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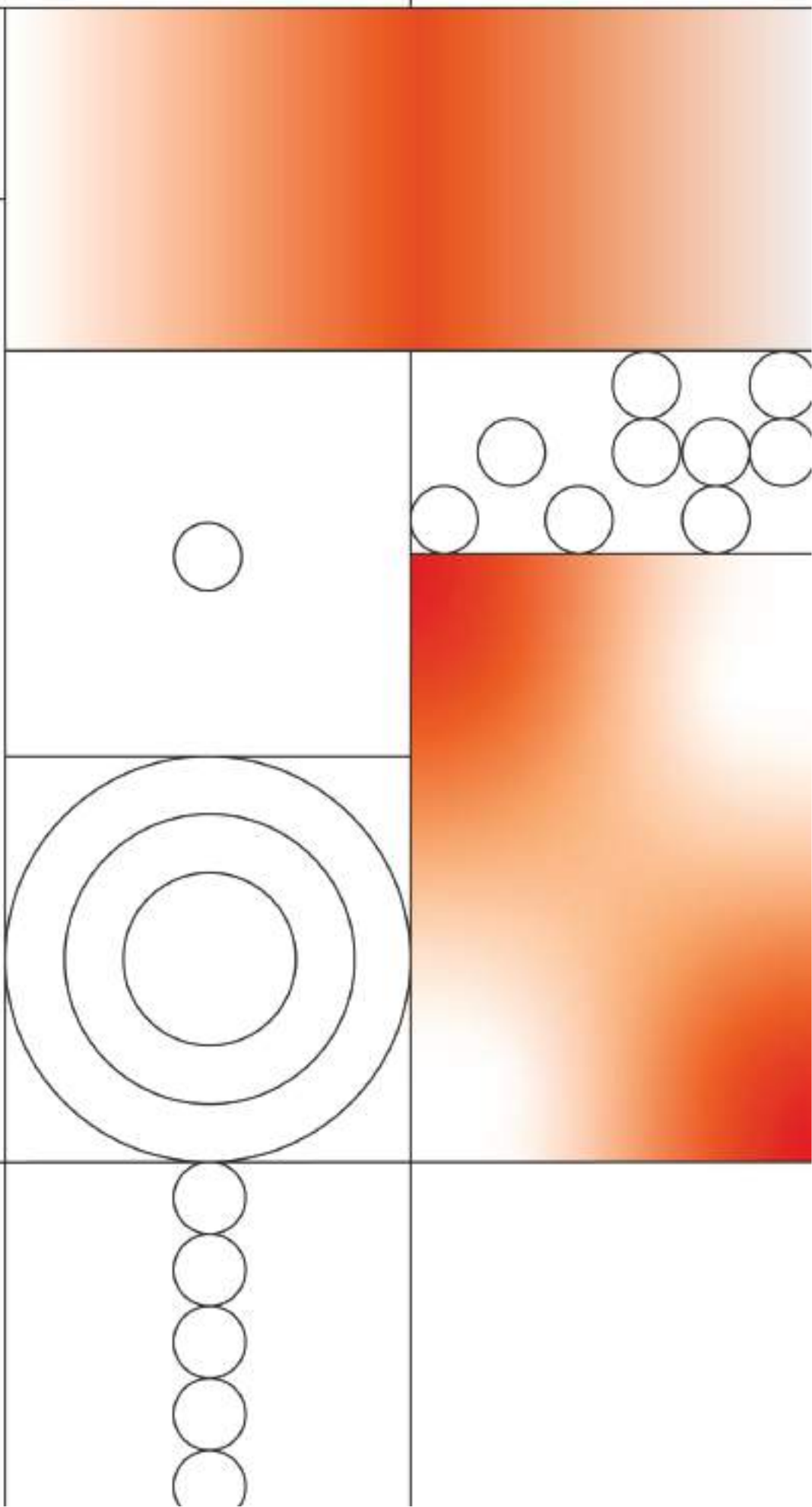


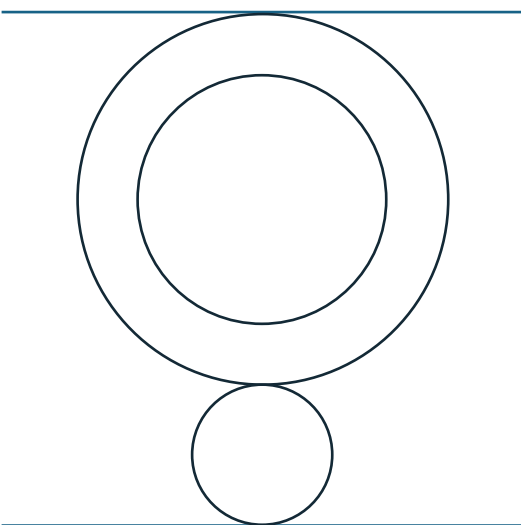
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The possible Milan of Giuseppe de Finetti

