A Monster in the City

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PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS	• Authors: Federico Parolotto, Francesca Arcuri • July 2013

It is 7 a.m. on an August morning. An empty Milan wakes up to the sound of chainsaws which in Piazza Maggi, to the south of the city, begin cutting down the trees that have populated the area for over thirty years. The plan entails the elimination of over 70 forest trees and shrubs to make space for the worksite which in two years should radically change the face of the junction.

In this regard, the plan certainly achieved its goal: in 2001 citizens, politicians and local associations took to the streets to create human chains around the trees to stop them from being cut down but now it seems like decades have passed since that August, so much so that few can remember what the piazza looked like before the work championed by the Albertini Council and, in reality, actually approved back in 1999. As stated by the planners and local council, the project promised to create a junction on three different levels which, thanks to soundproofed underpasses and flyovers, would have ensured the smooth flow of traffic along the Famagosta-Cermenate road and heading towards the A7 motorway that goes to Genoa. In reality, over the years the approval process of the project, conceived as part of the construction of the 'Gronda Sud' and the work to streamline access to the south of the city, has been anything but linear. The principle of transforming the urban nature of the road network into a series of express connections, in line with the parameters of the nearby motorway infrastructure, actually dates to the mid-1990's with the approval of the highway that runs between Piazza Maggi and Piazza Kennedy. Over the next four years the construction of a new 3-level junction in Piazza Maggi was approved. The local community and civil society reacted immediately with the Piazza Maggi – Gronda Sud committee set up in 1999 rejecting the project and requesting that it be withdrawn.

↑ Piazza Maggi

Their reasons for rejecting the project were mainly connected with the impact that the work would have on living conditions in the surrounding neighbourhoods and the fact that the local communities were not involved in defining the planning proposal. One month later, in December of the same year, the committee lodged an appeal against the Restructuring Project for the Piazza Maggi road junction with the Regional Administrative Court of Lombardy. As well as outlining some flaws in the design, the motion also called for minor, less invasive measures that would not change the face of the area and, as well as being more economical, would maintain the correct relationship between public and private transport. The protests continued throughout 2000 and for a part of 2001: marches and demonstrations brought hundreds of people into the streets but they found themselves up against a political machine convinced of its actions and – at this point on the verge of beginning work – less willing to enter into dialogue. In the second half of 2001 with the project now a year-and-half behind schedule, the “eco-monster”, as local residents called it, began to take shape. Today, the junction created at Piazza Maggi remains a magnet for traffic arriving directly from the motorway and bypass on the way to the city centre with inevitable repercussions on the urban quality of the area. In fact, if you look at the road network of South Milan, you can see how this complex infrastructure constitutes the endpoint of the A7 motorway, whose axis continues to resemble a motorway right up to the junction, largely isolating this area of land. This break is further confirmed by the recent extension of the Green line of the Milan Underground as far as Assago.
As such, the A7 retains the features of the motorway infrastructure found upstream of the bypass, maintaining three lanes on each carriageway with an emergency lane right to the end, underpasses and flyovers to prevent the interruption of the traffic flow by B roads, and a fixed speed limit of 100 km/h up to the entrance into the city, with a road sign indicating the end of the A7 just 20 metres from the roundabout which, in Piazza Maggi, should help the flow of local traffic. This sudden change in the nature of the highway, together with the visibility problems at the end of the road, has also resulted in a high accident rate at the roundabout because of the high speeds of vehicles arriving from the A7.

↑ Piazza Maggi

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A Monster in the City

As regards the junction, it is highly discordant with the surrounding context, overwhelming it and radically altering the urban landscape. Indeed, the three levels of the junction allow traffic to three-dimensionally overwhelm the existing geometries with a vertical development of the infrastructure that comprises the Famagosta-Cermenate underpass, a roundabout, higher than the road surface, which mainly filters traffic arriving from the ring road heading for the city centre, and two flyovers that act as a quick connection between the city – both the centre and the east/west – and the motorway.

