Borgo Mezzanone. Rurality, Ethnic and Race Conflict[1]



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Abstract
Just a few steps away from the fascist village of Borgo Mezzanone, lies the largest informal settlement in Apulia. A piece of sub-Saharan city occupying the Italian territory, in the heart of Foggia province countryside. The observation of the spaces of Borgo Mezzanone invites us to reflect upon the precarious nature of human beings' livelihoods in the world and urges a debate on raciality issues in deliberately obscured contexts. What happens in sites where resistance and tensions between spaces and bodies become so radical? What devices or infrastructures shape them? What do the terms protection and life mean in such a context? Borgo Mezzanone is an extreme territory. It reveals itself as a racist scene, a place of resistance and dependence on extractive logics and exploitative dynamics, muscular and carnal, in which the unbearable tensions between bodies, languages, noises and colours are asserted amidst hard and rejecting spaces.

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1 - (Previous page) Research conducted by Camilla Rondot as a master thesis project of the course Architecture Construction City, Politecnico di Torino, 2020-2021. Supervisors: Cristina Bianchetti and Antonio di Campli. The survey is part of the collective research "Lifelines" funded by the Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning (Politecnico di Torino) and supported by UCL (University of London) coordinated by Camillo Boano and Cristina Bianchetti.



Fig. 0 - (Previous page) QR code of the full research publication. https://territoridellacondivisione.wordpress.com/2021/10/05/abitare-lopacita-gli-spazi-rurali-di-borgo-mezzanone/.

Fig. 1 - Borgo Mezzanone framework.

Borgo Mezzanone is an untreatable case. An extreme territory – a politically, socially and spatially radical place – where the inequality and exploitative dynamics are made evident in space through corporal and spatial dimensions. The observation of Borgo Mezzanone invites us to reflect on the precarious nature of human beings' livelihoods in the world and urges a debate on raciality issues in deliberately obscured contexts. Borgo Mezzanone, as this text is going to explain further, is one of the old rural villages encased in the network of settlements founded during the Fascist regime in the province of Foggia (Apulia Region). Today, one of the largest informal settlements in Italy has its place here. With this contribution we aim, on one hand, to make public the exploitation of spaces and bodies witnessed in this territory, particularly to disciplines that revolve around "the urban", and, on the other, to make explicit the relationships between production, exploitation, race and power.



In Borgo Mezzanone, the conventional regular patterns dating back to land reclamation in the 1930s intertwine with the historic village and one of the largest informal settlements in Apulia. Rural areas of the Tavoliere delle Puglie have undergone a slow phenomenon of abandonment after important remediation actions, carried out between the two wars until the 1960s and 1970s. Urban policies have completely abandoned the issue of rural villages, failing to fully grasp issues linked to them and trivially neglecting implications once these villages were emptied. These places were slowly occupied by the incoming migrant labour force needed in agriculture. Conveniently located to allow daily commuting to those who get to work in the fields, the logistical reasons and availability of vacant spaces made Borgo Mezzanone available to the population of migrant workers. Here the presence of migrants raises the question of the relationship between rurality, ethnicity and race conflicts in “places increasingly delineated as assemblages composed of fragments of ‘elsewhere’ embedded in their actual ‘here’.” (Di Campli, 2019: 21).

Fig. 2 - Zenithal image of the Borgo Mezzanone area. On the left the village, on the right the informal settlement.



Fig. 3 - View of informal settlement of Borgo Mezzanone. Camilla Rondot, June 2021.

The spatial rationality in the distribution of the ring of villages surrounding Foggia, evident in the organization of the main infrastructures, in the subdivision of cultivated land and informal living shelters of the migrant workers, converge in a few miles of Tavoliere. The tension between exploited spaces and abused bodies, embodied to its extreme, is at the foundation of the economic systems of the Province of Foggia.



The tension between spaces and exploited bodies makes possible to relocate the debate and shed light on a dark and blurred territory where "one cannot speak of the body without space, and vice versa: in other words, it is the staging, in space, of bodies-in-place or bodies-out-of-place" (Bianchetti, 2020: 109, translation by the authors). The territory of Tavoliere delle Puglie, once dedicated to grazing, now is transformed into one of the most important agricultural production areas in Italy; yet, land produce comes from the exploitation of bodies, those of illegal migrant workers forced to work without rights in order to survive.



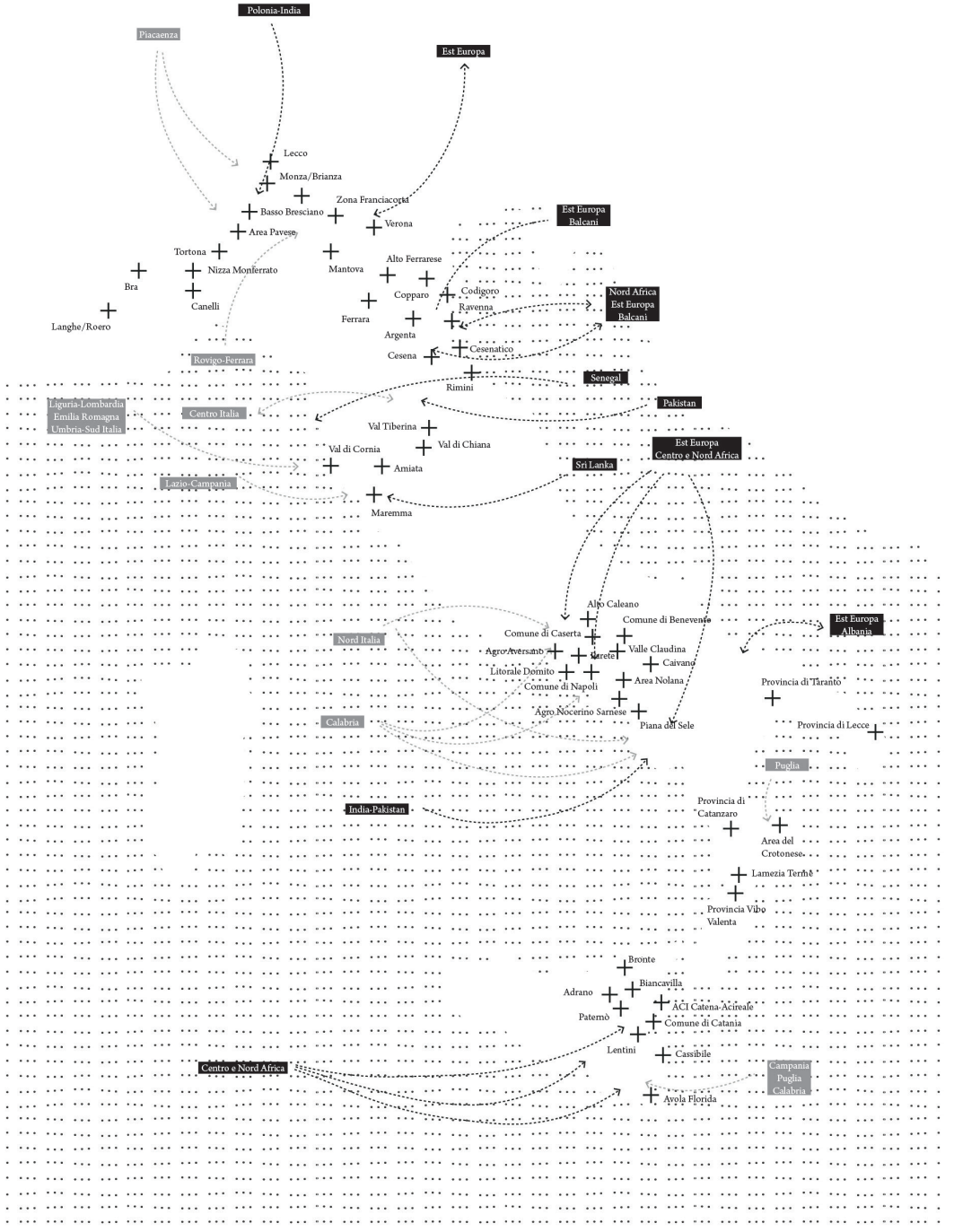
Fig. 4 - View of the outer border of the informal settlement of Borgo Mezzanone. Camilla Rondot, June 2021.