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ABSTRACT

Unrealized architectural projects often spark academic debate, yet they hold a unique potential: to evoke alternative visions of the built environment. Giuseppe de Finetti, for Milan, presents alternative visions that reveal reflections about urban form and development. The architect's early 20th-century proposals bridge architectural and urban scales, integrating public spaces and infrastructure. Instead of ring roads, he envisions main roads traversing the city, inspired by Roman principles to meet modern mobility needs. This approach is evident in many of his transformation proposals for Milan, such as the projects for Fontana and Beccaria squares, or the proposal *La strada Lombarda*. In his urban proposal, de Finetti blends the logical compositional principles of the Classic Era with the modern needs of the city. The proposal for the transformation of the *Arena Civica* and the surrounding area shows more explicitly how de Finetti links architecture and public spaces with infrastructures to connect the city's past and future. As a whole his vision offers practical design solutions that balance historical continuity with modern urban needs.

URBAN TRANSFORMATION | PUBLIC SPACES | UNREALIZED PROJECTS | GIUSEPPE DE FINETTI | MILAN

1. The de Finetti ideology

The construction of the city is the concept that moves the entire research about the work of the architect Giuseppe de Finetti. Through the analysis of his unrealized projects, it can be seized the architect's possible vision for Milan. This paper's objective is to provide an overview of how such vision can be inferred by taking into consideration works of de Finetti that allow to outline key concepts of the architect's vision and, at the same time, to illustrate key features of de Finetti's approach to urban composition through the analysis of relevant representative cases.

The architect is mainly known for several realized projects such as Casa La Meridiana in Milan and other interiors and exterior architectural works. However, de Finetti has also done extensive research on an urban scale for several possible proposals for Milan. One of his first projects is represented by the work, made with Club degli Urbanisti, for the Masterplan proposal competition of the 1926-27, in which it emerges an intellectual and clear position on the city's form composition. This proposal, titled *Forma Urbis Mediolani*, tries to define a new transport connection with a new stretch of road called *Racchetta*. This road, on the built environment, passes around the most central historic area of Milan and connects the streets passing by *Porta Nuova* and *Porta Venezia* (at north-east) with *Corso Sempione* (at north-west). The intention is to define a different way system of roads and public spaces across the city, so to transform the form of the city for its present necessities. The urban expansions made by Beruto and Masera across the 19th and the 20th centuries are omnidirectional and conceive Milan as a monocentric core which can be perpetually expanded in every direction. De Finetti, instead, supports the idea according to which the expansion of the city needs to be realized in specific directions: the primary direction is the north-west and the secondary one the north-east. This vision, despite its relations with the Roman implant of Milan and its *cardo* and *decumano*, underlies the modern necessities represented by the mobility from and to the town. The clear image of cities defined by their defensive walls, over the natural landscape, was a typical European conformation until the industrial revolution. Since the 18th and 19th centuries, many of these city walls, like Milan's, have been demolished, changing radically their urban form. For de Finetti, the urban expansion for Milan cannot just be defined by a physical limit which does not exist anymore: what can define the future form of the city is the relationship between public spaces, the built environment and the landscape or, in other words, the construction of the city.



Img. 1

"La città possibile di Giuseppe de Finetti". An invented collage realized by Francesco Lucchi and created by re-drawing selected projects by the architect Giuseppe de Finetti. Copyright: Francesco Lucchi

2. The construction of the city

Since its early history, Milan has been a hub for commerce and multicultural exchanges, earning the title "la città sulle vie delle genti" in literature. This romantic description underscores an important point, namely that urban mobility has consistently been a crucial theme in Milan's urban planning. De Finetti addresses this point through an approach that integrates architecture with mobility. The architect envisions Milan's development through the definition of public spaces that serve simultaneously as infrastructures for mobility and as defining elements of the city's architecture.

