



**Fondazione
Cav. Lav.
Carlo Pesenti**

www.fondazionepesenti.it

MENDING AND URBAN REGENERATION FOR THE NEW RENAISSANCE.

Intervention of RENZO PIANO, life senator for his contribution to architecture

The city that will be

I have always believed that our suburbs will be the key issue over the coming decades. In the 1960s, city centers were the priority; immediately after the war, city centers were regarded as best forgotten, then we finally realized they were essential. So that was a battle won, one way or another... yes in the 1960s, 70s and 80s it became clear. Today, in the 2010s, 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, everything will be staked on our suburbs. Suburbs are the city that will be, or won't be, but if it isn't then things will get difficult, because suburbs are the power, the energy of our cities. On average, in all cities 80-90% of residents live in the suburbs, and there's nothing wrong with that, except that the word "suburb" is always associated with the adjective "degraded", distant, abandoned, sad, and so on. And it's unthinkable, it's unthinkable, because that's where the future of our cities lies and that's the great gamble. Obviously, the first thing to do is not to build new suburbs, for the simple reason that they are unsustainable. We hear so much about sustainability, well, that's the first area of unsustainability: we can't build other suburbs. Enlarging cities in all directions, exploding them, substantially means building districts that then require roads, services, waste collection systems, sewers, a thousand and one things that then make cities unsustainable, fragmented, less strong. This question is both technical, economic, and also human, because obviously at this point these suburbs continue to be suburbs, by definition monofunctional suburbs, etc. This is why, and it's not something I've decided, this is why the economy itself, in all countries, has decided

that we can't go on building new suburbs. Indeed, what has happened in many cities, I think London was the first to give itself a "green belt"; it began well before Ken Livingstone, and then continued with Ken Livingstone, anyway today it is a given. London has a green belt all around the city, beyond which building is prohibited, beyond which the countryside is countryside. What does this mean? Some people take it to mean growth is impossible. And that's a mistake.

Building on built-up areas

We need to understand that growth should be through implosion, not explosion, not by building more suburbs, but by completing the fabric that already exists, building on built-up areas, occupying all those areas usually referred to as "brownfield", let's describe them as compromised space, cementified space. So, cementification, we have cementified so much. We need to stop cementifying outwards, but we can easily transform a great deal of cement inside our cities, change certain districts into something different, urbanize them. These places are like black holes inside cities, abandoned factory sites, abandoned rail yards, sometimes abandoned barracks, there are so many of them. During my career, I've seen all sorts, even abandoned political areas, because right in the center of Berlin is all the abandoned area of the Berlin Wall. And strangely enough that was *mittel*, the center, the heart of Berlin. However, that's the only example I can think of, of such a serious thing, a vacuum created by the cold war. Otherwise, the empty spaces trapped in our cities are largely abandoned rail yards, industrial sites and in some cases military areas. Yet there are so many of them, so many, and it is also possible to intensify built-up areas; mmm, if a city like London, and not just London, very often it is possible to intensify by building a bit higher, not necessarily constructing skyscrapers, but increasing density. It would be foolish to think this is a mistake; because the fact is a city is attractive, a good place to live only if it has a degree of intensity, if it's intense, if people enjoy it, if there is intensity. A city that is overly diluted, the classic example that comes immediately to mind of course is Los Angeles, but Los Angeles is too far away from European culture to use it as an example. Los Angeles has its charm, its beauty, but it is a city-territory, a city-state, it occupies a space equivalent to the area between Genoa, Milan and Turin. In short, Los Angeles is a city-territory. But otherwise, almost always, indeed I would say always, cities can grow internally, by implosion. And this is exactly what has always happened in the history of our cities. We have always re-developed built-up areas. Obviously, it is easier to build on virgin land, in the suburbs, it's very easy, you just clean up, lay the foundations, erect the building and there you are. You need more, you need greater skills, you need greater subtlety to re-develop built-up areas.

The challenge of mending

It's a bit like mending. We've borrowed the word from other activities, but really this is something that requires great attention, and also a diagnostic capability for example. You have to be able to use diagnostic tools. This catapults construction work into a new, slightly more organized and more scientific dimension, requiring even greater precision. I would say it's a way for builders to grow. I'm the son of a builder, I grew up in the business, I have always loved building, yet clearly this is a real challenge for builders. Re-developing built-up areas, building to complete abandoned areas means dealing with complex issues relating to the context; sometimes a hydrogeological context, a mining context, remediation; in other words, new issues relating to the diagnostic field, for example. In medicine, of course, no one would dream of operating without a diagnostic investigation into exactly what the situation is. Clearly, a greenfield site in the suburbs is much easier, you only have to dig a hole to verify the soil composition. Things are much more complicated in the city, there are existing structures, sewers, power cables, everything is a bit more complicated. The fact that it's more complicated is, I'm convinced, simply a challenge for the best builders. It's not less interesting, it's more interesting, but it requires a certain level of maturity, expertise. Also, in an urban environment, in terms of the organization of the construction site, which is something I particularly enjoy, since I still have close ties to the construction site, even though I'm an architect, but you have to know how to organize it. In an urban environment, you cannot have trucks loaded with rubble going backward and forward all day long, you need to invent systems. In London, for the Shard for example, we used a top-down solution, we excavated with miners, then slowly worked on the lower part, in other words as the structure rose we went down with the foundations. This allowed us to reduce truck traffic, but without slowing the construction of the building. At other sites, for example in Berlin, we used the Landwehrkanal, a nearby canal, to take away the waste material and bring in the construction materials. Sometimes railway lines are used; in abandoned rail yards there's always some track available. In other words, builders have to refine their skills, but they continue to be inventors.

