

Conference Session

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The intensification of territorial transformation processes, driven by ongoing economic, social, and environmental dynamics, calls for a critical rethinking of traditional interpretative paradigms grounded in the dichotomy between “urban” and “extra-urban”. The polarization of urban growth, marked by significant disparities in industrialization and socio-economic development, has resulted in a complex system of large and medium-sized urban centres coexisting with a widespread network of smaller settlements and intermediate spaces. This contemporary configuration is characterized by fragmented connections and emerging spatial hierarchies. Such a condition aligns with a comprehensive, network-oriented conception of “territory” that acknowledges the interdependencies among urban, peri-urban, and rural contexts. In this regard, the need for alternative development models converges with a renewed emphasis on “inner areas”, which have traditionally been perceived as peripheral and marginal in relation to major urban centres due to persistent structural inequalities in access to essential services, progressive depopulation, and economic stagnation.

However, precisely because of their extra-urban character, these areas preserve a stratified system of historical and cultural layers, heritage, local knowledge, and relatively unspoiled environmental resources. Consequently, they may serve as laboratories for experimenting with innovative planning strategies and design practices aimed at reconciling centrality and marginality. The goal is to unlock their intrinsic potential and latent local values not merely as compensatory responses to urban challenges, but as autonomous drivers of broader territorial development. Within this perspective, in which planning and design are called to operate through forms of territorial fitting, this session aims to:

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Critically discuss both theoretical frameworks and empirical approaches to addressing the urban/rural divide;

Examine emerging spatial configurations and hierarchies resulting from uneven urbanization and socio-economic polarization;

Analyse the role of small and medium-sized settlements in rearticulating territorial networks;

Investigate how cultural practices and local forms of organization contribute to shaping territorial identities and cohesion;

Explore urban planning and design approaches that integrate multi-scalar relationships and foster more equitable and balanced territorial development