Fig. 5 - Immigrant workers' movement map. Spring.

The bodies that plough the fields of Capitanata describe orbital movements, express dependencies and claim resistance. The spaces that hold the stories of this relocated Subsaharan settlement in the Province of Foggia speak of shadows, loss and race.

Indeed, colours help define the boundaries of the practices we look at: yellows and greens of fields that never rest, burnt by the sun; black of shadow, enslaved bodies. "In the context of the plantation, the humanity of the slave appears as the perfect representation of a shadow. The condition of the slave results from a triple loss: the loss of a 'home', the loss of rights over one's body and the loss of political status" (Mbembe, 2016: 24).

Reflecting on the theme of the loss of rights and duties allows us to describe the relationship between bodies and spaces in a dimension of power. Processes that frame these tensions are deeply rooted in the subjects and their place: the labourers who inhabit Borgo Mezzanone territory, shaped by characters of vulnerability, fragility and adaptation. The bond between spaces and bodies is so visceral as to define its forms. On a former airstrip, in use until the 1990s, bodies live in their own encumbrance, wriggling out of something that has depth and friction (Moresco, 2009), arranging shelters, refuges, repairs that house them; adapting their own moral, political and affective conceptions to dynamics of resistance and mutual aid.



spring

national routes

international routes

Fig. 6 - Immigrant workers' movement map. Summer.

Fig. 7 - (Next page) Immigrant workers' movement map. Fall.

Fig. 8 - (Next page) Immigrant workers' movement map. Winter.

What happens in places where resistance and tensions between spaces and bodies become so radical? What devices or implicit infrastructures shape these territories? How are they grafted as protective devices for the livelihoods of those who can only survive there? What do the terms protection and life mean in such a context?

"Can one lead a good life in a bad life?" asks Judith Butler (2012). Rephrasing her statement, how can one think of living well in a world where many live badly? What does it mean to live well in conditions of absolute precariousness and lack of sheltering dignity? Borgo Mezzanone is an extreme territory, yet not unique in the Italian context. As a racialized scene, the space of bodies displays resistance and dependence on extractive logics and exploitative dynamics. Unbearable tensions between muscular and carnal bodies, languages, noises and colours become public in the hard space of the airstrip.

Borgo Mezzanone is a territory made up of pieces within a rural space shaped by extractive dynamics. The relations which these pieces establish with the surroundings are defined by sequences of productive places and by orbital movements of bodies and products that mark moral and physical furrows. Mobility plays a central role in the system of labour exploitation that characterises agricultural production in the Tavoliere. This is because, if observed on a broader scale, the contemporary capitalist system is also held together, mainly, by the relationships established between migratory movements and those of goods, information and capital.

In this sense, the dynamism of this phenomenon follows two orders of movements: of who is moving and of what moves. Bodies and produce move within borders that widen and narrow, intertwining with each other; hands, legs, and bent backs of labourers, who follow the seasonality of the produce forced out of soil; produces then move along material and non-material infrastructures to reach the interconnected hubs of global distribution and food processing.

Rhythms and stages that mark the movements of the agricultural sector are among the fundamental elements that guide our interpretation of the dynamics that covertly govern this economic sector.

