

SOMEWHERE THE CITY SLOWS DOWN AND THE COUNTRY COMES BACK. FEATURES OF A STARTING CHANGE OF COURSE IN MANY ITALIAN URBAN FRINGES

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Abstract: This paper addresses an important topic within the process of reviewing the town planning approach into the Italian urban fringes: the relegation or retrocession of areas planned to be urbanized in areas for farming activity.

The relevance of this topic consists in facing two of the main problems of rural peri-urban areas, namely the scarcity and the fragmentation of agricultural land, caused by the urban-sprawl policies occurred during the so called "the glorious thirty", when these areas were conceived as a reserve for new urbanization.

Nowadays this status is more and more questioned, according to the contradictory pathways of urban transition and the new priorities postulated by the sustainable planning. Following this trend this paper intends to argue to which extent a return to farming in peri-urban areas can be helped out by an overall review of their land use.

To this end, the paper presents the results of a survey conducted on a sample of 30 municipalities of small, medium and large scale, located in many Italian Regions, that are implementing planning operations in order to convert some peripheral areas from urban to agricultural uses. Referring to this sample the paper discusses the impact of the transition in place and the conditions under which it may be effective. It follows that the present process of re-zoning buildable areas into farming areas, although still limited to local experiences and policies, is a large-scaled phenomenon that deserves a major attention from the public planning agencies at urban and regional level. In fact, at these levels more important results might be achieved by reviewing some regulatory and technical tools of urban planning till now not enough exploited.

In conclusion, the paper highlights how an 'other' urban planning is possible, indeed it is already being implemented, and provides some points of reference for the work that remains to be done.

In agriculture and food planning many things have changed in the last twenty years and a heightened awareness of the importance of food quality has revealed a phenomenon that seems to mark a turning point or at least a shift towards a Sustainable Food Planning (SFP). This phenomenon, being itself the result of a high innovation at the conceptual, scientific and cultural levels, and able to change many habits of thinking and acting for the food, is impeded by a strongly limiting obstacle: the powerful prevalence of buildable land values on agricultural land values and the consequent preference to plan as developable large peri-urban agriculture areas (PAA).

As known, this phenomenon is related to the planning policies of the 'glorious thirty years' of urban sprawl, which relegated the PAA to the role of reserve for new urbanization. Since then it has been put in place an building production system that has no longer been able to restrain his race. Only the last economic recession, still in progress, and not a change of policy choices in the frame of a more sustainable development, has produced and is still producing a tangible containment of city growth.

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Despite for decades "The unbearable weight of the building rights supply" (Mazza, 1994) was considered among the major causes of the weakness of urban policies, still today this unbearable weight hampers every possible perspective of sustainable development, including that based on PAA. It is worth mentioning that the above phenomenon is not the expression of a prevailing economic determinism, but rather the result of the concatenation of a number of factors, one of which consists of the long-standing separation between the operational field of the planning discipline and the agricultural world.

1. The planning discipline from urban to food system

The city planning was born as a discipline pointed towards the organization of the urban growth (Cerde, 1867; Unwin, 1909; CIAM, 1933-1941). As such it developed a vision of the agricultural land not as a problem to deal with but rather as a resource to be exploited. Yet, very soon the dizzying development of the city will raise the question of a proper use of PAA in order to reduce its negative effects. For that reason some proposals that put the rural territory in a different vision of development came to light, from the Garden city by Howard (1902) to the bio-region by Geddes (1915, 1925) until the various forms of sustainable development occurred after the 1970s. As well known all these proposals except some landscape aspects of the City garden remained marginal.

As a consequence, still in 2000, it is possible to assert that "Most planning literature [including physical planning and urban design, land use, real estate development, public infrastructure, environmental planning, urban transportation, historic preservation, AN], ignores food issues" (Pothukuchi, Kaufman, 2000); on the other hand there are those who claim that "much of the urban studies literature is symptomatically silent about the physical-environmental foundations on which the urbanization process rests" (Heynen, Kaika, Swyngedouw, 2006).

Although this lateness of urban planning is far from being overcome, today we are witnessing the maturation of many experiences that are facing a 'food equation' that has now become a global problem (Morgan, Sonnino, 2010), especially with "The rise of the urban food question in the Global North" (Morgan, 2009).

