflicts and new imaginaries are emerging? What future scenarios lie ahead for the territories of European urban-rural hybridisation?

Keywords: Hybrid territories, Agroecology, transition initiatives, Veneto plain

Introduction

The historical urban-rural divide has played a central role in the emergence of the agro-industrial system. Urban practice and planning have more or less indirectly endorsed these logics (Cronon, 2009), driven also by generally accepted policies and projections that promote the prospect of humanity's global urban destiny (UN, 2019). The resulting metabolic rift has led to a drastic decoupling of social and ecological relations between producers and consumers, in favour of a commodified approach to food (Patel, Moore, 2017). There is now ample evidence of how industrial agriculture contributes to climate change and how dominant food systems, driven by global productivism, are damaging planetary resources. What is needed then is a transition of agriculture towards more sustainable models that promote local and regional food relations that rediscover the socio-ecological values of food, and urbanism and planning have a central role to play in this.

While food systems and spaces of agriculture have been a central theme for urbanism and planning for more than twenty years now, too often food planning has looked at these themes from pioneering experiments focused especially on dense urban and metropolitan contexts. To date, there are few cases that refer to territories and processes of diffusion and dispersion,

where urban settlements and infrastructures mix and hybridise with the rural fabric. The result is that much of the urban policies and agendas of northern countries assume the separation, both physical and conceptual, between urban and rural, tracing the dichotomous pattern that favours the dominant agro-industrial system.

In recent years, scholars and activists have shown the role of agroecology initiatives in both the global south and north in accompanying the transition towards more sustainable models (IPESFood, 2018; HLPE, 2019). Beyond food production, some scholars in the field of urban studies question precisely the renewed relationship between urbanism and agroecology and the latter's role in determining the transition of inhabited territories. Agroecology initiatives are practices that can refound the heart of urban planning practice, reinterrogating the absolute validity of planetary projections of a general urbanisation of the population (Marot, 2019). A transformation of the food system based on agroecological urbanism requires radical approaches that go beyond just the urban context and traditional urban-rural linkages (Tornaghi, Deahene, 2021).

Based on these reflections, the paper focuses on the construction of the methodology for the research project entitled "Territories of urban-rural hybridisation in the agro-ecological transition" inscribed in the Vinci program of French-Italian University (UFI) and constructed between École d'architecture de la Ville & des Territoires Paris-Est (Ensa Paris-Est) and the luav University of Venice (luav). The project stems from the desire of the two partners to collaborate in the construction of a common knowledge on the territories of urban-rural hybridisation in Europe and, in particular, on the transformations affecting the spaces of emerging agro-ecological initiatives in the Italian case of the Veneto plain. The project is part of a line of research that deals with this hybrid territory, originally defined as *città diffusa*, a territory where urban and rural characteristics are intertwined. The hypothesis is that the observation of agroecology initiatives and their relations with urbanism could bring out tensions, conflicts and renewed imaginaries that could contribute to building new theoretical and strategic frameworks to overcome the urban-rural distinction that dominates urban and food policies and to outlining new scenarios on the future of inhabited territories.

The paper builds on some initial reflections put forward within the Vinci project. The text briefly reconstructs the evolution of urban studies around agrarian spaces within the luav scholarly community, identifying cognitive mutations and recent emerging themes (1), showing that the theme of the relationship between agroecology and urbanism still remains to be explored. Thereafter, the contribution will explain the reasons why it is now necessary to explore agroecology initiatives in this specific hybrid territory in a more refined manner (2). Finally, the contribution will then present the objectives, methodology and as well as the expectations of the research, and will conclude on some issues and limitations that the research could address.

Veneto central plain, a hybrid territory in an agroecological transition?

Spaces of agriculture in urban studies in Veneto

The agricultural space of urban-rural hybrid territories is one of the materials "too often forgotten in the studies dedicated to the *città diffusa*" (Ferrario, 2009:130). Often considered as a background to urbanisation, or a victim of it, it has instead had great importance on how the *città diffusa* came into being and how it may one day face new challenges linked to sustainability and eco-climatic evolutions.

Agrarian space has been a topic addressed by luav scholars at least since the mid-1980s, but from the point of view of agrarian economics and evaluation (Reho, 1985). The issue is approached at the beginning through the problem of land consumption, tracing the traditional disciplinary separation that saw "rural" space as the prerogative of agronomists and geographers, while "urban" space as the main object of study of urbanists and planners. Beginning in the late 1980s, however, the emergence of the phenomena of settlement dispersion also prompted planners and urbanists to consider the unprecedented relations

between these two spatial domains (Indovina, 1990; Secchi, 1993), even though agricultural space was not immediately identified as a theme in itself.