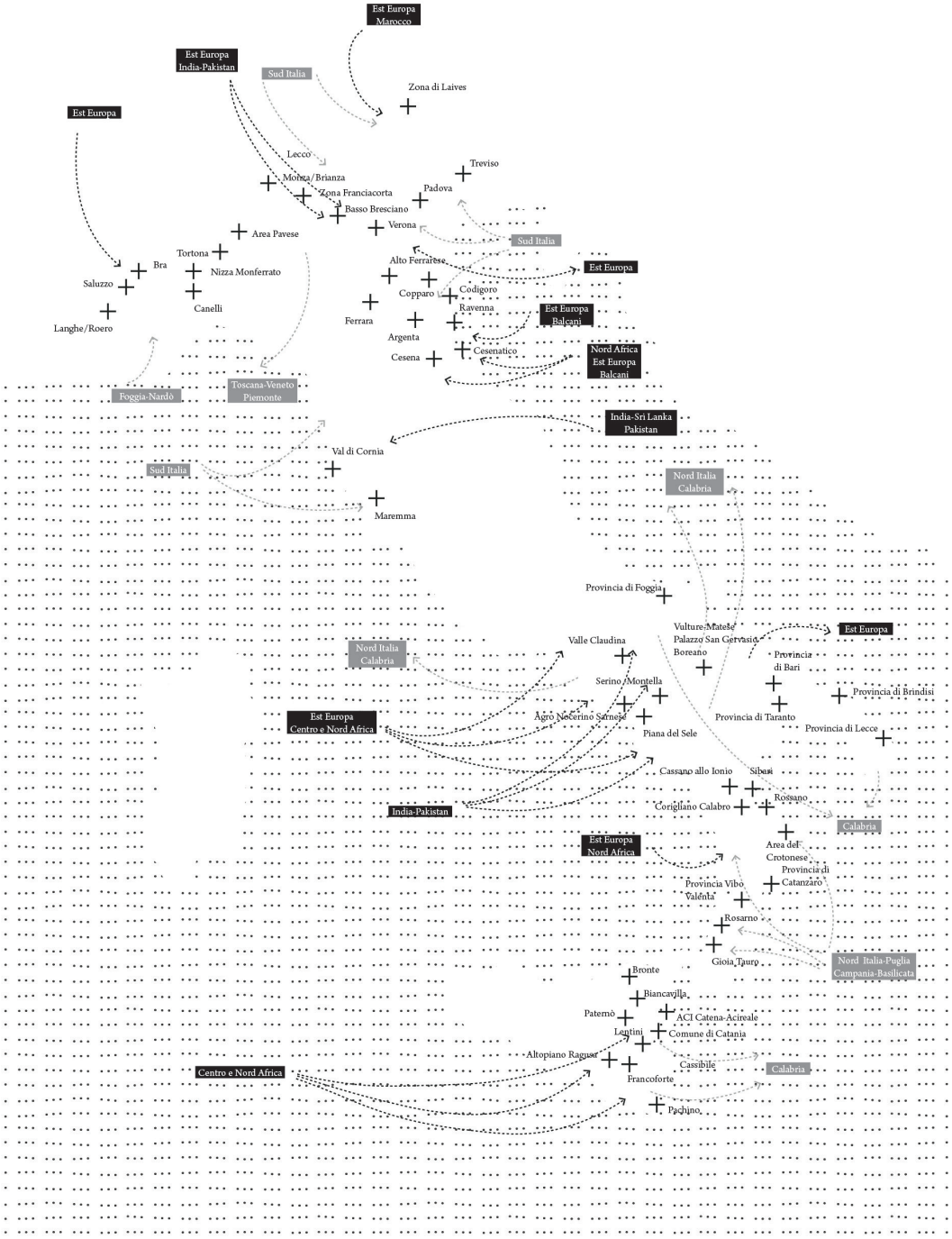
This productive network is clearly recognizable in a variety of ways that also involve space in its material characteristics: the extractive nature of the modes of production, added to the increasing flows of refugees and displaced persons willing to work in the countryside, has the direct consequence of redefining the soil of the countryside as something fluid, unstable and precarious, articulating again some of its spatial and social characteristics. The radical crisis that these spaces have been experiencing for several years now shatters the conventional image of the countryside. Locations such as Borgo Mezzanone but also Cerignola, Rignano Garganico and Orta Nuova are transformed into complex settings that welcome and exploit new populations, mainly from Africa, to engage in Apulia's huge agricultural production machine.



