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# Old spaces and new cities: the public space in Mergellina

**EURAU'12**

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*ABSTRACT. The case presented here tells the experience of an urban design project developed within a PIAU (Urban Environment Innovation Program) sponsored by the Neapolitan Department of Urban Planning for the redevelopment of the Mergellina area. At various stages, the working team has seen the participation of many professionals from diverse disciplines. Underpinning the desire to organize a widely based working group, where municipal technicians, a group of teachers, and researchers could work together, was the awareness that the Mergellina area has a unique cultural, historic, and architectural heritage, and the awareness that no transformation project, both in the short and long term, could disregard research that held together the physical memory of the place with new additions. The research team's goal was therefore to use this occasion of the area's physical transformation to redefine the role and urban significance of an area still able to give shape to an otherwise urbanized landscape.*

*KEYWORDS. Old\new; natural\artificial geography*

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1. Preface*



Fig. 1

## 1. Preface

There are special places in our cities, places which evoke memories and tell stories, places which have become icons of a remote past that often clash with the way in which we live and dwell today. Mergellina is one of these places. We are talking about the extreme outskirts of Naples, the "margin" of the city to the west, immediately under the hill of Posillipo, which marks the border between the gentle, reassuring coastline of Naples from that of the Phlegraean Fields.

Place of seduction, leisure, and literary and pictorial visions, Mergellina has always been one of the landmarks of the city, one of the world's most famous postcard scenes. Yet in this place, very violent infrastructural changes have occurred over time, artificial geographies have overlapped natural ones breaking the harmony of the whole, fragmenting the space.

Today Mergellina is a collage made up of a multitude of uses. Therefore any project for this area cannot be the result of an clinical interpretation of the settlement dynamics that characterized the area, but rather a work that builds a landscape which can "hold together", by different levels of use (local, metropolitan, and international) different cities (the pre-nineteenth century city, the 19th century city, and the contemporary city). A key element in the construction of this vision is the public space that holds together the historic city and the geography of "the Mergellina"; a space which is built by internal rules, that relates differently urbanized parts of an area and becomes the "infrastructure" that holds different parts of the city together.

## 2. Formation and transformation



Fig.2

The structure of Mergellina is the visible text of its history and its transformations, and if it is true that the origin of the name is related to the Latin term "margo, margellus", today more than ever Mergellina shows its essence as being a margin, a border, and a clash between three geographies which are also three moments in history.

The most ancient story of this place concerns the raised coast of Posillipo terminating with Mergellina. Along this stretch numerous remains of Roman times have been found; Plinio tells us that it was in Capo Posillipo that the Pharaonic villa of Pollione Vedio rose, while popular tradition tells us of a poet-magician Virgil who hollowed out the neapolitan cavern in one night and who kept a school of magic near the Caiola. According to De Fusco (DE FUSCO, 1998), these Roman residential areas are not an extension of the ancient Neapolis but rather of the Campi Flegrei: Mergellina therefore represented in some senses a terminal point of the Phlegrean Fields. It is interesting to underscore how in this phase of the history the areas of Mergellina and Piedigrotta are substantially comparable to one another, since the only possibility of access to Mergellina, other than landing from the sea, was represented by the neapolitan cavern which joined the area of Piedigrotta with that of the current Fuorigrotta. The importance of this linking structure is emphasized by Chiarini, who claims that it can be said without exaggeration that the great city of Naples emerged whole from the bowels of the neighboring hills and mountains but more than anything else, the hill of Posillipo made this so (CELANO-CHIARINI 1870). In medieval times Mergellina was given to the monks of San Severino, but

its proximity to the sea made it vulnerable to the Moorish attacks and so unsafe in comparison to other nuclei arising around the country houses of the high costs: for this reason it remained in a sort of limbo.