As a result, an extensive system of networks, associations, research centers and training institutes, technical and regulatory instruments has developed, whence the following lines of development are emerging among others:

- The formulation of analysis and development strategies at global scale (Smit, Nasr, 1992; UNDP, 1996);
- The acknowledgement of the role of spatial planning in food planning (Morgan, 2009);
- The implementation of urban policies through planning processes (Toronto: Blay-Palmer, 2009; London: Reynolds, 2009);
- The formulation of guidelines (APA, 2007);
- The proposal of innovative practices with a technological approach, from aquaponic food system to the e-farming (Jenkins, Keeffe, Hall, 2014);
- The attempt to built new agro-cities, such as Almere Oosterwold, where the challenging objectives (to provide 50% of urban / agricultural areas) is associated with a bottom-up implementation model (Jansma *et al.*, 2013);
- The development of non-profit international networks for consulting and action research specialized in City Region Food Strategies, such as RUAF foundation (<http://www.ruaf.org>);
- The development of high education and research centers specialized on the issues of food planning, mainly related to agronomic and economic disciplines, such as Wageningen University (<http://www.wageningenur.nl>) and the Institute of High Education Montpellier

SupAgro (<http://www.supagro.fr>). Furthermore, within this list an important place must be given to the development of policies for the management of land use and landholding system, based on specific instruments integrating urban planning projects and eco-agronomic planning. In this field the French experience proves to be among the most advanced, including the issues of agricultural function in both local and regional planning tools, like the *Plan Local d'Urbanisme* and the *Schéma de Cohérence Territoriale* (Jarrige et al., 2013).

2. The hesitant and yet significant return of agriculture in Italian urban fringes

Besides the evolution of the food planning, mostly referring to the global North, also in Italy are underway tangible advances in terms of urban, social, economic and agronomic studies, but the current policies remain still set back in terms of land use planning and governance.

In fact, the long-standing separation between urban planning and agricultural policies, present at the various levels of local government as well as in education and research, remains untouched. To explain this phenomenon it deserves to be recalled that in Italy the classification of agricultural areas in the city planning has suffered since the 1950s from the setting of Law 1150/42, which assigned to the city plan the task of "zoning the territory" (Art. 7) mainly within the framework of the housing needs, shifting the emphasis from areas earmarked for other functions.

This division remained in DM. 1444/68 on urban standards (areas for public facilities supply) and until the 1980s (apart from the Piedmont Regional Law 56/77, art. 25).

Only later, the planning was gradually leaving the mere bounds of urban growth. Since the early 1980s, when the environmental policies and the landscape protection gradually matured, for almost thirty years a growing interest in sustainable planning developed, and yet without affecting the issues of agriculture, still remaining a reserve for new urbanization; they remain apart a few exceptions, such as the Agricultural South Park of Milan. All this has meant that the agricultural land on the one hand has been crossed by forms of planning largely extraneous to it (urban, infrastructural, commercial, services, etc.) or mildly converging in terms of environmental and landscape planning; on the other hand has been supported by policies for farming development totally embedded in the corporate vision promoted by the CAP and the corresponding Regional plans of rural development.

However, in the context of actual urban transition, which redefines the urban functions at all levels within new prospects for sustainable development, the role of PAA as a reserve for new urbanization is questioned from many points of view.

In particular, a phenomenon is taking on great importance in the review of urban policies at municipal level with regard to peripheral areas: the relegation or retrocession of areas planned for new development into agricultural areas.

It should be said that this phenomenon is due to the fact that these areas are subject to a taxation corresponding to their building potential (building rights) and not to the current use (unused or still agricultural). Therefore, since the housing market is stagnant and the prospects of urban development in the short-term are lacking, the owners prefer to ask formally the relegation of their land from "building area" to "agricultural area" in order to pay lower taxes. So we are in front of a phenomenon not originated by bold urban policies but by the sum of particular interests; if we want to turn it in a meaningful device for the PAA development we must overcome its mere fiscal sphere and intercept its substantial relationships with the city planning policies.

Its importance lies in the fact that it acts on the ground of two of the main problems of PAA: their scarcity and their fragmentation. So, working to reduce this scarcity and this fragmentation is the degree zero of each PAA policy.

