

Reimagining Latina: an Intensive Summer School to Imagine Sustainable Urban Futures, Overcoming Societal Biases and Bridging Past with Present, in Collaboration with Non-Academic Stakeholders and the Local Community

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INTRODUCTION

Reimagining Latina is a five-day summer school project that is part of the broader commitment by the University of Hertfordshire (UH) and the Arch+ research group to collaborate with non-academic partners in addressing real-world issues and designing potential sustainable scenarios. The project is funded by the UKRI (UK Research and Innovation) AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) through the Harmonised Impact Funding, a fund intended to promote collaboration between academia and non-academic partners to generate tangible societal impacts.

The partnership with Casa dell'Architettura (CdA) di Latina emerged after several meetings involving Luigi Pintacuda (Head of Architecture at UH), Pietro Cefaly (Director of CdA), and Marco Cappelletti (Architect and CdA collaborator). These discussions focused on envisioning the future for the city of Latina and the garden cities in Hertfordshire. Despite their contrasting urban cultures, these two experiences share several commonalities: both were designed in the early 20th century, aimed to address the relationship between urban and rural areas, and are situated at commuting distances from their respective capitals (Rome and London).

The current state of these areas served as a basis for reflecting on their evolution and the gradual loss of their original concepts. They have expanded without planning that takes into consideration their foundational principles and now seek new identities. The challenge was to “identify possible future developments of the contemporary city: a strategic framework onto which questions, development hypotheses, and projects can be superimposed”¹. Here, the UH Arch+ played a crucial role in partnering with CdA as it is noted that for Universities the collaboration with non-academic organisations (national and international) is key to making progress in the Sustainable Development Goals, fostering community engagement and aligning with local and global². Both institutions are committed to urban studies and strive to create impactful sustainable scenarios and influence governance decisions through a design processes involving all stakeholders.

From an educational perspective, this experience was invaluable for the students who travelled from the UK. It exposed them to an unfamiliar environment. Being free from preconceived notions was particularly beneficial in overcoming the typical bias associated with the city of Latina, which was

founded by the Fascists and thus has a politically charged connotation that affects decision-making, dialogue, and the development of potential solutions. Understanding the past without any bias is crucial to avoiding stagnation and enabling the imagination of a different future for the city. UH students helped the citizens of Latina realize that, as Pietro Cefaly noted in an interview, “to look at this city stuck inside, I needed to change my perspective. These projects have brought life to places that didn’t have any”³.

This educational model aims to integrate design, culture, and innovation into urban-scale design processes. By exploring diverse cultural perspectives and engaging with environments beyond the University context – where the pursuit of high grades often overshadows experimentation – this experience challenged students’ understanding of the discipline. It encouraged them to appreciate different worldviews, develop empathy, and recognise the interconnected nature of global challenges, thus fostering their development as active and responsible global citizens⁴. The creative freedom within this process transformed the intensity of their work into innovative solutions that they had not anticipated at the start of the week.

Latina: a case study

Latina is a planned city designed by Oriolo Frezzotti in 1932 under the commission of the Fascist regime. It was part of the broader Agro Pontino reclamation project, where marshlands were converted into cultivable land. The attempt to reclaim these marshlands began in the second century BCE by Roman engineers, with the most successful effort before the 1920s occurring in the late eighteenth century under the aegis of Pope Pius VI. Before Prampolini, who led the works in the 1920s, the project failed to conduct large-scale drainage encompassing the entire area. This region underwent significant changes mainly between 1931 and 1941, transitioning from marshes and thick brush to organized fields, canals, and settlements⁵. The reclamation initiative was not only utilitarian but also carried symbolic significance, representing progress, development, and the advancement of civilization during the Fascist regime. A careful analysis of the Fascist intervention is crucial in understanding their misconception of the Agro Pontino. In continuity of a history of failed reclamation attempts, the Fascists regarded the area as an empty one. In particular, Gruppuso highlights how the etymology of the Italian word ‘laguna’ (marshland) comes from the Latin word ‘lacuna,’ which means gap or interruption. Gruppuso emphasizes that the Pontine plain was not a lacuna, but the historical product of water management by local populations over centuries⁶. Any analysis, project, or intervention in this area must start from this awareness.