In 1496, when Frederick of Aragon ascended to the throne of Naples, Mergellina began a new phase of its history related to the low coast and to the beach that from the city extends towards Posillipo. The "margin" is reconfirmed, but the sense is reversed: topographically Mergellina was the extreme edge of the beach of Chiaia, ending with the Posillipo's first construction, the hunting lodge of Prince Roccella (DE FUSCO, 1998,70). There are three events that characterize this new phase in its history: the sale of the area by the monks to Frederick of Aragon, the construction of the Torretta in 1564, and finally the development of the Rampe di Sant'Antonio which in 1643 made wheeled traffic possible. The first event had an immediate impact on the "soul" of Mergellina. Once ascended to the throne, Frederick of Aragon, among other donations to people of note loyal to his family, gave the poet Jacopo Sannazaro land in Mergellina, where a tower and a house were built that hosted the creation of the greater part of the poet's work. Following the defeat of the last aragonese king, Sannazaro was exiled to France, and on his return, on the site of his now-demolished house, he had built the church of Santa Maria del Parto, where his remains still lie today.

From the eighteenth-century view of Sclopis and from the map of the Duke of Noja, we can see that the placement of the Rampe di Sant'Antonio establishes a continuity between the boroughs of Torretta and ancient Casale and, through its switchbacks, it marks the correct "separation" between the area of Mergellina and that of Piedigrotta, not so much from a physical point of view as in terms of identity.

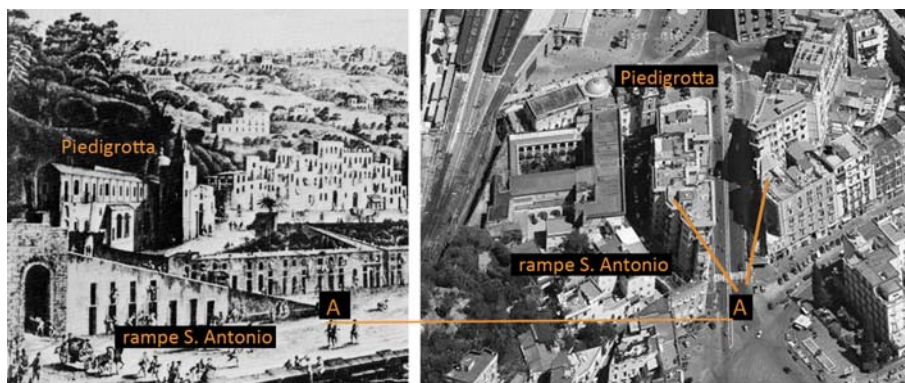


Fig.3

The third period in the history of Mergellina is that of artificial geography that was composed of the opening of major roads and the construction of landfills. The first road projecting Mergellina beyond its geographic borders was to Posillipo, built in 1812 at the behest of Giocchino Murat, sacrificing the lodges of Roccella and that of Caserta. The road was built with the intention to extend the most agreeable locality of Mergellina and lead it, while avoiding the perilous hill of the cave, to the venerated lands of Pozzuoli and Cuma (SASSO, 1858, 168). As appropriately emphasized by Alvino, all the houses along this road were put there after completion of this pleasant path in 1812, while the old houses were on the hill of Posillipo or by the seaside. In 1854 the Salita Piedigrotta (Piedigrotta ascent) begins construction with the intention of rejoining Mergellina with the Corso Maria Teresa; this operation starts a process of subsequent marginalization and

dissolution of the Piedigrotta area that will be consolidated with the opening of the tramway tunnel in 1884 and the construction of the railway "Direttissima" in 1922. A clue to this process of progressive loss of identity of a place till that time one of the most emblematic images of Naples is that the station, located just behind the Largo Piedigrotta, is called the Mergellina station. Also the park of Virgil's tomb, built in 1930, fails to identify itself as the new entrance to the cavern which, having been replaced in its function of "infrastructure" by the gallery opened in 1884, becomes an archaeological find.

The substantial difference between via Posillipo and the Salita Piedigrotta lies in the fact that while the first roadway is thought as "starting" from Mergellina, the second is considered to be a connection between two areas until then separated. This explains why, despite the destruction of its "terminal", Mergellina retains its feature of margin and of "conclusion" of an entity, that of the beach of Chiaia, compared to the beginning of another, that of the coast of Posillipo. On the contrary, the subsequent buildup of infrastructure in the Piedigrotta area lead to the progressive loss of identity of an area, from an end point of a path to a intersection of streets.