With the advent of the 2000s, the territorial dimension was confirmed as a useful paradigm for overcoming the dichotomous approach, thanks also to the emergence of new digital cartographic tools and a new sensitivity to the landscape issue. These developments lead to a new season of studies where the role of agrarian logic in the urbanisation process of the Veneto plain is also investigated. The *città diffusa* was in fact born in a fertile alluvial plain, around and between a series of medium-sized towns and a settlement structure that was already historically polycentric and dispersed. From its origins, this settlement structure followed certain agrarian logics linked to the natural hydraulic and irrigation system and a dense network of roads. All these elements ordered the built-up space and its materials, aggregated over time according to specific rules and processes. Italian scholars then considered the need to (re)design this territory precisely from the materials from which it is constituted (Munarin, Tosi, 2001; Viganò, Fabian, Secchi, 2016).

Agricultural space only became a central theme for urban studies from the end of the first decade of the century, particularly with the contribution of Viviana Ferrario (2009). The scholar looks at the role of this space as material for the design and transformation of the contemporary city. Ferrario puts forward the idea that, contrary to what has traditionally been claimed, urban sprawl has made it possible to preserve the ecological and cultural richness of the territory and that “Veneto central plain is not an urbanised countryside: [but rather] it is a metropolis with a lot of agriculture inside it” (Ferrario, 2009:139). This inversion of gaze – from an urbanised countryside, thus assaulted by urbanisation, to an idea of a large city-territory that integrates agricultural areas within it – is useful to understand the strong and constructive link that there is (or that there could be again today) between inhabitants-consumers and producers.

From this moment on, scholars begin to bring out the multifunctional character of the agricultural space that includes food, energy, leisure, biodiversity, and water security. Among these themes, that of food emerges strongly, at a time when the new millennium pushes the start of post-industrial agriculture and the 2008 food crisis poses the urgency of finding new ways to feed the planet. These events then drive scholars to bring new attention to the relationships between urban spaces and agriculture: emerging practices of urban gardens, proximity markets and social agriculture, new city-countryside pacts and new relationships between agriculture, cities and spatial planning.

In recent years, the new role of urban agriculture and food policies in urban and territorial agendas, as well as the Covid-19 health crisis, have confirmed food as new and central issue for a new generation of Venetian scholars. These approach the relationship between food and territory today through different lenses, driven also by new European-driven research projects: the conflicts and frictions between agricultural activities linked to agro-food productivism and inhabited areas (Basso, Fregolent, 2021); the contribution of urban and peri-urban agriculture to planning policies (Lucertini, Di Giustino, 2021); the complexity of the Veneto food system and its spatial transformation (De Marchi, 2020). These scholars are therefore opening up new thematic pathways that show how the balance between food systems, agricultural activity and dispersed settlements is crossed by new processes.

In the light of this analysis of the literature, we can then confirm that the topic of the relationship between agroecology and urbanism in the Veneto plain is still unexplored, as well as those very initiatives that are accompanying the necessary agroecological transition still remain to be investigated in a more refined manner.

A necessary survey of agroecology initiative and urban planning in the Veneto plain

The reasons that prompted the Vinci research project to consider the urgency of a focus on agroecology initiatives and their relationship with urban planning in the Veneto plain are several, but we will mention two in particular.

First of all because the Veneto plain and its dominant food and production system is, like all western countries, highly unsustainable and dependent on fragile and unstable global markets. In fact, the country's food system is highly dependent on imports, despite the fact that the available agricultural land can offer a good capacity for local sustenance and supply (Coldiretti, 2022). In this sense, the Veneto plain is a good example, as shown in a recent article by Ferrario and D'Angelo (2024). In Veneto, the area dedicated to agriculture accounts for more than 65% of the total surface area, and its proximity to urban areas represents a high potential for food self-sufficiency, despite the fact that much of this area is used for the production of animal feed for export. The authors hypothesise, however, that the agricultural transition of the coming years may change this situation, and that land and agrarian landscapes will undergo a profound transformation driven by European policies for the reconstruction of agroecosystem networks, organic farming and quality certification, all of which are supported by agroecological practices. For the authors "representing these changes is fundamental to predicting transformations and imagining scenarios for a just and sustainable future, enhancing local food potential" (Ferrario, D'Angelo, 2024:74).

Another reason behind the Vinci project is that agricultural space continues to be neglected by current urban and planning policies and instruments. It is in fact only considered by rural and autonomous farm-oriented instruments and policies, despite the still strong relations between small producers working through peasant or agro-ecological practices and inhabitants-consumers. The condition of urban-rural hybridity, in fact, has counteracted the total industrialisation of agriculture, and the Veneto plain is still characterised by small and very small-scale production (vegetables, wine products, small-scale dairy) (De Marchi, 2020). This condition has therefore made it possible to preserve the small-scale peasant production that offers the inhabitants of the plains fresh and healthy products derived from socially and ecologically sustainable practices, often through direct sales or farmers' markets, the latter of which are rapidly increasing¹. It is then necessary to construct a new representation of these relations between those who cultivate and those who live, trying to understand if and how urban policies and plans are fostering these relations or opposing them, as well as to understand in what ways urban planning can support the launch of new agro-ecological initiatives, investigating the hypothesis of an ongoing urban exodus or back-to-the-land movement.