Many planned cities and places built by regimes, regardless of their political orientation, share similarities in their purpose and execution. The most notable example is the Potemkin villages of 18th-century Russia, constructed along the banks of the Dnieper River to create a fleeting impression of a flourishing economy for Catherine the Great and other passing dignitaries⁷. Similarly, Latina can be considered a Potemkin city, designed to demonstrate power, efficiency, and modernity through one of the strongest propaganda tools: the urban environment. This approach, focused on establishing a clear and strong image, aligns with what Lynch⁸ refers to as “imageability,” or “the quality which gives a physical object a high probability of evoking a strong image in every observer”⁹.



Figure 1. The current city of Latina and the two selected sites.

The layout of Latina can be interpreted as an oversized Panopticon, characterized by a radial design that originates from an arbitrary central point in the Agro Pontino. This design blurs the boundaries between the city and the surrounding countryside, an anti-urban concept of the city, promoted by Piccinato's 1929 ideas, suggested that dispersed regional planning could address the problems of oversaturated cities and allow people to live in the countryside¹⁰. However, such an extensive urban design, built without considering its future inhabitants and on an excessively ambitious scale, inevitably introduced flaws. This rapid process left behind fragments and parts of a city more complex than initially apparent, which warrants careful analysis¹¹. Amid these fragments, we still perceive the scars generated by the impact of such process. As Lebbeus Woods¹² observed analyzing layered cities, “The scar is a mark of pride, and of honor, both for what has been lost and what has been gained (...) a mutant tissue, the precursor of unpredictable regenerations.” Moreover, Woods emphasized that “Acceptance of the scar is an acceptance of existence.” This perspective allows us to shift our focus from the consolidated urban areas, remarkable buildings and defined public spaces of Latina to its unfinished parts. Understanding these incomplete elements is crucial for designing future scenarios for Latina, as it enables us to layer the original city plan with considerations of the broader historical context and recent developments. This approach views urban history as “an interlocutory material that raises unresolved or open questions for those who must continue to design the urban environment”¹³. Nowadays, the challenges posed by Latina differ significantly from the original drivers behind its conception. Initially planned for 15,000 inhabitants, the city’s current population exceeds 120,000, resulting in an urban footprint characterized more by sprawl than by a consolidation around the original centre. Where land remains undeveloped, marshlands reemerge, creating conflicts with the built environment. The notion of combating the marshlands is no longer viable; instead, it is evident that marshlands should be viewed as “raw material to be transformed into culture (...) the built landscape”¹⁴. Our role as humans and designers should be that of observers. A variety of actions are necessary to ensure that marshlands remain wet and fluid, facilitating ecological succession, known in wetland ecology as hydrosere – the transitional process that transforms wetlands into shrubby fields

and eventually into woodlands¹⁵. While the approach to landscaping should be more attuned to the marshland environment, the approach to the consolidated city should reflect, and perhaps challenge, the original concept of Latina. The rigid grid of streets and buildings should evolve towards a more fluid public realm, incorporating nature-based solutions and informal public spaces through a bottom-up approach. This would enhance livability, improve physical and mental health, foster community engagement, and create adaptable public spaces¹⁶.

The idea of addressing and reimagining these scenarios involved developing comprehensive sustainable design proposals for the 21st century. This effort, undertaken during a summer school, aimed to enhance communication by making the proposals more accessible to the general public and stakeholders. Additionally, the goal was to create a “physical and visible representation” of a process that might otherwise be “unintelligible”¹⁷.

DESIGN PROPOSALS AND SCENARIOS

The two sites chosen for the students to develop their design proposals were selected based on theoretical and speculative reflections on contemporary Latina. Both areas embody elements of Latina's DNA. One is an unfinished area, landlocked by roads (hard accessibility) with limited soft accessibility options for pedestrian users, where the marshland, reminiscent of the Agro Pontino before settlement, reappears and needs to be integrated with the contemporary urban fabric and uses. The other is an established urban axis, Viale Mazzini, that connects the Court to the main square, a clear manifestation of Frazzotti's concept. Viale Mazzini, originally designed for cars, is an empty space that could now be repurposed as a place for people. The design proposals were conceived as radical responses to the limitations of each specific area, aiming to initiate critical consideration and debates among the administration, the community, and various stakeholders about the possibilities within the development and growth of Latina.