The miracle of urbanity

It is almost always possible to move from a built-up area to an undeveloped area, that is, from brownfield to greenfield. Because almost always greenfield sites can be retrieved in city centers, some green spaces, which are very important. But greenfield

above all because people are going to live there: the site is transformed, black holes are urbanized, turned into cities. This is the real destiny of cities: to reinforce them, give them new vigor. Above all, to turn suburbs into places where life is lived 24 hours a day. What does that mean? It means suburbs can't be dormitories, places where people go just to sleep, or to work. You have to achieve the miracle that makes the city an urban location, an urbane place; the word "urban", as everyone knows, is not just an adjective meaning relating to a city, it is also a way of being. An urbane person is a civilized person, and it is no coincidence that "city" and "civilization" have the same root, and resemble each other in Italian, "*città*" and "*civiltà*". So the idea is to transform monofunctional areas into plurifunctional areas, where in addition to housing, or supermarkets, there are other activities, professional, creative, cultural activities, services. Well, one of the most important systems to, let' say, fertilize suburbs is to bring in public activities such as hospitals, law courts; in the Paris *banlieue*, we are building the main Paris courthouse in the north and the new university in the south. That's what you have to do, create places where people meet, where people share values, in the suburbs. Schools, universities, libraries, as well as concert halls and, if possible, museums. I don't want to overstress the importance of museums, but really everything that can help create meeting places is very important because that's what fertilizes suburbs, enriches them, turns them from monofunctional places that are abandoned in urban terms into places hosting all the complexity of life.

Looking for beauty

There's something else I absolutely want to talk about, because, while old city centers in the battles of the 1960s, 70s and 80s were attractive, photogenic. Well, suburbs are not photogenic; people say they are ugly, it's not true, it's really not true. Some suburbs have an appeal for which they weren't built. They were built badly, without passion, sometimes almost scornfully. Yet a beauty comes through; not just the human beauty of the faces of the youngsters and so on, which is very romantic. No, this is a beauty created by the fact there are horizons, an attractive light; nature often helps. At least they have that, because while there are few green areas in cities, in the suburbs there are a lot more, and they can help. So there is this, let's say, interesting adventure we shall see in the next 50 years, if we manage to stop building new suburbs and transform the ones we have into happy places, attractive places, urban sites, into cities. And give urban centers functions that are not just the functions of a shopping center; because at this point unfortunately they are turning increasingly into consumer locations, very chic, very snob, but consumer locations. This is where we have to gamble, and, another small detail, if we manage to avoid extending our

suburbs even further, then the countryside beyond the not too imaginary green belt, which has to be on urban plans; well, the countryside carries on being countryside, otherwise the suburb, this borderland between the city and the countryside, becomes something impossible, because it's not city, but it isn't countryside either. It's nothing, it's lost all its values. And that's why it's degraded. It's degraded physically and morally, etc., because it's nothing. You need the courage to establish that, up to a certain point, the city is city, there are services and so on, and then the countryside goes back to being countryside, especially in a country like Italy, where unless we do this, we are eating up our land at an absolutely crazy pace. So, I want to refute the idea that this reasoning prevents cities from growing. No, it enables them to grow, but in terms of sustainable growth.

Materials to be re-invented

I've always been passionately interested in construction materials, it's a field, well, that's how it goes. I have many musician friends, musicians who study sound, even noise, in other words you always have to go to the origin of things. At the origin of architecture are materials, and at the origin of construction materials you find the usual materials, wood, stone, and then, of course, cement. Cement is an extraordinary invention, it's reached a certain age now, but it too is being re-invented. Wood flourishes through re-invention. Glued laminated timber, reconstructed wood, stone. Stone can be cut with digital machines, which make it exactly the right size to build extraordinary arches, or to make pieces that once would only have been possible with the work of a thousand expert stonemasons. All these materials, glass, think of glass, the advances in glass. And cement too, high-strength cement, ferrocement. In Greece, I'm building a large solar collector for the Niarchos foundation in Athens, above the library, their Athens library, which is 10,000 m², a great sheet of ferrocement, and this is simply to say that cement too is a material to be reinvented. I enjoy exploring materials, also new materials like carbon fiber, exploring their expressive potential, because every material offers a promise of form, an expressive promise let's say, and it would be foolish for an architect, an architect interested in building shelter for people is bound to be involved in materials, just like Robinson Crusoe if they were on a desert island: they would look around, look for materials, then with those materials they would think. Well, fortunately, we're not on a desert island, but there are many materials that are just waiting to be re-invented, re-used and looked at again. It is just this sort of human gamble to go into things in depth, not forgetting that there are materials that have a memory, their own memory, and that they also have a huge potential for invention.

Contact us

www.fondazionepesenti.it

twitter: [@fondpesenti_it](https://twitter.com/fondpesenti_it)

facebook: [FondazionePesenti](https://www.facebook.com/FondazionePesenti)

mail: contact@fondazionepesenti.it

Tel. +39 035 421685