Organizing cities along major and minor axes offers a framework for urban planning, prefiguring public spaces that, as Aldo Rossi later observed, become a fixed backdrop for human life. De Finetti consistently emphasizes an architectural definition of public spaces, presenting a clear vision for the city rooted in 19th-century urban planning theories and specifically in Milan's 1807 master plan by the Commissione d'Ornato. In this plan, the urban axes traverse the consolidated city rather than circumventing it along its perimeter. In de Finetti's works, urban themes such as the "street," "square," and "urban block" holds the same relevance as in 19th-century urban theories: what distinguishes de Finetti's approach to these concepts, though, is that the architect adapts them to meet the infrastructure needs of a modern city through architectural design.

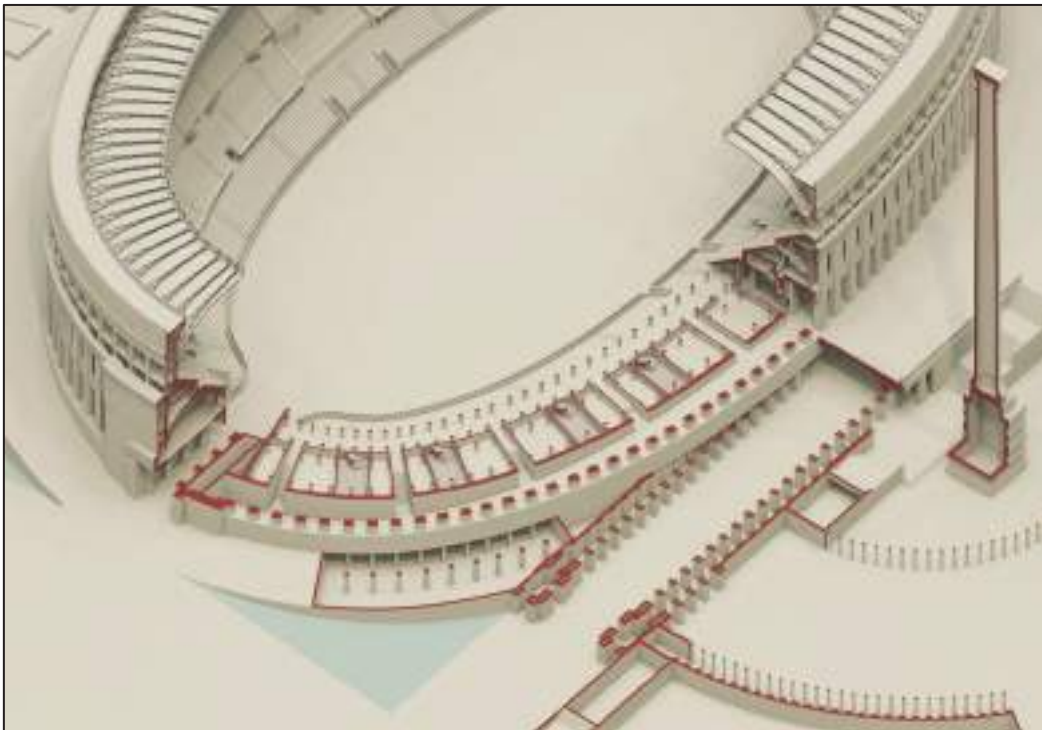
Such approach can be inferred through the analysis of numerous of his unrealized projects. For instance, in several of them the architect places train lines, metro stations, parking facilities, and various public services beneath public spaces. This approach reflects an urban mobility system that traverses the city, penetrating and intersecting its urban and built core. For this vision, the architect presumably draws inspiration from Milan's Classical heritage, including the city's Roman urban structure, as well as from the unrealized 1807 master plan. Additionally, he was most likely influenced by Leonardo da Vinci, another important figure for Milan during the 15th and 16th centuries. In fact, as Leonardo's interest in mobility led him to conceive multiple layers of transit at different elevations, de Finetti's vision of such concept influenced several of his proposals, such as his possible expansion plan for northwest Milan conceived in the late 1940s. For instance, in a notable project called by the architect "autostrada in trincea" (trench highway) de Finetti envisioned a high-capacity road traversing the city to connect with other infrastructures. This multilayered design, featuring both above and below ground levels, was intended to incorporate public spaces, squares, and potential architectural elements along its route. In his various urban and unrealized projects for Milan, de Finetti also demonstrates a hybrid approach that bridges classicism and modernity. He is deeply rooted in the urban and architectural culture of the 19th century, yet he embraces technological innovations and is well-versed in the European architectural landscape of his time. Above all, he recovers from the Classic Era a logical approach to problems to resolve contemporary needs. This modern yet classic attitude defines de Finetti: he is directly connected to the past, attentive to the present, and aims at proposing practical solutions for the future. Raffaella Neri's concept of "modernista classico" can be used to better understand de Finetti's approach. Although not directly connected to the architect, the term can be applied to him: in fact, his approach too goes beyond formalism and historicism as it aims at identifying a rational principle and a method for the project.¹