Viale Mazzini: A Figurative Reclamation of the Marshes

The design proposal draws direct inspiration from the site conditions and the “feeling” it generates, given the original design intent of imposing power through urban design as an instrument used by the Fascist regime methodology¹⁸.



Figure 2 and 3. Axonometric view of the Viale Mazzini proposal and a view towards the Court building.

The project proposal is to turn the original design intent for Viale Mazzini “upside down”, creating an area, and a series of spaces and events, that generate a sense of belonging, community, and liberation,

rather than a sense of dictatorial oppression. The proposal calls for a figurative (metaphorical) reclamation of the marshes – calling for the reclamation of nature through the consideration of urban conviviality and urban programming as catalysts for developing and improving the lived experience of Viale Mazzini. The main concerns the design proposal attempts to address can be summarized as: Opposing the imposing nature of the existing Fascist dictatorial urban/architectural language; Considering the missing “human” element and “sense of place”; Addressing the indifferent dominance and importance of the vehicle over the pedestrian experience; Replacing (inserting) the missing link between the programmatic placement of space and related urban function.

Through the identification of the main concerns, the project directly intends to defy and contest the very nature of the existing architecture and urban design through the introduction of enigmatic, and organic, urban structures along the avenue. The design proposes the insertion of a completely new pedestrianized landscape, identifying a series of three different zones – Residential, Educational and Social Mediation. These identified sections have been established by studying and understanding the programmatic organization of the buildings along the avenue. The three zones are connected through a densely populated landscape of greenery and vegetation, which along with the insertion of the new organic circulation allows for events to take place that are specific to each particular section (zone). The proposed landscape is further manipulated to allow for the existing north-south vehicular connections to remain.

Perhaps some comparison can be drawn to the plan initiated by the Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo in 2019, whose goal was to make 50 per cent of the city’s surface permeated and covered in vegetation by 2030¹⁹. Part of this proposal was the new “urban forest” that has recently been completed at Place de Catalogne near the Gare Montparnasse railway station, which shows the complete transformation through reconsidering the existing vehicular routes, and introducing substantial greenery within the previously austere, empty hard landscape that lacked a sense of place.



Figure 4 and 5. Viale Mazzini: Current state and a view of the proposed project.

The insertion of this new green strip in Latina would celebrate the possibility of reconnecting the city with a space that can allow for different levels of public engagement and activity, providing a platform for continuously changing events to be played out. The design proposal envisions an area that celebrates human lived experience, offering a place where couples can daydream, parents can stroll with pushchairs, kids can skateboard after school, local farmers can sell their produce, and inhabitants can feel liberated.

Urban Marshlands: Memory of the Landscape

The concept ‘Memory of the landscape’ considers how the environment contains the memories of history and culture from events, human interactions and site evolution. This is ingrained into Latina’s landscape both in natural form (through the history of the wetlands) and man-made (the Torre Potina high-rise building). The project proposal for the ‘Memory of the landscape’ within Latina was broken

down into 3 key themes: urban intervention, landscape intervention and public intervention which allows for a layered, holistic development strategy that first understands, then enhances, and finally activates the site in a manner that will be ecologically responsible, aesthetically pleasing, and socially engaging.

