

URBAN RESILIENCE

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Lessons on Urban Environmental Planning from Turkey

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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From an idea of Luca Mercalli

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PREFACE

The idea behind this writing originated from a brief interview with a famous Italian climatologist, Luca Mercalli. He kindly made himself available despite the strange Christmas of 2021. It was a short but passionate interview.

Luca is someone I know very little, in fact, I don't know him at all. But in one way or another, he has always been "close" to me: he wrote the preface to "L'insostenibile consumo di suolo" (The unsustainable land take) a book I wrote with Ciro Gardi and Nicola Dall'Olio in 2013. It was a beautiful connection to what would become the theme of my research. At that time, I was still completing my Ph.D. Then, we met at a few seminars, and now I reached out to him for this further small collaboration/interview.

Although I don't know him personally, I could place him among those who embody a "vertical" dimension, not only as a metaphor for a good relationship with the mountains, but as an approach to life and people. To climate and the environment. By that, I mean distinguishing oneself from the average person who bases their existence on the Cartesian space of the horizon in front of their nose, without raising or lowering their gaze to give deeper meaning to things. Repeating without reflecting: an existential theme that I can hardly escape in this writing.

In short, I admit that I felt a sense of agitation about interviewing him, and I knew I had very little time available. When the video call started, I tried to come up with a banal "how are you?" and his response, "I'm tearing pages out of my agenda," immediately reminded me of the limited time.

I tried to recover from my embarrassment, but it was Luca who intervened: "So, you're in Turkey?"

I responded with yes, in the Aegean region. Since mid-February 2021, I have been working as an Assistant Professor at the Izmir Institute of Technology. "I try to teach what it means to plan in an ecologically compatible way, even though there is no trace of sustainable planning in this place."

Then something unusual happened, which rarely occurs with ordinary people. The roles were reversed. Perhaps to ease the tension. Perhaps out of Luca's curiosity. Maybe both. He asked me, "But how is Turkey?"

God... this question is difficult. Because I thought about how Turkey was, and how still it is every day. Really. And it was the question I hoped someone culturally emancipated would ask me sooner or later... And I had prepared the answer during the long walks that mark the distance between my apartment and my workplace.

And so, the interviewee become the interviewer. For a few minutes, I told Luca about some aspects of living here. He listened. His blue eyes were curious. Interested. I realized that these things sounded distant from our world. They are part of me now.

And then he added, "Come on, but it's interesting. No one here knows that world. Jot down some notes on that!" It's true. Including me. There is no real conception of the daily challenge of working and living in a country in which we only know a few traditions.

"Alright, Luca. I'll try to do it, and if you have the time and desire, we can talk about it again."

So, this short Book stems from the reversal of roles that occurred for a few minutes. The interview went well. And I take this opportunity to thank Luca again for granting me this opportunity.

I dedicate this unusual work primarily to him. However, there are friends that I want to include in this dedication: Jenny, Fehmi, Engin, Adile, Koray, Bertan, Taygun, Sila, Eylül... Turkey means you to me. And then to Maristella: here's to the unexpected encounters that shape our stories.

11.57 a.m., December 25, 2021.

Sitting at my desk in the Department, the idea about a manuscript titled *Urban Resilience: Lessons on Urban Environmental Planning from Turkey* take shape. From up here on the rocky terrain where they decided to build the Gulbahce campus (Urla) in 1992, 30 km or more from Izmir, one of the most unsustainable campuses I have ever known, the brief Fellinian retrospective begins. I look beyond the window at the gulf that opens to the Aegean Sea, but in my mind, the film starts. The sound of the film reel rewinding transforms the cinematic metaphor into a slow retrace of a year with a Middle Eastern flavor. Some flashes become prompts that I want to capture on paper here and now. It can be amusing, but above all, writing is a process that involves the emotional aspect, extracting meaning from it and taking stock of the situation.

For someone with a nautical license, without coastal limits, taking a ship's position is a fundamental exercise. Every one of us should occasionally take our bearings. It serves to position ourselves in life. It helps us redraw our strategy and correct any mistakes. It also helps us critically review our choices and evaluate our habits. It even involves feeling pain and understanding its nuances, its expressions.

I have had the fortune of being able to distance myself from Italy and come here to teach and conduct research. And I realize how genuinely partial the comfortable, polished view of a world we don't know is. I mean the conception of the world based on commonplaces, the absence of a "vertical" conception of the world, of its existence.

Turkey is an extraordinarily biodiverse land. I'm not talking about the "regionalism" that distinguishes the Italian territory and culture. I'm talking about a broader conception of life and spirit that includes aspects of real counterbalance, chaos, and resilience that we haven't developed. I don't know the reasons for it. Maybe... there are parts of this spirit that I believe partly come from Middle Eastern Sufism. First developed in the Persian world, then in the Arab world, and finally rooted in Turkish-Ottoman culture, they characterize elements of extreme openness to life on one hand and extreme or intimate protection on the other. Certainly, exposing oneself to life without protection seems to resemble what I have experienced and still experience living in this part of the world.

There are profound differences, deep asymmetries, great diversity, and sociocultural aspects that I can only grasp at. On other hand, I, too, will inevitably provide a partial view of history. As someone who has moved to Aegean Turkey, a place profoundly different from the more conservative character that even a Western city like Istanbul maintains compared to Izmir.

I don't know anything about the Kurdish issue, nor have I visited cities in the east that profoundly differ from the more liberal area where I am staying. Izmir and the Turkish Aegean coast are essentially similar to our Greco-Latin culture. The coast is dotted with Greek and Roman cities. The "culture" is decidedly Mediterranean, just like the climate and cuisine. If it weren't for religious practices, which are mostly observed by older people, I wouldn't say that I'm far from a world that shares the same roots as mine. I visit Ephesus or Pergamon and find the columns that I used to admire from the car window as my father drove through Aquileia, just 10 km from where I was born, in Grado. The Mediterranean Sea has been a basin of great cultural unification. I could dive into the turquoise water and, if I had enough strength and breath, I could reach the green, sandy waters of the Adriatic shores, explaining that they have been, and still are, united by millennia of shared history. In Izmir, the last Italians left a hundred years ago with the Greek War of Independence. But the bridge to our Western culture is truly a matter of miles. Over there is Chios. Europe. Today, taking a ferry from Turkey to Greece, apart from being a complicated operation, means landing in two separate worlds.

It's incredible how modern history has separated and created divisions and tensions instead of uniting.

And it is precisely from here that I understand better how the term “Europe” has a meaning that we take for granted but is not at all... everything here is complicated. Making a phone call. Thinking about moving to Turkey is reasoning at the limit of possibility... requesting the conversion of a document.

With this book, I will try to organize some topics on which I have been able to reflect this year. I will do so by using banal and personal thoughts that triggered my attention and which I used as the genesis of each chapter. I would like to think that those who read can get the real meaning of my idea of research, which is purely personal, concrete, intimate, and inductive.

Being an exercise I am not accustomed to, I fear that I will not be able to adequately develop many concepts. I lean toward writing, but I have never professionally measured myself in an environment other than international environmental essays, which is the field where I teach and conduct research.

As I write, a certain personal style will emerge that I will hardly be able to control.

I hope it sounds pleasurable and harmonious... happy reading.