In 1872, after a long process, construction started on the landfills that represented the city's only possibility of westward expansion. The hypothesis of overlapping a new artificial geography onto the character of this area was already advanced in the Bourbon period: the Mergellina road was widened by order of Ferdinand IV, the first time in 1780 and a second time in 1840. There followed the presentation of two projects, the first by Genovese and then by Fiocca, who also made a second proposal in 1864. Even Enrico Alvino prepared a proposal in 1861 which included the widening of the Salita del Gigante on the via Santa Lucia, of the Chiatamone, and the boardwalk as far as Mergellina. Of this interesting and organic project (ALISIO, 1989, 54) only the Cassa Armonica in the Villa Comunale will be realized, performed in 1877 at a distance of fifteen years from its design. The construction of the landfills, which instead is initiated in 1872 is the fruit of an unstable and precarious balance between decisions made by the various municipal councils during the years of its construction and the economic demands made by the suppliers awarded the contract for the seafront construction. In fact, Gilletta's 1869 construction contract stipulated the expansion in two stages: from the Panatica to Piazza Vittoria and from there to Mergellina, clawing back from the sea a collective total of about three hundred thousand square meters. Subsequently, the Baron Ermanno Du Mesnil was subcontracted by Gilletta. While work of the first stage went rather quickly, that of the second, the landfills of Mergellina, suffered numerous delays and slowdowns linked to storm damage which became the base for economic disputes between the council and the builders that eventually, because of the impossibility of paying off the loans, were compelled to yield the still unsold reclaimed land of Mergellina to the Banco di Napoli. For whatever the reason, the nineteenth-century in Naples proved to be "imperfect" and ended up erasing the ancient character of the locales without actually building an alternative. This is the case of Piazza Sannazaro, built in 1882, after recognizing the unseemliness of introducing an avenue 40 meters wide with two sumptuous palaces and terminating it with a tavern. The piazza was completed in 1892 with the restoration of the Fontana della Sirena, previously placed in front of the old Central Station. Piazza Sannazaro, designed as a terminal for Viale Elena, does not resolve the relationship with the rocky ridge from which it projects, and that previously marked the transition between the beach of Chiaia and the Mergellina area. It is here on this rocky wall that the second tunnel connecting Fuorigrotta is opened in 1925. So once again the logic of infrastructure modifies the locale's character, erasing its identity; as a matter of fact the opening of the second tunnel and the construction of landfill buildings in front of the Piazzetta del Leone break the relationship between the area occupied by Piazza Sannazaro and the Mergellina beach. It is this exact area where the greatest delays accumulate due to winter



storm damage and by the difficulty of finding material for the landfills. Further difficulties arise relating to the location of the homes of the fishermen whose livelihood is tied to the gradually disappearing beach. Some proposals suggest the creation of stone slides on the seafront and of a marina or a low quay, this however, is considered unsuitable for fishing with nets and would be inaccessible in bad weather. Alvino was then entrusted with designing a small fishermen's quarter on the sandy beach of Palazzo Donn'Anna with a harbor protected by reefs. When the tender for the construction of this neighborhood was nulled, it was decided to build a port of refuge in Mergellina which, destroyed by a storm in 1879, was rebuilt to a larger and more organic design. Once the landfill was completed many Neapolitan professionals developed new expansion projects; among them, the project of three engineers; N. Despuro, G. Sommella, and L. Lops, which provided a further extension of the shoreline from Chiatamone to Donn'Anna and the segmenting of the hill behind Piedigrotta. In reality no further widenings were made, except for the short stretch of seafront from the marina of Mergellina to Via Posillipo done in 1928, a stretch which also holds of the third roundabout on the seafront, that of Largo Sermoneta, on which the old Fontana del Sebeto is placed in 1939. Unlike the Rotonda di Diaz and the Rotonda di Largo della Vittoria, this last roundabout can never really take shape as a "traffic circle" since, while the first two are placed tangentially to via Caracciolo, the Sermoneta roundabout creates ambiguity between this road and via Posillipo, and thus retains the character of "path terminus" or the point where the axis of via Caracciolo, meeting the high coast, turns towards the Gulf. In the twenties they finally closed the chapter on urbanization of the upper ridge of the hill of Posillipo with an agreement signed by the Società Partenopea Edilizia Moderna Economica and the municipality of 1926. Included within this S.P.E.M.E project were the Rione Sannazaro Posillipo, built along the axis of Via Orazio, and the Funicolare of Mergellina. The nineteenth and twentieth-century renovations are those that above all others create the current geography of Mergellina. However, the "imperfect" Neapolitan interpretation of this European urban transformation logic leaves snags on the now well established cloth of the city, points of discontinuity from where past history and geography resurface and which can be the starting points for a new transformation