Table 1. Planning tools and local authorities having provided a procedure of relegation

Plans/tools	Municipalities	Content
<i>1 - Plans at the Municipal scale</i>		Prescriptive rules on the property rights and the land use
PRG- General Regulatory Plans (in progress)	Spoletto	
General or partial ‘Variants to PRG’ (in progress, adopted or approved)	Asti, Pinerolo, Rivalta di Torino, Balangero, San Mauro di Torino, Bardonecchia, Pessinetto, Chieri, Bellante, Fermignano, Mosciano, Pescara, Pollutri, Teramo, Torino, Velletri, Bellante, Gorgonzola, Avio, Frassilongo, Pomarolo, Ruffre' Mendola, Sover, Storo, Terragnolo	
Specific ‘Variants to Prg’ (adopted or approved)	Chieti Reggio Emilia Senigallia	
Programs and Detailed plans (in progress, adopted or approved)	Ravenna (POC- Operational municipal plan) San Benedetto del Tronto (PORU- Operational program for urban rehabilitation)	
<i>2 - Large-scale plans</i>	Province of Teramo. Territorial Plan for Provincial Coordination. Variant to the Operational and technical reglementation (NtA).	Descriptive rules for the property rights and the land use

Some features of the relegation of buildable estates into agricultural areas

In Italy the over-sizing of urban growth, linked primarily to an overestimated population growth has been the perverse mechanism through which the practices of real estate speculation have been fuelled.

However, we would make a mistake if we interpreted this phenomenon only under this connection, which shows political and entrepreneurial interests as directly tied through distorted and sometimes illegal modes to make planning. The construction sector in fact, while linked to big business and big political lobbies, ended up affecting a wide range of activities and social groups, with a huge impact in the production of work and wealth. Moreover, the excessive size of the buildable areas, while was producing a rise of land value, was also pushing for a general increase in financial assets, generating a corresponding growth of bank credit, trade and industrial revenues. This explains why the ‘brick industry’ it has been so successful. Today, with the repositioning of the real estate market on the basis of higher taxes and lower demand, the over-sizing of building areas is called into question again.

In Italy, the taxation of real estate, recently updated (D.lgs 201/2011) requires the payment of a tax in proportion to the value of real estate as established by the Municipal plan through the building rights, even if the building capacity has not been implemented. Therefore, the owners of buildable areas are required to pay high taxes even if the real market does not foster any implementation (Bisulli, 2013).

Consequently many owners, whose buildable areas are not built up, ask the municipality to relegate them to agricultural areas in order to pay a much lower IMU (municipal tax); among these owners

only a few, encouraged by new production opportunities, combine the convenience of paying less IMU with the start of a new farming activity or the consolidation of an existing one.

The consequences of the relegation are therefore of two types: (i) areas that remain unused; (ii) areas that become or remain agricultural areas and evolve in terms of farm production. The latter is still marginal in terms of quantity, but involves a growing number of municipalities and is expected to grow. So what is the real effect of transformations produced by the relegation, to which extent it is able to foster the development of the PAA within a framework of multi-functionality?

To answer this question, this study presents the results of a survey carried out on a sample of 30 municipalities of small, medium and large-scale, distributed over 5 regions, that have implemented administrative and planning procedures to accomplish the transformation of some peripheral areas from urban to agricultural uses (Table 1).

The goal of the survey was mainly meant to assess the extent of the phenomenon and its capacity to affect on a review of urban policies in favor of PAA; in particular the capacity to identify some qualitative and quantitative aspects, useful to address this review.

The results of the analysis can be summarized as follows:

- The relegations are validated only within the municipal urban plans, the only tools entitled to define the land use and the building rights of each property; besides, they may be addressed by planning tools at higher scale, such as the provincial plans;
- The processing of planning tools including the relegations are dependent on the political conditions that make the related procedures more or less demanding from the political point of view;
- The relegations can be introduced through different types of planning tools at the municipal level: (i) a General regulatory plan (Prg), (ii) a general or partial modification to Prg, (iii) a specific modification to Prg (Table 1);
- Requests of relegations may concern areas for residential, industrial or service uses; apart the taxation, the reasons for the request may be three: (i) to transfer the building rights in another urban areas and (ii) to start an agricultural activity or consolidate the existing one, (iii) to pay less taxes;
- The size of the areas affected by relegations is only in a few cases significant;
- In some cases, a requested relegation can change the setting of the surrounding urban context; for this reason it can be rejected or lead to a revision of scheduled planning measures;
- The relegations introduce a change in the Municipal budget, as they reduce the tax income;
- The phenomenon of over-sizing the building areas, and the reduction that comes through the procedures of relegation, highlights the need for a harmonization of the municipal tax policy with the town planning instruments.