De Finetti applies such an approach to the complex urban environment of Milan, envisioning the city's organization around primary, penetrating roads that extend in specific territorial directions:

¹ Neri, R., & Vigano, P. (2000). *La modernità del classico*. Venezia: Marsilio editori, p.17

north-west (cardo) and north-east (decumano). This vision guides the composition of his urban projects: the great importance represented by a penetrating axis (as in the past) and by technological mobility infrastructures finds in de Finetti a way through the definition of public and architectural spaces. His city planning concept unifies urban themes, architectural expressions, infrastructural needs, and technology to respond to a possible construction of the city, or more precisely, to the transformation of one of its parts. Most, if not all, of de Finetti's projects underscore the importance of these questions which are conceived at an intermediate scale, between urban planning and architecture.

This approach also anticipates themes later explored by Carlo Aymonino, who says that urban changes are not absolute innovations but rather reinterpretations of the existing built environment, integrating the city's historic memory.²



Img. 2
 “Un grande stadio per Milano”.
 Axonometric section. Re-drawing of the project “Un grande stadio per Milano” of Giuseppe de Finetti.
 Copyright: Francesco Lucchi

De Finetti's various unrealized designs from the 1940s for Fontana and Beccaria squares near the Duomo suggest that his vision goes beyond a simple spatial reorganization. Beneath the ground level, he incorporates public spaces and services, such as an underground square and parking facilities. This strategy is similarly applied in his project for “La Strada Lombarda”, situated north of the Duomo. This project reconfigures an urban block, envisioning a potential train line beneath it that would connect east and west. Since elements of “La Strada Lombarda” evoke classical forms such as the Stoà of Attalus, the architectural vision at the core of this project attests too how de Finetti's projects tend to suggest analogies to and draw from the Classical Era. In the mentioned proposals,

² Aymonino, C. (1977). *Lo studio dei fenomeni urbani*. Roma: Officina, p. 130

de Finetti tries to define a possible built environment for some parts of Milan which, simultaneously, are subordinated to a specific idea: a city connected by main roads that pass through its urban core. In the Fontana and Beccaria square projects, for example, de Finetti diverges from the urban administration's plan, which bended a main road around an existing building. Instead, he proposes to demolish part of the same building to restore the road's linear alignment. This approach reappears in "La Strada Lombarda", where he tries to directly connect Piazza San Babila with Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II and the oval Cordusio square. Beneath this implant, he puts a train line, while overground he designs multiple levels of public spaces dedicated to pedestrians and slow-flow mobility. This reconfiguration of existing urban blocks also envisages additional public courtyards and squares, all defined by a rational and sometimes classically inspired architectural language. De Finetti's proposals are characterized as well by a rational and rhythmic articulation of facades and their compositional elements. Sometimes, precisely in specific parts representative of the collectivity, he even incorporates a more direct reference to Classical architecture such as classical orders with entablatures and giant columns with capitals and balustrades inspired by 15th-century Renaissance forms.

Reflecting on the city's architecture, Aldo Rossi conceives the city's image as a background for human life, a place that is not just a functional public space but rather an area with a sense of permanence and memory. According to Rossi, a space must be evocative, not merely functional and technically refined. In his projects, de Finetti achieves an analogous emotional and evocative quality by drawing on Classical architecture to create an image that communicates the civic character of public spaces: this perspective enables to seize a critical reason at the core of de Finetti's use of a rational composition interspersed with elements inspired by the Classica Era in several of his projects. Another example that illustrates this approach is the architect's proposal to transform the existing Arena Civica into a modern stadium. The Arena was designed by architect Canonica in the 19th century and is still located in Parco Sempione between the Castello Sforzesco and the Arco della Pace. The Arena has an oval plant with an athletic track 600 meters long and can accommodate approximately twenty thousand spectators. Entirely built overground, its stands are located on a stone terrace. Its principal axes are characterized by four architectural elements: the Pulvinare (and its honor tribune) which constitutes the entrance building; the Porta Libitinaria, a small access to the playing field for the athletes; the Porta Trionfale, which is parallel to Corso Sempione; and Le Carceri, a building constructed by architect Tazzini, who terminated the project of architect Canonica. This project represents for de Finetti a potential opportunity to reform some parts of this area of the city that he perceived as unresolved: indeed, he emphasizes the necessity for Milan to have a larger stadium capable of accommodating one hundred thousand spectators. For its renovation, he proposes to maintain only the existing stands and the playing field, while he plans to demolish all the other structures to build three overlapping tiers of stands, topped by a marathon track and covered with an iron roof supported by truss beams and to construct the remaining structural elements using