### **3. The issues of urban design**

Place of seduction and leisure, of refined literary and pictorial images, Mergellina lives in the portraits of the city as a biographical sketch binding history and memory. Taking from these images, like framed snapshots of the culture and of the architectural landscape, the city has nurtured itself over time, giving back to us the beginning and the end of a process, and, together, a rich inheritance of forms that still appear clear among its construction efforts.

In this framework of relations, which holds together the historic city with that of the urban landscape, to propose a project means to probe different aspects and different potentials, to establish a hierarchy between parts, to use, within a renewed problematic dimension that characterizes the area, existing values and innovative scenarios, which take account of changes underway and the horizons of expectation. At the center, there is a precise objective: to relate the consolidated city, the historic city, to the modern city, laden with its positional value and the more complex, less formally defined, but more dynamic situations of the contemporary city (MACCHI CASSIA, 1999, 62-89).

It does not concern, therefore, a clinical interpretation of the historical outcome of a process governed by "settlement dynamics" but rather, to work in a landscape which holds together, on different levels (local, metropolitan, international), different cities (the pre-nineteenth century city, the nineteenth century city, and

the contemporary city).

In this network of relationships, the public space, the principal inheritor of locale's memory - from the ancient parades for the festival of Piedigrotta, to the recovery of memories of the old entrance the city of Naples through the Neapolitan Cavern - must therefore be laid on a foundational strategy, based on a varied attention to the means and quality of the change, to the different developmental and settlement processes that have characterized the area in its development.

In this sense, the public space acquires a central role within a wider strategy for reconnecting areas and parts of the city, within a more complex system of infrastructure to be made available for the passage-in and crossing-of areas. A vision which draws analogy with the squares designed by Patte in the central historical areas of Paris in 1748, within which the architecture incorporates an ancient journey, based on the design of public space in the modern city, a place of the community and a forerunner of the polycentric model, able to give shape to otherwise urbanized landscape (MONESTIROLI, 1986, 13-14).

In this vision, iconographic and physical, the public space builds itself along internal rules, it relates otherwise urbanized parts of a territory and becomes "infrastructure" that holds together different parts of the city (LANZANI, 2003). Starting from this premise, the Mergellina area has been described through analysis of four main areas clearly distinguished within it based on their positional values, intrinsic qualities of the places, morphological characteristics, and types of spaces.