summer

national routes

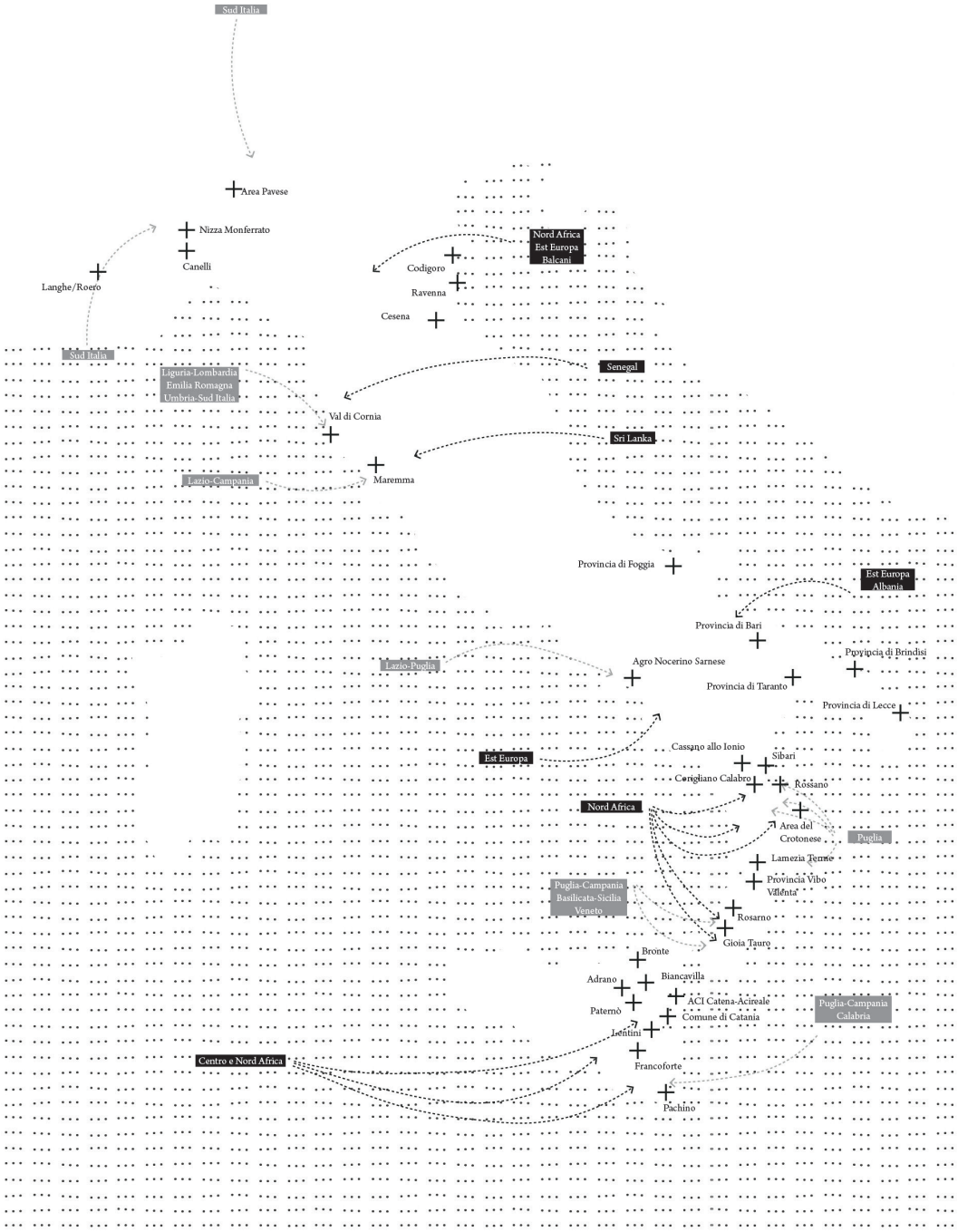
international routes



fall

national routes

international routes



winter

national routes

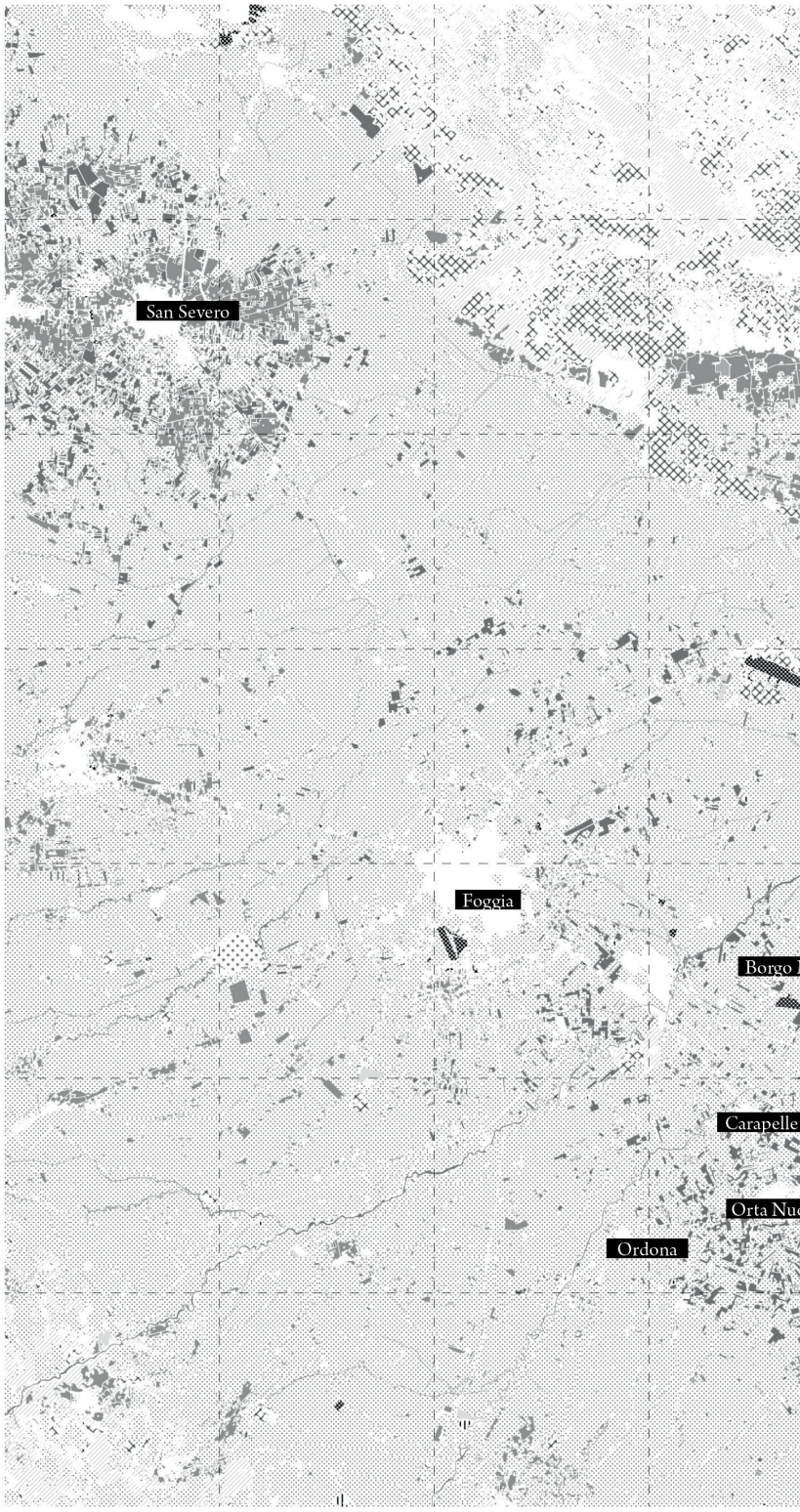
international routes

Fig. 9 - Land use map. Revised from PPTR Regione Puglia, 2015.

Fig. 10 - (Next page) Farm distribution. Revised from PPTR Regione Puglia, 2015.

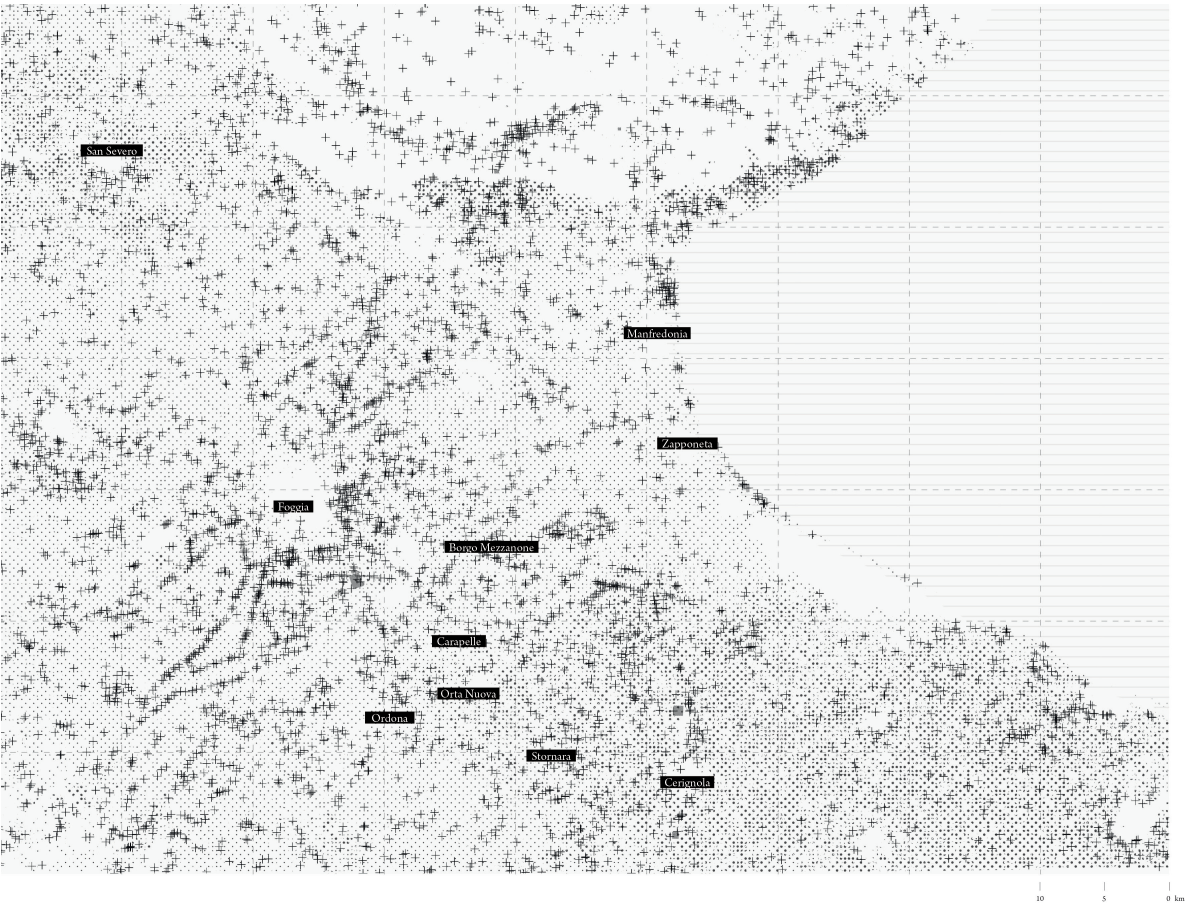
Fig. 11 - (Next page) Major infrastructures. Revised from PPTR Regione Puglia, 2015.