Objectives, methodology and deliverables

The research thus starts from these fundamental reflections and is built around three main objectives. The first is to contribute to the ongoing debates on the relationship between agroecology and urbanism, in order to build a broader sharing of knowledge and research methods on the territories of hybridisation in Europe and in particular between France and Italy. In fact, the research project aims to contribute to building new tools to face the challenges of agroecological transition also in the face of new European and national policies². These policies reinterpret the phenomenon of urban sprawl that has always been seen as one of the causes of uncontrolled artificialisation, but the model of the compact city and especially that of the dense metropolis is showing its limits (Bihouix et al., 2022). The growing interest in the territories of urban-rural hybridisation in France is also particularly lively, but it is still recent and much remains to be explored, and a dialogue between the two countries can contribute to building a specific reflection within this debate. Finally, the research aims to sketch out some hypotheses around possible future scenarios of urban-rural hybrid territories, relying on the imaginaries that have emerged from the observation of agro-ecology initiatives, specific to

¹ A reality, that of farmers' markets, which is gaining ground in the region, as demonstrated by the Veneto Region's census that indicated 50 farmer's markets in 2009, compared to 107 in 2022 (Regione Veneto, 2009; 2020).

² Particularly taking into account the new European objectives of the 'No net land take by 2050' policy affecting both Italy and France.

these territories and in an Italian geographical and climatic context not so different from the French one.

Starting from this, the research will therefore be structured in three main stages. The first is dedicated to the construction of new and fertile alliances between the knowledge of agroecology and urbanism and was launched with a seminar entitled “Urbanism and agriculture: dialogues between Italy and France”, which was held in March 2024 at Palazzo Badoer in Venice³. This first stage will then be devoted to an in-depth analysis of the existing literature on the relations between agroecology and urbanism (at the European, national and regional scales) and on the related policies. The second half will be devoted to field explorations and information gathering through mapping, participatory observation, and interviewing. This second part of the project will proceed following the transect method. As conceived by its creator (Geddes, 1925), the transect will cover a sequence of four specific pedo-climatic conditions: the high piedmont plain; the dry plain beyond the line of the resurgences; the humid and clayey low plain; and the coastal territory with the humid lagoon territory. The intention is to investigate in this area first of all the existing Community Supported Agriculture networks (producers, distribution points, consumers), their location in the territory and their functioning. Then a case study of an agro-ecology initiative will be identified for each of these four sub-transects where precisely the relations between their functioning and the planning context in force will be investigated. The aim will be precisely to identify possible tensions, conflicts or new alliances and existing strategies in order to build a clearer cognitive framework. Finally, the third stage will be devoted to the editing of all the materials and information gathered in a final report, where some hypotheses on possible micro-comparisons between France/Italy will be sketched out and some scenarios will be outlined. The work will end with the organisation of a final closing seminar that will once again bring together key figures in the debate between the two countries and others on a European scale.

Finally, the research will produce some useful tools specific to the case study and the research context. As the research experience should make it possible to construct a common and novel language between the two countries, a common glossary in French and Italian will be produced, capable of structuring comparable descriptions overcoming existing conceptual dualisms and dichotomies. In addition, an open repertoire of agro-ecological transition initiatives will be constructed: the recognition of these initiatives will necessarily pass through the construction of critical and synthetic maps, capable of revealing unedited geographies of a long-studied territory. This repertoire will report on the research work on the relations between initiatives and urban planning, revealing tensions and conflicts, but also useful measures and tools for the construction of new alliances. The document will conclude with a list of possible future scenarios sketched out in order to situate new hypotheses and research questions in the territory.

Conclusions

The scientific interest of the research touches on very different aspects both on a possible transdisciplinary theoretical contribution as well as on aspects specifically relevant to urban culture. The outcomes of the research could in fact contribute in a transversal way to the various fields that are now increasingly interested in agroecology in addition to agronomy (social sciences, geography, economics, etc.) with a specific approach to the case of the territories of urban-rural hybridisation. The theoretical reflections, in fact, will be able to fit into that research panorama in the European context that is increasingly questioning, beyond the large conurbations, the role that low-density settlement territories can play in agroecological transition processes. In particular, the research will contribute to the reflection on the role of rural and agro-industrial contexts: similarly, the attention of the scientific and political debate is

³ The aim of this first meeting was to bring together some key figures in the contemporary debate on the relations between agriculture and spatial planning with french and local actors of the Venice lagoon, who are also already involved in other luav research projects on the theme of food (Cities2030) and ongoing climate change (GREW).

increasingly turning to hybrid territories, characterised by the proximity between primary production and small-scale manufacturing. Finally, the outcomes of the research will be able to be part of the ongoing debate on agro-ecology starting from specific cases with reference not only to productive practices, but rather and above all to practices that question themselves on the dimension of social and environmental justice.

To conclude, the project will have to pay attention to a few more general issues that could have important consequences for the research: first of all, great care will have to be taken in the use of the term agroecology and the way it is applied to this specific territory; secondly, an attempt will have to be made to measure the reality of this ongoing transition, as well as its actual embodiment in territorial practices and processes; finally, the research will have to proceed cautiously around the hypothesis of an urban exodus and the back-to-the-land movements, taking into account the very specific life trajectories that characterize the population and the producers of Veneto plain.

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