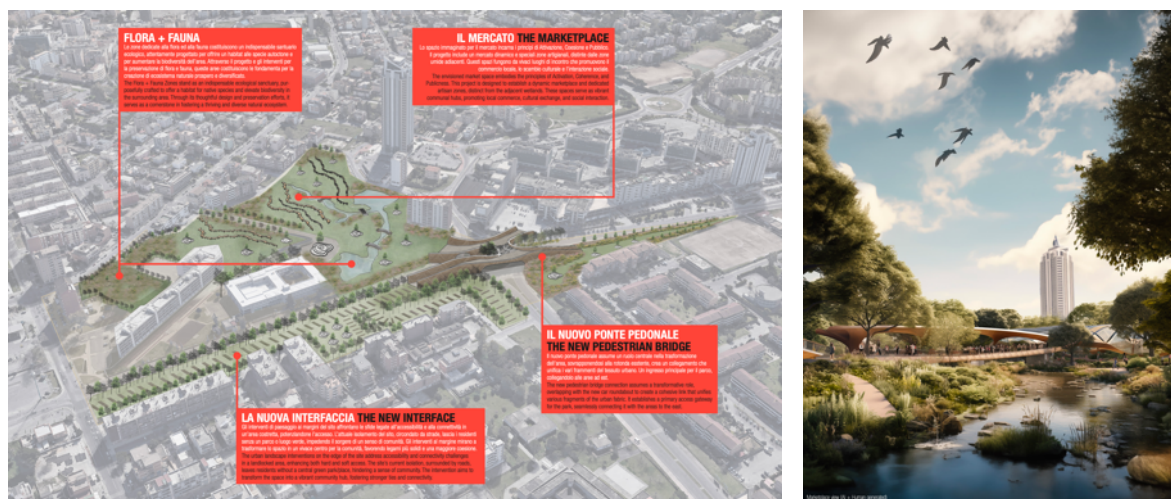


Figure 6 and 7. Axonometric view of the Urban Marshlands proposal and a view towards the Torre Pontina

Urban Intervention: Conclusions on the existing accessibility and connectivity were that the site is landlocked by roads (hard accessibility) with limited soft accessibility options for pedestrian users, therefore making it feel both isolated and disconnected at the same time. Coherence of the site was considered low even though amenities are relatively accessible, the area lacks a community hub, leaving residents without a central gathering place to foster a sense of belonging.

Landscape Intervention: Leveraging the ideas of “Resilience”, “Stability” and “Sensibility”, the landscape intervention will revitalize the wetland area, ensuring its ecological integrity while making it adaptable and relevant to the current community needs. The aim was to utilize one of Latina's most expansive green spaces, contributing to the city's overall urban ecology and providing essential recreational opportunities.

Public Intervention: Utilizing principles of “Activation”, “Coherence” and “Publicness”, and considering the importance of “participatory” design practice as put forward in Participatory design practice, event(s) and the activation of public space²⁰, the project's aim was to create a dynamic marketplace and artisan zones separate from the wetlands, serving as vibrant communal hubs, promoting local commerce, cultural exchange, and social interaction.



Figure 8 and 9. Design strategies for Urban Marshlands.

Based on the study and consideration of the three themes, the proposal is to create several different zones on the site that integrate the site's landscape and focal points to Latina. The first is an ecological sanctuary - "Flora + Fauna"- a zone that will provide a vital habitat for native species to flourish and which will enhance the biodiversity of the area. The second zone will see the establishment of a Landscape Community Park, which is envisaged as a vibrant green space that will foster social interaction and which will offer a variety of recreational activities for residents of all ages. This will also offer a unique opportunity for visitors to explore diverse ecosystems, encounter local wildlife, and learn about the importance of wetlands for environmental sustainability. A large area towards the eastern side of the site will be transformed into a marketplace, with a strong sense and focus on placemaking, it will be more than just a place to buy and sell goods; it will become a community hub where people gather, interact, and strengthen neighborhood ties. The fourth zone will see the creation of a series of new pedestrian bridge connections which will take on a transformative role, overlapping with the new car roundabout to create a cohesive link that unifies various fragments of the urban fabric. It will establish a primary access gateway for the park, seamlessly connecting it with the areas to the east of the site.

CONCLUSION OR THE WAY AHEAD

The outcomes of the summer school have generated significant interest within the local community and among various stakeholders. The council, particularly through the Councilor for Planning and Territorial Development Policies, has expressed interest, noting how these explorations open potential scenarios for underutilized areas. It has become evident that universities possess unique resources and capabilities, providing expertise, informing policies, and promoting sustainable development²¹. In this context, "Reimagining Latina" is part of an initiative that links academia with non-academic partners to design sustainable scenarios in alignment with the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Specifically, SDG 11, which aims to "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable," advocates for sustainable urban development worldwide.

The projects developed in our research on the future urban development of Latina took a radical approach, yet carefully considered and addressed the critical questions posed by the city, in direct alignment with the UN goals, while also being mindful of the city's significant historical development ideals. Their academic and open nature, tailored to meet the specific needs of the community, fostered debate and served not as definitive solutions but as potential foundations for future proposals, or perhaps as questions capable of informing policy²². This marks the first step in a broader collaboration between UH and the City Council, as we are already working together to plan new summer schools

aimed at defining other pieces of the complex puzzle that is the city of Latina. The goal is to extend this experience to similar urban environments in the UK, finding cross-solutions for different places in various countries. Lastly, from a pedagogical standpoint, this experience is invaluable for the students, allowing them to step beyond university boundaries, engage with real-world challenges, and grow as thoughtful designers and conscientious global citizens.

