



Guido Guidi, Photograph from the series 'In Veneto, 1984-89'
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A Project of the Soil

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All this intends to shift our attention from the building to the ground: to that surface which is shared by more buildings, and which cannot be reduced to a pure technical space. . . . I claim that it is not only a matter of modifying the use of what already exists or of replacing it with new architectures, of filling unfinished parts of cities, but that today it is also about, if not above all, design and avoiding to treat the soil in a trivial, reductive, technical and unarticulated way.

— Bernardo Secchi, 'Progetto di suolo', 1986

With 'Project of the Ground', an article published in *Casabella* in 1986, Bernardo Secchi drew the attention of his public not only to what he denounced as being a 'general impoverishment' of the urban discourse, but also and even more interestingly to the role that – within this 'impoverishment' – was played by the gradual but inexorable removal of the 'ground' from the urbanist's preoccupation. According to the author, such a removal, or more precisely, its 'gradual and dramatic reduction' – in plans and projects – to a mere, 'technical medium', witnessed not only a certain degree of cultural decay in the architectural milieu, but also the interruption of a 'long-lasting and fruitful reflection' on the role played by open and collective 'ground' within the project of the city, a 'research program' that had been animated and consistently nourished by the Modern Movement's visions and hypotheses and by its ambitious project of emancipation, gradually abandoned and forgotten. Today, while the ecological, energy and social transition together with the emergence of a radically new form of city require us to deeply reformulate our project of society, Secchi's warning sounds particularly up-to-date, especially from the perspective of a necessary revision of the contemporary urban and territorial project and the related design practice. In this context, where we are forced to review established tools and categories of the urban project, Secchi's intuition acquires new relevance and strength, making its reappraisal an urgent task.

More in particular, as soils within cities become widely and increasingly recognised as a fundamental resource that provide a wide range of ecosystem services, and an effective agent to contrast climate change, the 'Project of the Ground' requires a shift towards a 'Project of the Soil' in which the open space, the 'space between things', can no longer be conceptualised as a surface and demands – instead – to be understood as a living thickness, a volume in four dimensions. Soils, although degraded and fragmented, call to be looked upon with a new gaze, to be rearticulated in a new project aimed at the construction of a shared, productive and inhabited

nature, containing different elements of urbanity and offering – at the same time – a more resilient and sustainable environment for all. ‘New soils’ created by man and resulting from different formation processes, spatially reorganised through multiple urban and territorial operations such as excavations, embankments or terracing, and regularly maintained by the intervention of a multitude of actors, represent today a strong urban and ecological potential. The challenge is to modify our perception of these spaces, which might become the gardens or the public spaces of the urbanised territory of the future.

The objective of (re)building the city on the city – as induced by the European scenario ‘No net land take by 2050’ or by national prescriptions as the Swiss ‘Urbanisation vers l’intérieur’ – risks being banalised and translated into oversimplified solutions consisting of simple variations of an ‘infill procedure’, sacrificing the last reserves of open soils uncritically considered worthless because already ‘compromised’ by the urban tissue that includes them. The bias on which these accounts are based raises a paradox: urbanisation is correctly identified as the greatest threat in terms of land consumption, but it is hardly considered as a lever to conceive the solution. Too often, urbanisation is still perceived as a threat, as the mere consumption and destruction of soils, which should be limited by measures of concentration. Undoubtedly, given the slow pace of their formation, soils are a non-renewable resource on a global scale and a fundamental support for food production; however, neglecting their multifunctionality and capacity to be ‘artificially’ regenerated within an urban context shatters any possibility of including them as fundamental components of the new urban project. By preserving and enhancing the quantity and quality of diversified open and cultivable spaces already present within the city-territory, urban and metropolitan areas could become not only a problem but also part of the solution.

This issue of *OASE* is dedicated to the radical transformation that urban and territorial design and – more specifically – the design of open space is experiencing and will increasingly experience in the future, in relation to the recognition of soil as a fundamental resource providing a wide range of ecosystem services and an effective agent to contrast climate change. We aim to collect a series of insights from the front, a series of voices testifying a radical transformation on the frontier of urban design and architecture. Abstracts that propose an interdisciplinary approach are encouraged. Three possible trajectories are put forward to develop the abstracts:

1. Soil as urban design challenge. The recognition of urban soils’ value and of the importance of preserving/enhancing their quantity and quality within the urban fabric, contains – in itself – the foundations of an alternative urban project. In this perspective, how should urban design, understood as a privileged tool for city and soil regeneration, substantially revise its tools and categories to vehiculate an ambitious project for the city of tomorrow?

2. Towards an urbanism of living soil. At the territorial scale, the perspective according to which urbanisation is considered only a threat to the environment and soil as a capital to be merely protected, is radically altered by the recognition of soil as a ‘living organ’. Within a new (co-

evolutionary) synthesis between the city and its soils, how can urban and territorial design acquire a new status related to the construction of a plurality of ecosystems?

3. *The construction of a new gaze.* Recognising the contemporary urbanised territory as largely made of open and living soils also implies the necessity of building new representations documenting the physical state, the spatial distribution and the potential functionalities of urban soils. How might new, original cognitive strategies enhance the description of soils beyond monodisciplinary and static perspectives? And eventually trigger innovative design solutions?

Abstracts of maximally 500 words must be submitted (in English or in Dutch) via info@oasejournal.nl by **15 September 2020**, along with your name and e-mail address, your professional affiliation and a short bio (no more than 150 words).