agricultural land use map



permanent crops
natural pasture areas
agroforestry areas
water basins
mixed forests
canals and waterways
rivers and torrents
horticultural crops under glass
olive groves
vineyards
saline
simple arable crops
lakes, lagoons, marshes
meadows and wooded pastures
reworked soils


Manfredonia
Zapponeta
Mezzanone
Stornara
Cerignola



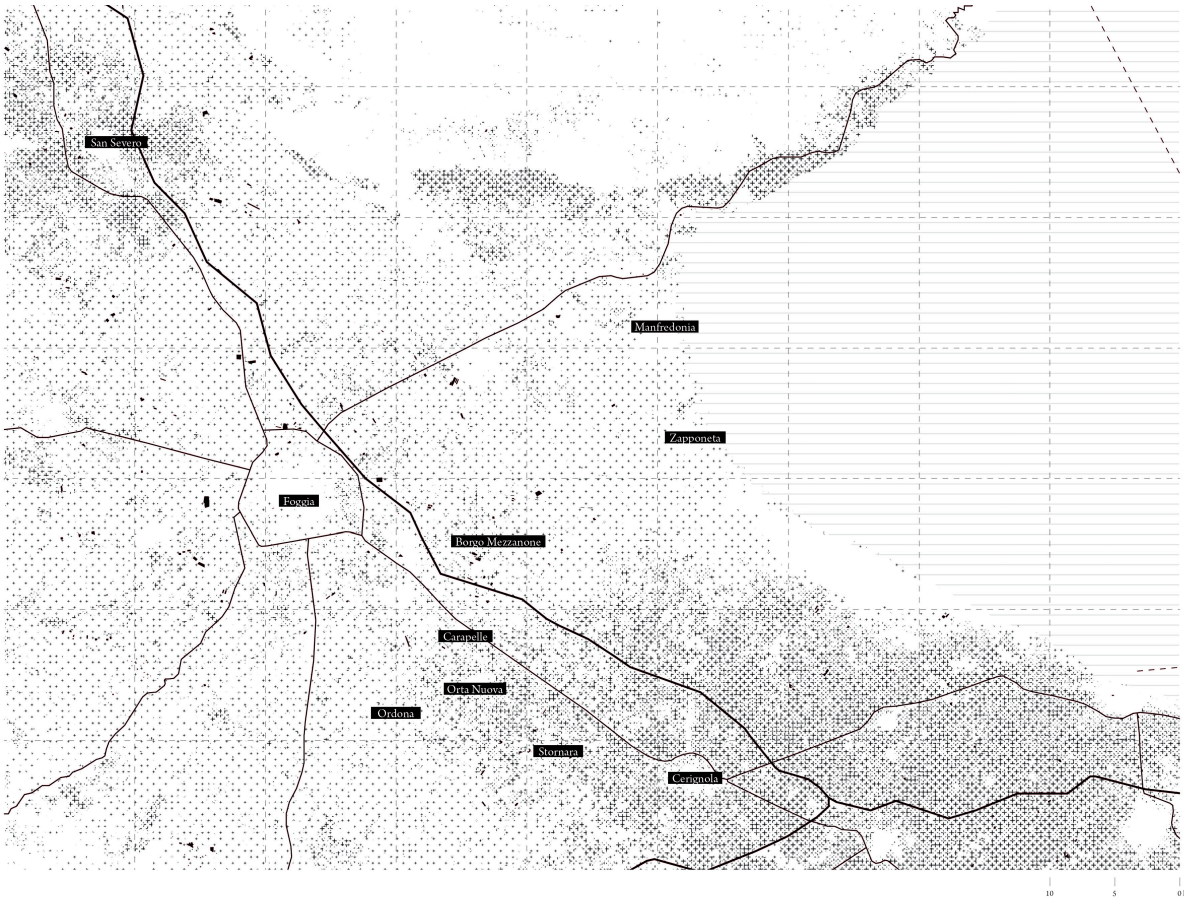
permanent crops
temporary crops
agroforestry areas
horticultural crops under glass
simple arable crops
olive groves
vineyards
fruit trees
farm

This is not because of the type of cultivation, the environmental aspects, or the productive aspects, but because of the way in which an articulated system of production, only partially visible and legal, is built around this rural condition.

The Apulia productive machine is characterized by a dual extraction method. On the one hand, the land becomes the terrain from which raw material – i.e. agricultural produce – is extracted to become a marketable product; on the other, bodies are conceived as the commodity called labour power. Such double extraction of value reveals estranged conditions for the current European welfare state, yet it is part of its industrial chain.