The survey reveals the presence of a diverse set of procedures that testifies the different ways of approaching the problem of land use change. Moreover, it is worth mentioning on the one hand the absence of addresses at national scale, and on the other hand the presence of some common characters which give to this phenomenon a meaning to some extent generalizable.

In fact, a partial re-zoning of PAA is now underway at national scale, largely limited to administrative procedures of the land use 'maintenance' in the existing planning instruments. This process, when considered on the basis of individual proceedings, which lead to punctual changes, has a limited impact; on the contrary, if considered in its potentiality - to process the individual transformations in an overall reframing of land uses - it appears likely to favor important developments².

² The results of the analysis here presented are referable to a first screening of the phenomenon. However, a continuation of the work is underway in order to deepen the following aspects: the disciplinary context in which the practice of

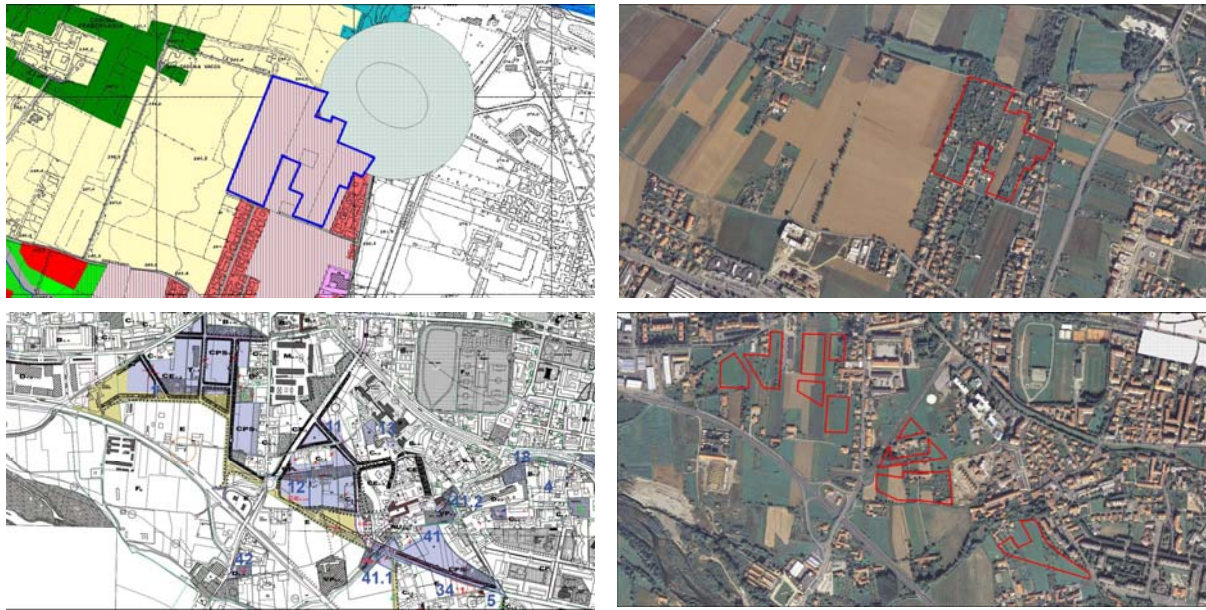


Fig. 1 – Municipalities of Rivalta (top) and Pinerolo (below). Relegation of periurban areas from buildable (left, blue lines) to agricultural use (right, red lines). Source: G. Fiora, Città Metropolitana di Torino, Life SAM4CP, 2015

3. Synergies between reduction of land consumption and peri-urban agriculture

The relegation of the building estates into agricultural areas and more generally the increase of agricultural uses in peri-urban areas has a formidable supporter in the movement for the reduction of land consumption.

This latter, originated from an instance primarily environmentalist, has an increasing recognition from the scientific, social and political point of views, as it is supported by a strong mobilization of the scientific community (Gardi, Dall'Olio, Salata, 2013; Munafò, Salvati, Zitti, 2013; Arcidiacono *et alii*, 2014; ISPRA, 2015) and by specific political orientations, at national and EU level (EEA, 2006; European Commission, 2012).