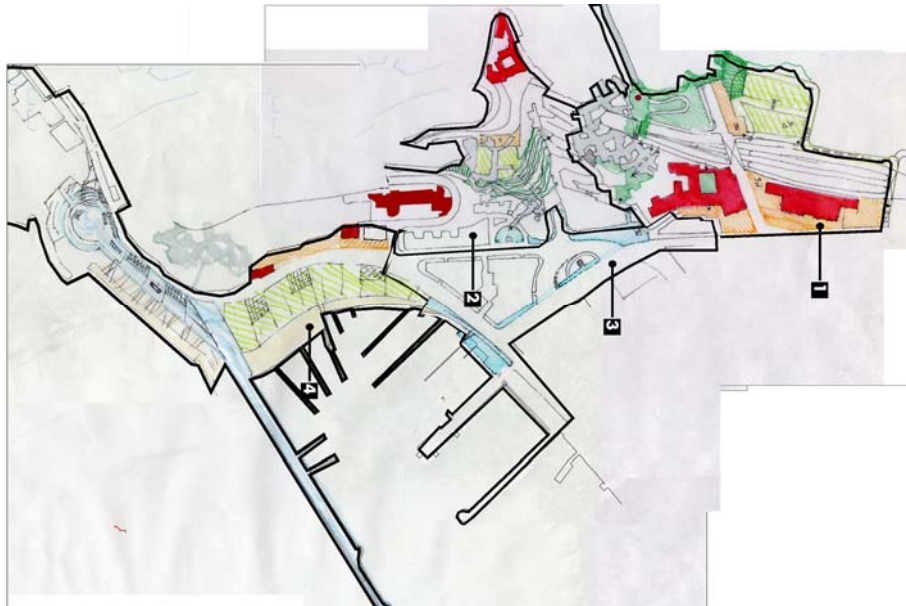


Fig. 4

### 3.1 The Park Station

Defined by the station building, the church, and the cloisters which form the units of the monumental block of Piedigrotta, the territory includes the Mergellina hostel, with its open spaces in front of it, the system of switchbacks, and the opening of the cave. The territory is completed by the Park of Virgil's tomb, the Neapolitan Cavern, and the system of caves located in the south, partly used for private parking, on which significant tampering is discernible. From reading the orographic characteristics, the territory is configured as a great crown characterized by strong

jumps in height holding together elements and parts which lend themselves, by their nature and their positional value, to an integration of space, quality, and function. This strategy of connection aims to reunify, through a reordering of existing connections, the complex of the services formed by the station, with its space to the front, with the new station planned for the M6 line, the Mergellina hostel area, with the Park of Virgil's tomb, and the Neapolitan Cavern. Further connections through the system of caves, are also envisaged between the Park (which is configured as the last outpost of a system of parks on the territorial scale that originates in Posillipo), vico cieco Piedigrotta, the monumental cloister of the church of Piedigrotta, and the antique piazza of Piedigrotta.

In this sense, the project aims to reconstruct the unity of the place, thought of as the set of still recognizable identifying characteristics, which have always presided over the whole of the physical and historical transformations of the locale. Understood in this manner, the idea of the park is the idea of reconstructing, starting from the presence of the station, a space of physical relations which can give shape to and restore the urban centrality of this historic core of Piedigrotta. Within this process, history becomes a tool for understanding the whole of the transformations and gives the city back its memory. In this area the particular morphology of the site also provides for the location of a large underground parking, with access from the Salita della Grotta and exiting out onto vico Piedigrotta.

Within this system, it is furthermore possible to consider the opportunity of connecting, through the cave system, the Park of Virgil's tomb with the Rampe di Sant'Antonio, and from there, through a jump in height through the tuff stone that forms the crown of Mergellina, the access area to lower turns and the entrance spaces to the Piazza Sannazaro system.

### **3.2 From Sant'Antonio to Piazza Sannazaro**

Placed immediately behind the system of caves described above, the surroundings are formed by the Rampe di Sant'Antonio, the Mediterranea clinic, Piazzetta dei Leoni, and the topographic system of contour lines formed by the tuff stone enclosing the area of Mergellina.

Starting from a reading of the topographic, positional, morphological, and landscape characteristics, the area appears as a kind of hinge that marks the transition between the upper part of the city, through the descending slopes of the hill system, to a survey of the crown of Mergellina, as it becomes an urban area at the foot of the sea.

The design hypothesis provided for this area are the reconnection between the ridge and the Mergellina area, through the cave system and the existing ramp, and the recovery of the public space that forms the Piazzetta dei Leoni.

To the first intervention is tied to the idea of reinterpreting, in a complete departure from the past, the creation of a connection with the area of gravitating near the Mediterranea Clinic with the Rampe di Sant'Antonio switchbacks, till now still unconnected. In this case, the design hypothesis involves the use of parking for some part of the Rampe input, in order to relieve area congestion.

The second project aims to give dignity to a substantial portion of public land recently privatized and divided into plots. Consideration should be given to the idea of connecting, through the cave system, the Rampe di Sant'Antonio switchbacks and the Park of Virgil's tomb, along with an area provided for parking with the ridge and the Piazzetta dei Leoni.