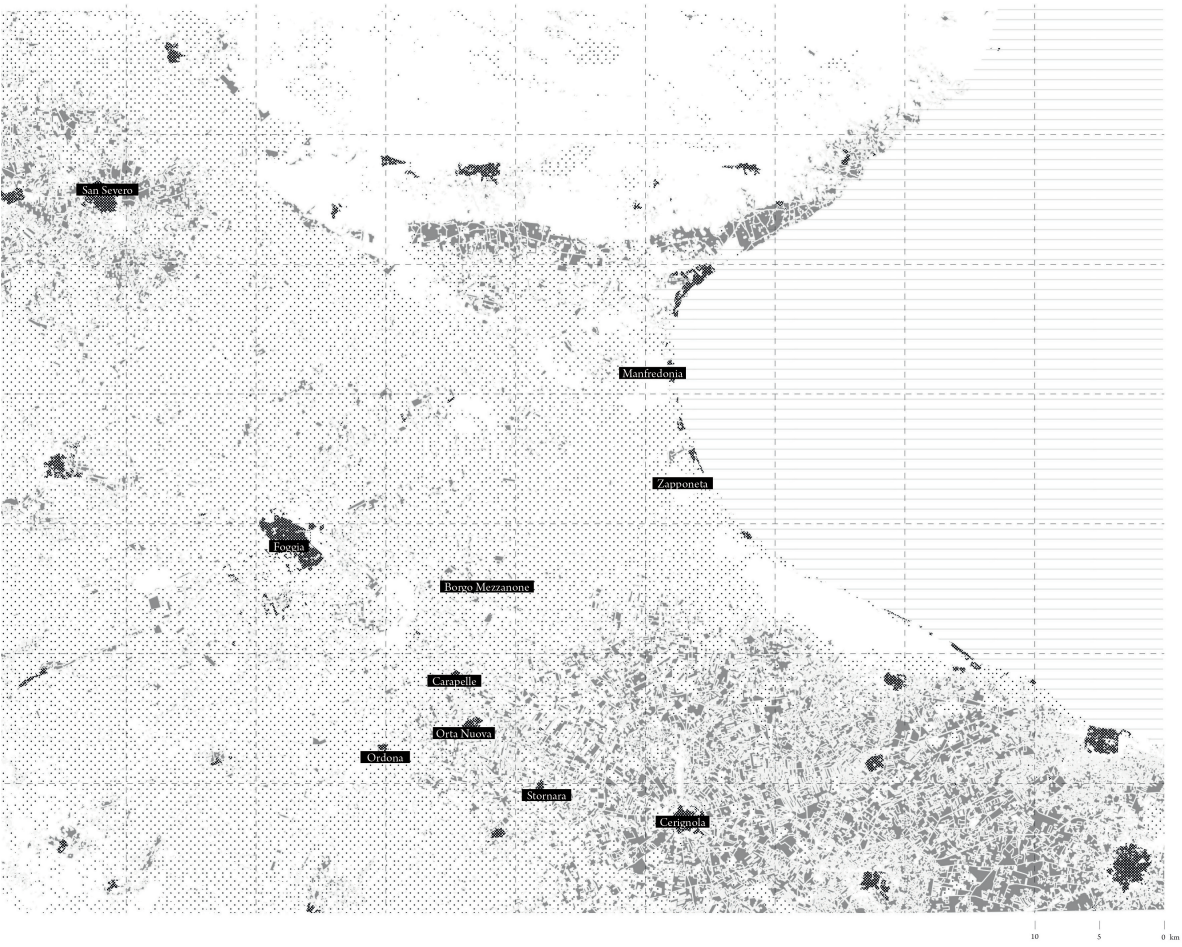
Contrary to expectations, in the Capitanata plantations the devaluation and the exploitation of labour make the difference between the value of work performed by the worker and its remuneration (CREA, 2020). Through the devaluation of the service provided by the migrant labour force, companies can adapt to the low prices managed by large-scale retail chains.

Yet the devaluation of performed work is not just a matter of labour exploitation; it rather is a complex system built on social, economic and cultural conditions rooted in the precarious livelihood and absolute poverty



through which migrant workers serve the agricultural production network. Because of these dynamics, which are much more complex than they are described here, intermediary figures between farms and available workers, the caporale, are crucial. The illegal system of *caporalato*[2] structures the relationships between labour supply and demand, or between companies and migrant workers in search of the sustenance means to survive. Rural ghettos, villages of shacks, informal settlements near abandoned farmhouses, are becoming a common feature of the Mediterranean rural context, as in Capitanata. Their socio-spatial characteristics allow some reflections on the dynamics that lead to the appearance of certain housing devices in specific territories. The fragmented rural context in the province of Foggia and the opacity of the seasonal labour supply, in the Capitanata plains, make these territories natural catalysts for the flows of irregular migrants, favouring their dispersion throughout the territory (Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto, 2020). Labour in southern Italy agriculture is closely linked to the way in which housing segregation reproduces alternative organizations of livelihoods (Caruso, 2018).

The Borgo Mezzanone airstrip is part of the circuit of informal settlements in the Apulian Capitanata. Proceeding on bumpy roads, one suddenly finds