Many disciplines have long been engaged on this front, from natural sciences to economic and agronomic sciences, just to mention the most relevant. Several initiatives to raise awareness and develop actions and proposals are in the field by the initiative of public authorities and the third sector. Numerous legal instruments, not only referring to the planning field, are already in force and others are on the way. Among them it is worth mentioning the Regional planning law of Tuscany which establishes that the rural land is a common good and, as such, it must be protected and preserved for its productive and ecological functions (Lr 65/2014, "Rules for the governance of the territory", art. 3 and 5).

Additionally, the advancements on eco-system services assessment are the ram's head of research in view of the reduction of land consumption. In fact from this research is maturing a knowledge that allow us to more directly evaluate the costs and benefits associated with soil saving/consumption, so helping to take well-founded decisions to properly identify the areas to be urbanized or preserved. However, it remains to be verified how much a better understanding of eco-system services will be

relegation take on relevance; its possible development; the measures adopted; the amount of the areas involved; the role of actors involved; the changes produced by taxation in the new landholding regime.

able to counter the system of interests related to the use and exploitation of the soil. In other words, to which extent it will be able to influence the battleground of the exploitation dynamics, considered that the lower income of agricultural areas usually can oppose only a weak resistance to hinder the advance of urban growth.

In Italy still there is neither a national law³ nor specific regional laws limiting the land consumption⁴, yet many municipalities, through new urban schemes, are reconsidering their territorial policies under this point of view.

The ways in which this approach is being experiencing are still controversial and include, among others, laws with effects at times contradictory with the reduction of urban growth, such as the Regional Law of Lombardy, and planning tools that adopt rough quantitative measures of containment posing no secondary problems of application, such as in the Regional Spatial Plan of the Piedmont⁵.

The decision to adopt quantitative measures to limit to growth is in some way simplistic - it's hard to put it into practice - but it is appropriate from another point of view: in fact, although it does not solve the problem at least it introduces a first mode, of course to improve, to address it.

In this direction a few small municipalities have come forward taking the "zero growth" as their political banner, as in the cases of Solza (BG), Camigliano (EC), Ronco Briantino (MI), Ozzero (MI), Pregnana Milanese (MI). In the case of Cassinetta di Lugagnano (MI), also with the involvement of local community, the problem of how to compensate the reduction of tax income produced by the reduction of new buildings has been made clear to the resident community: reduced revenues entail a lower availability of funds to ensure the public services. To bypass this problem the Municipality chose to forgo the revenues generated by new construction taxes in favor of the landscape protection, considering that its economic added value could offset the lower tax revenues.

However, the city planning for "zero growth" will not have an easy life, unless this objective will not be pursued within a project able to ensure the necessary measures to stand up to the challenges of the market. In this sense the consistency between the tax regime and the real estate market remains at the heart of the political debate, and on this ground economists still have much work to do.

In conclusion the policies for the containment of land use trigger a dynamic parallel and in many ways in line with that of relegation: by focusing on land saving, they work in favor of the agriculture keeping. However, we can not think that the soil saved might be left only to leisure uses and other facilities under the public authority or the third sector.

On the contrary, where sustained in order to operate in the market system by avoiding the conventional food production in favor of a sustainable one, the agricultural income might provide the economic conditions to contain the urban growth in a more durable condition. In many cases the suburbs of our cities show this relation clearly: where agriculture activities were weaker the urban sprawl had no obstacles, where they were stronger the city grew less untidily.

³ It is currently under discussion, and subject to much criticism, the DdL_2039 "Containment of land use and reuse of built soil", approved in 2015 by the Council of Ministers and the Parliamentary Commissions VIII and XIII.

⁴ In the field of regional legislation the following documents are being discussed: (i) Draft laws specially designed to complement the current legislation on territory government (in Tuscany, Lombardy, Veneto); (ii) Specific regulatory tools for the production of sectoral plans or programs oriented, even indirectly, to limit the land consumption (Puglia and Marche); (iii) Other proposals or specific draft laws for the reduction of land waste (Abruzzo, Campania, Basilicata, Calabria).