reinforced concrete. If considered as a whole, it is possible to seize how the transformation of the Arena was likely a pretext de Finetti used for reimagining and reorganizing this entire part of the city with numerous public spaces. For Parco Sempione, the architect designs an elevated square connected to the Arena by gently curved ramps and staircases. Below the square a new road called Corso Bonaparte passes through it along with a metro line and a station, as well as parking facilities. In the opposite direction of the Arena, de Finetti envisions a grand semicircular forum bordered by three buildings and centered on a monumental obelisk designed as a tall classical column on a plinth. The forum, like the square in front of the park, has multiple levels: a road level at -5.00 meters and a higher level at +5.35 meters. Behind the columns of the forum, at ground level, de Finetti plans additional public services and parking facilities. To maintain symmetry, he proposes to open a new road parallel to Corso Bonaparte, also incorporating a metro line. Along the major axis of the Arena, he defines additional public spaces, including two squares located in front of the new symmetrical triumphal entrances. To design this stadium and its internal routes, de Finetti draws inspiration from classical Roman amphitheaters, but mainly from contemporary examples such as the stadiums in Berlin, Vienna, Turin, Los Angeles, and others. Through the squares and the Foro, de Finetti introduces multiple access points at different levels and aims to design a large-scale urban and architectural infrastructure based on a specific vision of the city that takes into consideration both mobility and the definition of public architectural spaces.

Today, the triangular open space formed by Piazzale Biancamano and Piazza della Lega Lombarda still highlights relevant urban planning issues of this area. Borgo degli Ortolani and Rione Garibaldi, two neighborhoods located in front of the Arena, have indeed never been properly connected, resulting in a formless urban space. In his project, de Finetti reimagines the area by proposing a multi-layered road system to facilitate movement to and from this part of Milan. These systems are known respectively as the Sistema di Smistamento (from the city to the stadium) and the Maglia di Arroccamento all'Arena (connecting this area to other parts of the city). The project integrates hybrid public and infrastructural spaces, and through this architecture, seeks to reclaim the urban legacy of this part of Milan. In the same area, specifically in Parco Sempione, the architect Antolini proposed, at the beginning of the 19th century, an unrealized vision for a grand urban Foro, known as the Foro Antolini. At the time, Parco Sempione was a vast open space on the outskirts of Milan, and the Foro Antolini was intended to define a center for human activity around this part of the city. De Finetti, in a similar way, seeks to achieve the same vision, but with a response to the modern needs of the city. His multi-layered road system reflects the area's potential to attract people while facilitating movement to and from the site. In his proposal, such goal is achieved by blending public, architectural, and infrastructural spaces into a unified concept. The squares and roads transcend their basic functions, revealing an integrated approach to architecture and infrastructure that recovers the city's legacy while addressing current needs and future possibilities.



Img. 3
“La strada
Lombarda”.
Public spaces.
Image realized
by Francesco
Lucchi, obtained
by re-drawing of
the projects “La
strada
Lombarda” of
Giuseppe de
Finetti.
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Lucchi

3. The legacy of de Finetti

In conclusion, the works of de Finetti, as demonstrated by the projects discussed and others not mentioned here, represent a concrete approach to reflecting on the tangible and intangible nature of urban space. For de Finetti, the relationship with the built environment is connected with a deliberate and clear intention: the construction of the city. This principle underscores a methodology that addresses the needs of the present while remaining rooted in an urban ideology connected to the past and grounded in logic. De Finetti's vision does not claim to represent an absolute truth but is rather an attempt to offer numerous concrete possibilities for the city through the practices of urban transformation and renovation. His projects often propose transformation to already built and consolidated parts of Milan, reflecting an active dialogue with the existing urban fabric. These unrealized proposals reveal their potential in presenting alternative visions of the built environment and show critical urban interpretations which ultimately are expressed through precise, concrete, and clearly articulated architectural projects.

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