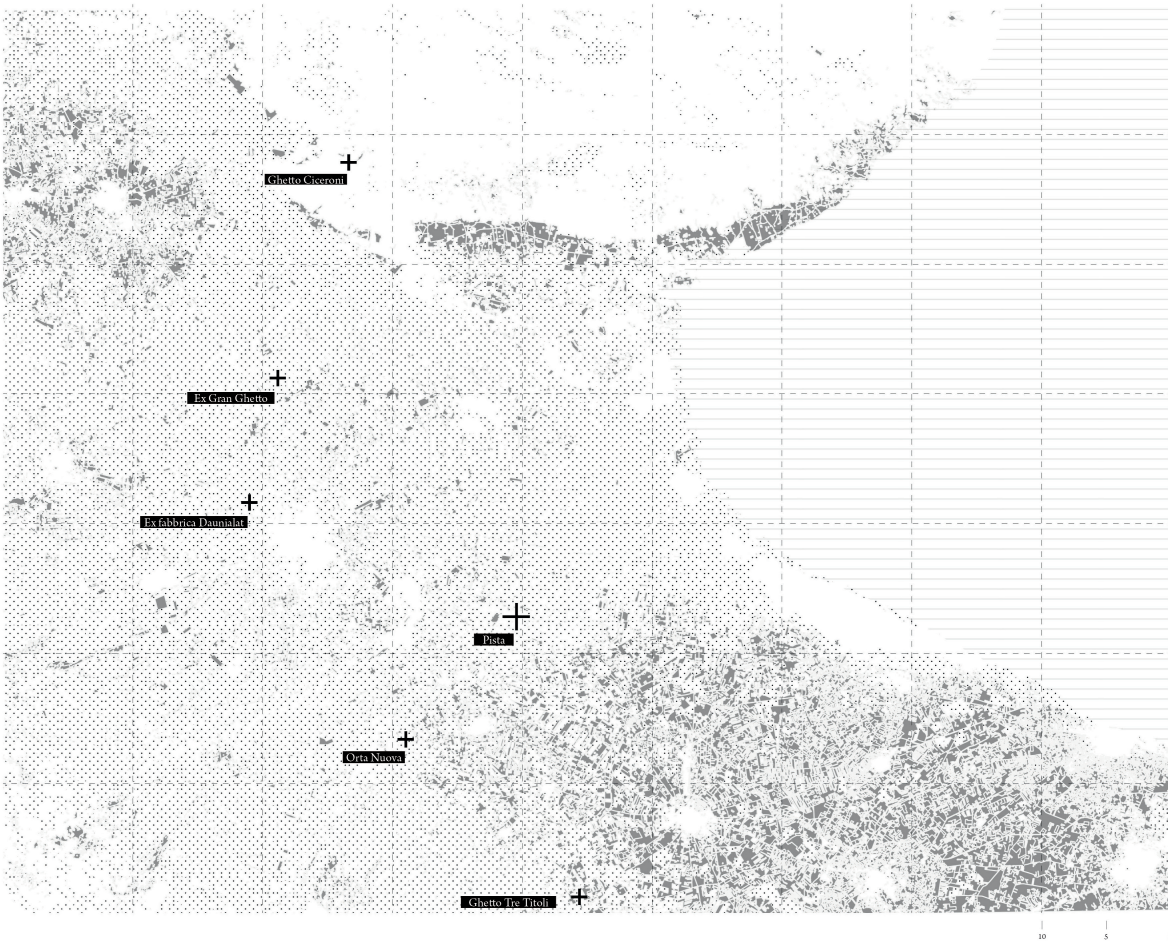
permanent crops
temporary crops
agroforestry areas
horticultural crops under glass
simple arable crops
olive groves
vineyards
fruit trees
old continuous residential fabric
recent continuous residential fabric

2 – Illegal intermediation between the employer, the so-called "caporale", and the worker based on the exploitation of the letter's condition of vulenerability. This form of oppression results in working conditions that forge modern slavery: lack of adequate social and legal protection, wages below the national minimum, constant threat of losing the job, endurance of physical and moral violence. In the agricultural sector, the "caporale" handles the workers' recruitment, housing and transportation on the fields, often demanding a percentage of the workers' wage in addition to the remuneration provided by the employer.

3 – CARA is the Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers, now closed for several years across Italy.

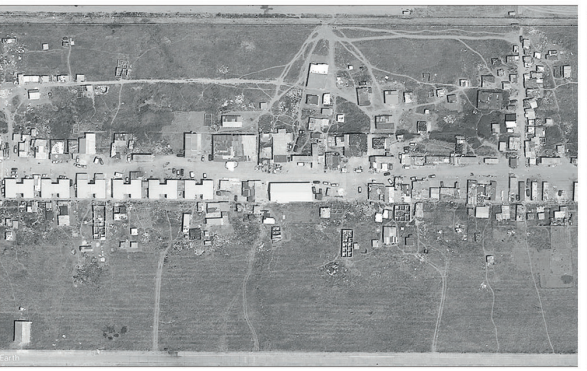
Fig. 12 - Rural villages and settlements. Revised from PPTR Regione Puglia, 2015.

Fig. 13 - Informal settlements. Revised from research by Antonio Ciniero, updated September 2020.



oneself along a concrete flow on which flights once landed and took off and now men and women live and die enslaved. In the summer months, around two thousand people populate the informal settlement of Borgo Mezzanone, developed on the site of a former NATO airstrip, behind the CARA.[3] Shelters have a linear organization along the last miles of the airport infrastructure, separated by barbed wire fences from the wheat fields that surround it. Now deprived of their initial containment function, fences are now perforated in several points to allow working bodies to reach the work field. Two parallel axes result, bordering the asphalt platform of the old CARA. Shelters develop mainly in the half of the airstrip adjacent to the centre. The entrance space is marked by the succession of three gates that were set up in the first years of the centre's development. Homes built with discarded materials alternate with old containers or huts in bricks and mortar, echoing the typical structures of houses in sub-Saharan African cities. Everyone lives on the ground floor, taking advantage of the presence of verandas leaning against the existing shacks or containers, further softening the threshold between public and private space.

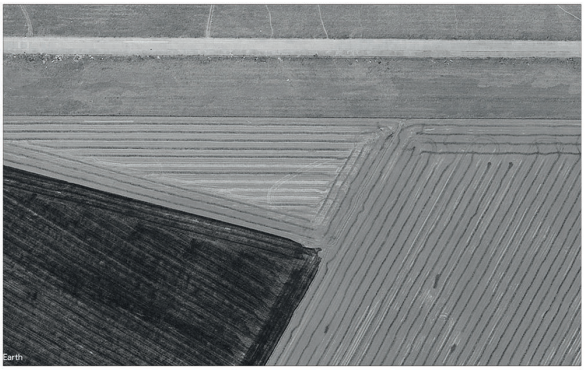
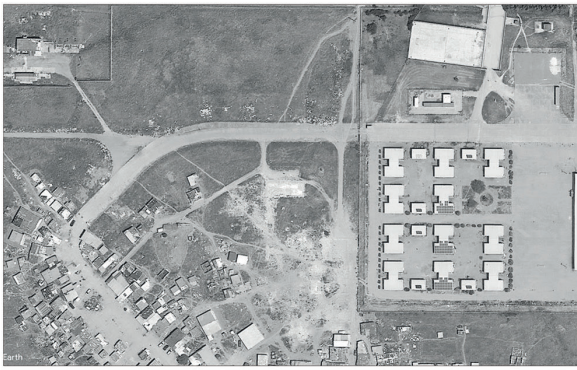
permanent crops
temporary crops
agroforestry areas
horticultural crops under glass
simple arable crops
olive groves
vineyards
fruit trees
Informal settlements