⁵ The Regional Law of Lombardy is the Lr 31/2014 "Measures for the reduction of land consumption and the rehabilitation of degraded soils". The Regional Spatial Plan of the Piedmont is approved by DCR n. 122-29783/2011.

Table 2- Soil consumption in Italy. Trends between 1952 and 2012. Source: ISPRA 2014

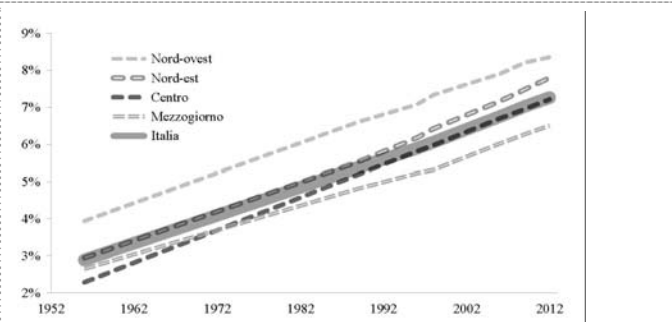
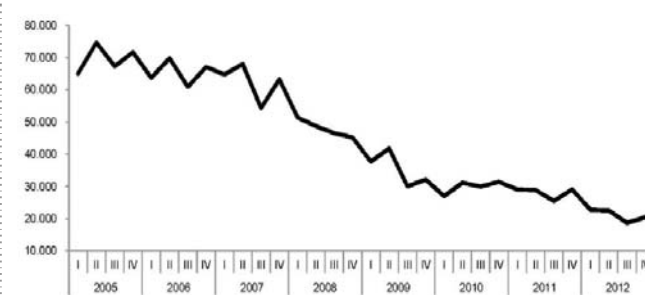


Table 3 - Housing crisis and land use. Building permits for residential dwellings 2005-2012. Source: ISTAT 2014



Soil consumption in Italy

In Italy from WWII to date the irreversibly urbanized territory has quadrupled and is estimated around 7.5% of total area (Table 2). Nearly 20% of the Italian coastline, over 500 km², is now irrevocably lost. Also 34,000 ha in protected areas, 9% of flood-risk zones and 5% of the banks of rivers and lakes have been consumed. Road infrastructures are a major cause of land degradation, which reached (in 2013) about 40% of the total area consumed. This explains why the growth of land consumption does not decrease even face to the substantial decline of building permits for residential uses in recent years (Table 3).

Source: ISPRA (Institute for the Protection and Environmental Research), Report 2015

4. From land use 'maintenance' to a new urban project

The inherent multiplicity of the food system entails that the issues of food planning are addressed by multiple disciplinary approaches, with crossing policies and practices. In this new and busy research border the spatial planning is struggling to define its own function. Yet it is at the forefront of a number of issues in which the specificity of its tools, mainly analysis and design, has a pivotal role.

Just think of the issues of multi-functionality, the landholding regime, the accessibility, the land regrouping, and the possibility of partially considering the PAA as a public interest asset: these are issues that can not be left to the individual negotiations among owners, investors and public officials. On the contrary they must be addressed by planning tools and rehabilitation projects capable of harmonizing objectives and effectiveness, public action and private initiative, incentives and regulatory measures.

Well, the process of relegation in place, which is growing exponentially at national scale, can provide new opportunities to enrich in this sense the proactive and regulatory function of planning. It should however be taken into account that at present the role of local administrations is much more reactive than proactive, and piecemeal rather than comprehensive. In other words, in most cases local councils do not take on far-reaching commitments; and so, without a strong involvement of local governments the phenomenon of relegation is likely to remain the action field of a few best practices without a significant influence on the urban growth containment and the related distortions on land uses.

It is therefore necessary to change step. Every municipality should rethink its planning policy by activating the relegation to agricultural uses not as just a land use 'maintenance' of scattered lots, but from the perspective of a new urban and territorial project.

Finally, a project able to establish influential choices on the land uses and to face the contradictions marking the discourse on agriculture and food, where alarming basic data (e.g. about a coming global food shortage) are opposed to positive counter-indicators (e.g. about the growing number of young farmers in several countries); and where beside the success figures of the Milan Expo "Feed the Planet" (e.g. 18.4 million tickets sold), which location sacrificed 100 ha of mostly agricultural land, arises the suspicion of a planetary green-washing operation.

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