This complex structure, which cost 33 billion Italian lira, compromises local relations and public transport routes relegating them to the periphery, spaces undigested by the "monster" that do not meet the requirements of busy areas like Barona, Chiesa Rossa and Morivione. The permeability of the area by foot, already limited by the substantial number of intersections along Viale Famagosta and Viale Cermenate (approx. one every 200 m) and the direct nature of these roads, becomes a secondary issue for good as you approach the junction where there are no street-level pedestrian crossings for a kilometre.

The only exception is the system of pedestrian crossings that form part of the junction project which, as mentioned, are located at an intermediate level, a residual space between the levels of the underpass and the raised roundabout. The hedge and the pedestrian space, a potential subway for the hundreds of people that every day have to walk from the Underground to one of the busiest bus routes in Milan, are isolated and visibly closed in by the volumes of the surrounding architecture. A similar destiny befell the public transport stops, two of which were located on the roundabout by the project with obvious problems in terms of safety, buses rejoining the traffic on the roundabout, and visibility.

Finally, it should be noted how the construction of the two raised link roads, particularly the one that joins the Schiavoni flyover which led to the doubling of the section, has taken the infrastructure right up to the buildings, also modifying residents' perceptions of their private space.

In terms of traffic, it is interesting to note how the junction, through the separation of the traffic flows, permits the continuous movement of vehicles before immediately breaking up the flow with traffic lights to the east, north and west of the junction. In order to maximise the capacity of the junction Piazza Maggi is developed on three levels but this solution, unacceptable in itself, could have been avoided if this part of the city had not only been observed from an angle purely concerned with traffic and increasing traffic volumes.

The history of Piazza Maggi is emblematic of this type of approach to town and transport planning, an exclusively functional type of planning that takes no account of the specific features of the local area.
This type of planning approach can also be seen in numerous other structures that have been planned or which are under construction such as, for example, the new bypass to the north of the city and the junction on the East Bypass heading to Lambrate. What we should be doing is observing how the use of private transport in Milan is gradually falling, as it is in other Western capitalist cities, despite the largely stable number of workers and residents in the city.

This information, reported in the recently published update of the Milan 'General Plan for Urban Traffic', shows a downturn in the number of vehicles accessing the city, a downturn without doubt connected with the economic recession and strengthened by the activation of Area C, the Milan congestion charge launched in June 2011.

As well as the economic reasons, the diminishing tendency to travel by car also seems to highlight a structural change in society that is largely related to the younger generations, which have significantly changed the relationship of dependence that previous generations had with private transport.

In this respect, projects like that of Piazza Maggi are anachronistic in terms of their attempts to increase traffic speed and capacity in the city as they lead to oversized structures that compromise urban quality in favour of a mode of transport that is becoming less popular. It is also an internationally recognised fact that increasing the capacity of infrastructure leads to an increase in traffic and, therefore, a quick return to the original levels of congestion, rendering the modification of the work pointless.

Bearing in mind that every user of public transport is also a pedestrian, it should be noted that another consequence of this planning approach is the compromising of environmentally-friendly methods of moving around and footpaths, the reduction of which also leads to the weakening of public transport.

Put together, all of these elements undoubtedly have an influence on transport choices, confirming the close relationship between supply and demand, in recent years also recognised at international level. Milan is a clear example of the influence of cars in Western cities, which have witnessed the retrofitting of the urban fabric and the road network in order to accommodate them.

This process of retrofitting has involved all kinds of roads, from local roads that are often too small to major urban roundabouts (for example Piazzale Loreto) and genuine motorway junctions located in cities, as outlined in this article. In response to this state of affairs we need to begin a process of cutting back on the infrastructure in cities, of gradually reconfiguring our road networks in favour of networks dedicated to environmentally-friendly modes of transport and pedestrians in particular. Through an incremental process that gradually redistributes the urban space and lessens the impact of the road network it is possible to visualise a systemic change that enables us to re-establish the quality of space as a key factor in urban planning.

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