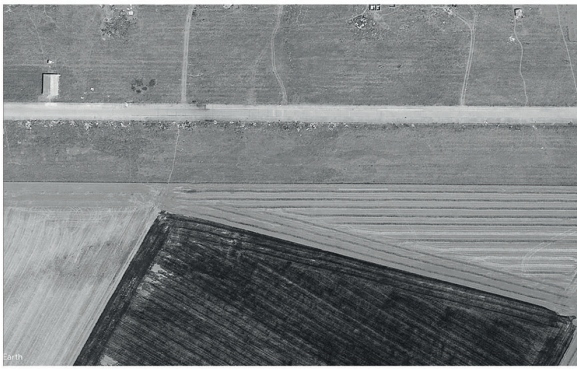
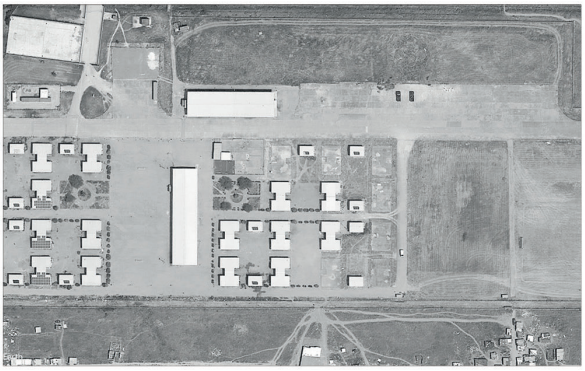
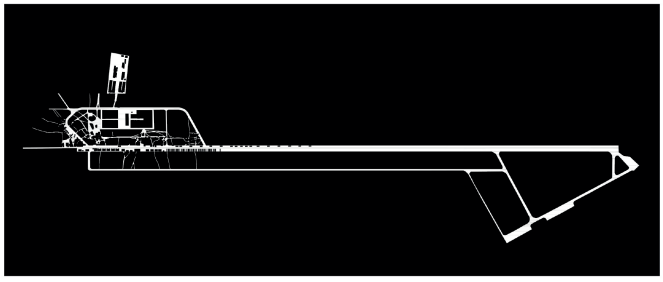



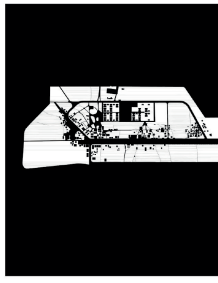

Fig. 14 - (Previous page) Fragments zenithal view informal settlement of Borgo Mezzanone. Google Earth.

The absence of a clear hierarchy in the structure determines the lack of a gradient in the articulation of open spaces and of mediation between places dedicated to communal living and places of intimacy. The public places are mostly housed in containers where collective activities take place.
The Borgo Mezzanone airstrip settlement is a place of relationships, as in any real city, and a non-white architecture. Certainly, it is a space of dependencies and resistances that manifest socially and spatially through dynamics of mutual aid, informal practices of life support, caring and taking care of others. It is a place marked by a logic of attraction and expulsion, where relationships often characterise for discord and violence. Living in Borgo Mezzanone, in the airstrip, means experiencing the condition of arranging the meaning of a home in a process of constant negotiation. In the fragments of Borgo Mezzanone, not only dwellings are arranged, but the complex emotional and moral concepts of diversity find spaces and ways of expressing themselves (Bianchetti, 2020).
Observing Borgo Mezzanone through disciplines such as architecture and urbanism is indispensable for rethinking this territory. Looking at those conditions implies trying to hold together the stratifications of which this place is composed, to accept its fragility, to have a disillusioned look at the issues of informality and difference.

SPACE



paved areas

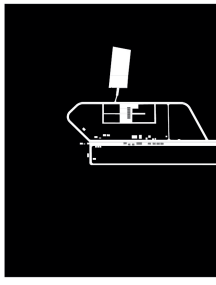


unbuilt soil

PRACTICES



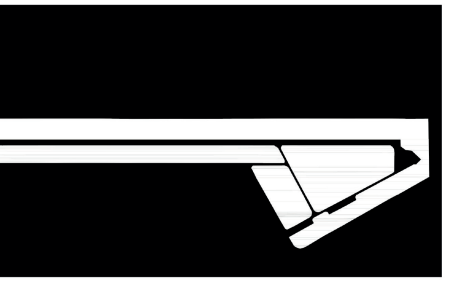
houses



services

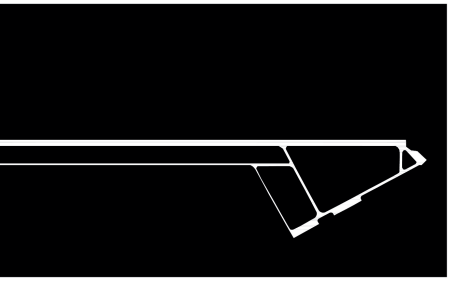
Investigating the relationship between production, exploitation, race and power, in a physical place where these issues clash violently, responds to the urgency of making this issue a public problem. The rural spaces of Foggia are transformed into places of difference, spaces that unwillingly welcome conflict and diversity.
The territory of Borgo Mezzanone is a threshold marked by incessant negotiation, a figure of proximity, division and endless movement. It is a place of arrivals and departures, of hostile intrusions and conflicts. This place manifests the vulnerability of both migrants and other social groups interacting in this part of the Foggia countryside. The Borgo Mezzanone coastline is a place to learn and reflect on the difficulties of co-existence in the rural space. Observing this place allows us to think about a project that welcomes relations and contact. Sometimes these relationships are harmonious, more often they are characterised by discord and violence.
The research carried out on the territory of Borgo Mezzanone, on its stratifications, on its ambiguities, on its opacity, opens up a number of reflections on the themes of co-existence, separation and injustice, observing them with a disillusioned and conscious investigation of otherness, through a project of difference.

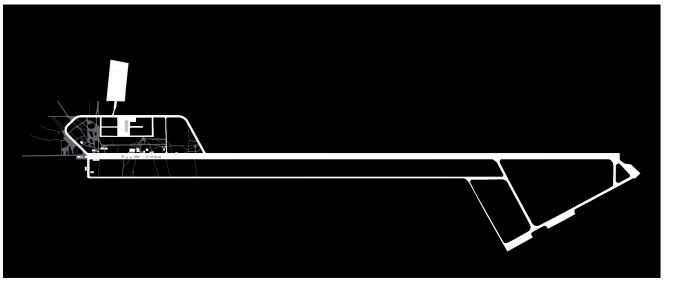
Fig. 15 - Land use diagrams of the informal settlement of Borgo Mezzanone. Camilla Rondot, June 2021.





cars





public space





Fig. 16 - Photo of housing in the informal settlement of Borgo Mezzanone. Camilla Rondot, June 2021.







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Fig. 17 - (previous page) Photo of housing in the informal settlement of Borgo Mezzanone. Camilla Rondot, June 2021.

Fig. 18 - (previous page) Photo of housing in the informal settlement of Borgo Mezzanone. Camilla Rondot, June 2021.

Fig. 19 - Photo of housing in the informal settlement of Borgo Mezzanone. Camilla Rondot, June 2021.