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NOTES

- ¹ Pietro Cefaly, “Latina Storia di una Città,” in *Latina: Architetture e progetti della città di fondazione 1927-1944*, ed. Marcello Trabucco and Ferruccio Bianchini (Latina: Casa dell’architettura, 2022).
- ² Walter Leal Filho et al., “Mapping Universities-Communities Partnerships in the Delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals,” *Frontiers in Environmental Science* 11 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fenvs.2023.1246875>.
- ³ Alessandro Ricciardi, “Usare Occhi Nuovi per Osservare Latina,” *Latina Oggi*, February 10, 2024.
- ⁴ Kateryna Gamaliia et al., “Synergy of Design, Culture, and Innovation in Pedagogy: New Horizons for Education,” *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities* 4, no. 4 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.58256/rjah.v4i4.1131>.
- ⁵ Rocco Louis Gentilcore, “Reclamation in the Agro Pontino, Italy,” *Geographical Review* 60, no. 3 (1970): 301, <https://doi.org/10.2307/214036>.
- ⁶ Paolo Gruppuso, “Latina e il Canale delle Acque Medie: Hydrocitizenship, Idroanomia e River Literacy,” in *Fiumi e città: Un amore a distanza Volume 2, Corsi d’acqua di Italia Centrale e Liguria*, ed. Giorgio Osti (Padova: Padova UP, 2023), 79–90.
- ⁷ Jeremy Wilson and Manuel Bayón, “Potemkin Revolution: Utopian Jungle Cities of 21st Century Socialism,” *Antipode* 50, no. 1 (2017): 233–254, <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12345>.
- ⁸ Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977).
- ⁹ Luigi Pintacuda, *Bucarest, Città in Attesa* (Ariccia [RM]: Ermes, 2016); Luigi Pintacuda, “Boundaries Inside Consolidated City. Bucharest Pötemkin City,” in *Boundary Landscapes*, ed. S. Dalzero et al. (Roma: Tab Edizioni, 2020).
- ¹⁰ Pietro Cefaly, *Littoria 1932-1942* (Latina: Casa dell’Architettura Edizioni, 2023).
- ¹¹ Cefaly, “Latina Storia di una Città.”
- ¹² Lebbeus Woods, *War and Architecture = Rat I Arhitektura*, trans. Aleksandra Wagner (New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003).
- ¹³ Cefaly, “Latina Storia di una Città.”
- ¹⁴ Paolo Gruppuso, “In-Between Solidity and Fluidity: The Reclaimed Marshlands of Agro Pontino,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 39, no. 2 (2021): 53–73, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764211038669>.
- ¹⁵ Gruppuso, “In-Between Solidity and Fluidity,” 53–73.
- ¹⁶ Li Li et al., “Mapping the Research Landscape of Nature-Based Solutions in Urbanism,” *Sustainability* 13, no. 7 (2021): 3876, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13073876>.
- ¹⁷ Cefaly, “Latina Storia di una Città.”
- ¹⁸ Federico Caprotti, “Destructive Creation: Fascist Urban Planning, Architecture and New Towns in the Pontine Marshes,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 33 (2007): 651–679, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2006.08.002>.
- ¹⁹ India Block, “Paris Plans to Green by Planting ‘Urban Forest’ around Architectural Landmarks,” *Dezeen*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.dezeen.com/2019/06/26/paris-urban-forest-plant-trees-landmarks/>.
- ²⁰ David McGillivray et al., “Participatory Design Practice, Event(s) and the Activation of Public Space,” *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability* (2023): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17549175.2023.2214140>.
- ²¹ Leal Filho et al., “Mapping Universities-Communities Partnerships.”
- ²² Cheryl L. Sugawara et al., “The Role of Community-University Engagement in Strengthening Local Community Capacity in Southeastern Europe,” *International Journal of Educational Development* 98 (2023): 102747, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2023.102747>.

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