### **3.3 The nineteenth-century city, the hills, and the sea**

Placed in immediate contact with the two areas described above, the surroundings are characterized as a large knot that ties together the consolidated city, the modern city, and the contemporary city. Defined by the nineteenth-century joining of via Gramsci and via Sannazaro with Piazza Sannazaro, it includes the ancient route of via Mergellina to the coupling with via Caracciolo and the hydrofoil dock. Characterized by the multi-functional and discontinuous aspects dictated by the various systems it has hosted, it can be described as a kind of large cohesive void between pre-nineteenth century constructions, nineteenth-century formations, and the additions of recent times.

In this situation, the priorities are the redevelopment of the public space around the Mergellina nexus, and a series of interventions designed to create relationships between differing parts of the city which have fallen out of communications.

Therefore, through a strategy of functional integration and redevelopment of public space in this area, the project hypothesis targets holding together a system of large public elements such the tram line, the connection with the new M6 line station, the Mergellina station, and the harbor. Great care, therefore, is given to the redesign of the land of Piazza Sannazaro, in relation to paths, areas to be pedestrianized, the design for passage through public space, the construction of the seafront, and the ordering of the hydrofoil boarding area. The specification of the design themes that will enable the realization of these objectives will define means of intervention, connection, and redevelopment within a wider strategy of functional integration to clearly defines the use and inhibits the misuse of public urban space.

### **3.4 The coastal strip**

Consisting of the chalet area, the large pier, and the areas pushing against the coastline up until Largo Sermoneta, this locale extends from the meeting of via Orazio and via Mergellina, to the junction of via Posillipo and via Caracciolo .

For its morphology, its positional factors, and the singular exposition that characterizes it, the locale configures itself as an element shared by ancient coastline, the touristic and fishing port area, and the large widening of Sermoneta, "terminus" of via Caracciolo, separated from via Posillipo by a slight drop in altitude. So it appears as a sort of large hinge that marks the transition from the historic and urban landscape of Mergellina to a system dotted with villas and houses in via Posillipo.

From this reading, the design hypothesis is focused on making sense of the existing resources through the removal of barriers, the redesign of the area the chalets have taken, and the reorganization of urban public spaces present in the area.

The intervention aims, therefore, at the morphological and functional redesign of a space which was built over time by successive "bands" (the street, the fence, the lawn, the chalet with its grounds, the parking areas, the coastal road), creating spaces as a result, construction of new fronts in opposition to old fronts generated behind them, undefined spaces, areas of mixed and misused public space. The redefinition of a tighter relationship between the pier and its root will also allow reorganization of the currently congested system of open spaces, preventing misuse of public space. This strategy requires the identification of Largo Sermoneta as a leading element of the system, a place to meet and relax, a gateway to the promenade along the sea. This is the idea of a large piazza on the sea which finds a closer relationship - morphological and of use - with the pier and its root, able to give shape to the built landscape.



Fig. 5

#### Note

Paola Scala is the author of paragraph 1 Preface and 2 - Formation and transformation, Carmine Piscopo is the author of paragraph 3 - The issues of urban design.

#### Images

Fig. 1. aerial photo of Mergellina

Fig. 2. Map of G. Carafa, Duke of Noja, 1775

Fig. 3. Fragmentation of the territory. The area such was portrayed by I. Sclopis (1764) and the current situation

Fig. 4. Areas of the project

Fig. 5. The project hypothesis

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### Biography

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In 2008 he published the book "Elogio della mediocritas. La misura nel progetto urbano. "in which attempts to define through the reading of numerous projects and critical essays, the profile of architecture of "modificazione". On the same line of research she published articles in national and international scientific journals, including "Cahiers thématiques", the French magazine published of the 'Ecole nationale supérieure d'architecture et de paysage de Lille and the journals "Landscape Architecture" and "Op.cit".

She was speaker at many conferences in Lille, Madrid, Naples and Bari. In 2010 she was coordinator of the organizing committee and member of the Scientific Committee of Eurau'10 conference, held in Naples on 23-26 June 2010. He is currently a member of the organizing committee of Eurau12.

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Component of the Scientific Committee of EURAU'10, I have participated in conferences with object the themes of the research in architecture and of the transformation of the city. Consultant for the Public Administrations for the editing of urban projects and plans, I have participated in national and international competitions of planning, getting signalled projects.