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Urban densities and diffuse urbanities

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Abstract

What does the term urban mean nowadays? Although it is an established fact that the urbanization is still commonly conceived in terms of concentration, today's urban spatiality is increasingly disaggregated and challenging. As a consequence, a blurring conventional geography fleshes out new visions of an heterogeneous "urban mosaic", characterized by a surprising diversification of spatial practices. This urban mosaic is always subject to new definitions highlighting its multiple scales and polymorphic configuration both at the global and at the metropolitan scale.

The re-evaluation and the enhancement of partial and conflicting identities, coexisting in the whole urban reality, constitute the main turning point compared to the past. In line with the Lefebvre's theoretical elaborations, the essay will question the established conceptions of the urban as a closed socio-spatial condition. Hence, the necessity of redefining the real urbanity concept.

In order to anticipate some conclusions, the paper will define the urban as a complex system of different urbanities. Accordingly, several speculative tools and strategies within the design process have to be re-thought, including the much debated density issue.

Keywords

Urban density; urbanities; diffuse city; urban design strategies; contemporary urban theories.

Acknowledgments

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1. Introduction¹

What should be considered *urban* in the contemporary reality? Despite profound differences of methodology, analytical focus and political orientation, the major twentieth century approaches have taken an entity, commonly labeled as the city (albeit with some lexical variations), as primary object of analysis (Brenner, Schmid, 2014). The epistemology of urban studies has been indeed characterized by a deeply rooted “methodological cityism” (Angelo, Wachsmuth, 2014), as a result the term *urban* has been usually referred to the city one.

However, the latter term has increasingly lost its traditional meaning. Since the first half of the 1990s, a profound reconsideration of the “compact city myth” has been arisen by means of a new perspective focused on the urbanization processes and phenomena. This has brought some methodological and conceptual consequences, such as the awareness of an increasingly disaggregated and challenging reality, and the recognition of the importance of the empty spaces as a structuring element for the urban spaces and the territory (Secchi, 1986; Viganò, 1999).

Nonetheless, the confusion resulted from this revolution of thought left the urban framework in chaos, often still tied to ancient hierarchies and dualisms such as that of “center-periphery” or “city-countryside”. In addition, the blurring conventional geography fleshed out a surprising diversification of individual spatial practices inscribed in a territorial mosaic (Indovina 2009), a complex system of different urbanities, increasingly difficult to decode both at the global and local scale.

2. Urban density and territorial narratives

During the 1970s and 1980s, the “reconquest of the city” theorized and debated within the framework of urban architecture (Rossi, 1966; Aymonino, 1975, 1977; Huet, 1977) led to the emergence of the notion of “urban project”. This process has been strongly influenced by human and social sciences (Lefèbvre, 1968), based on a gradual distancing from functionalist operational practice in the context of a progressive and diffused decentralization (Tsiomis, 2007). At the turn of the 2000s, the consolidation of the “urban landscape” concept (Corajoud, 1981) introduced new scales of analysis.

A new research approach arose characterized by a telescopic vision at the local and at the territorial scale, aiming at the investigation of complex interactions between the dense urban cores and the neighboring territories. In urban planning, several authors described the “limitless” aspect of a dimension in which all the boundaries seem to dissolve; a space without any dimension characterized by a radical compression of the space-time relationship in an “epoch of simultaneity, juxtaposition and dispersion where the world was seen less as something set over time, and rather as a network of connecting points intersecting with its

1. The essay is inspired by the work done within the IPRAUS laboratory (ENSA Paris-Belleville) contained in the *Paris, mirroring metropolises. Île-de-France as new Ecoregion book* (Mazzoni, Pommier, Magliacani, 2020).

own skein” (Foucault 1986). Several neologisms such as *città diffusa* (Indovina, 1990), *Desakota* (McGee, 1991) or *Zwischenstadt* (Sieverts, 1997), developed to deeply interpret the territorial forms, to the point that the term dispersed urbanization ceased being an oxymoron (Grosjean, 2010).

However, the image of the *città diffusa* used to describe this state of spatial dissolution has not yet proved to be fully operational. It is indeed tricky to elaborate an unambiguous understanding of a spatial organization defined by diffusion but also by densification, multi-polarization and integration. As described by M. Lussault, «while the urbanization is spreading, new centralities are arising in a widespread manner, complicating the spatial organization since the number of polarizations is multiplying creating in turn new urban systems; as a result, the “unicentralization” has given way to “heteropolarization” and, inversely, peripheralization is now gradually creeping also into areas that are deemed to be the urban core» (Lussault, 2013). The contemporary urban landscape thus appears, on the one hand, disaggregated and dispersed, and, on the other hand, dotted with peaks of density. Polarities, aggregations, territorial bodies potentially form new urban centers and represent the opposite phenomenon of dispersion.

In this perspective, even if general theoretical figures such as the “metropolitan archipelago” (Indovina, 2009) or the “territorial mosaic” (Mazzoni, d’Emilio, 2014) appear suitable to evoke, at different scales, the territorial complexity, it is necessary to revise some underlying concepts and parameters. Among them, urban density (Fouchier, 1994) should be deeply redrafted to become an interpretative key and a sensible tool for the architectural and urban project.

3. Urban density as “relational intensity”

The urban question has been always developed in close interrelation to the “density” issue, taking into consideration a multi-scale and interdisciplinary approach, and sociological, economic, environmental and hygienic-sanitary themes. It is well-known, for example, that reflections on human health in built-up areas have often raised issues of housing density, leading to the development of contrasting models.

Overcoming an approach overly anchored to merely quantitative assessments, several recent studies proposed to replace the *density* term with that of *intensity*, in order to include other parameters as well as the housing density, such as the social but also morphological and functional mix. However, *urban density* can still be an interesting and suitable notion as an interesting indicator of interaction between three main “relational intensity factors”, only if used in relation to an appropriate interpretation of the urban concept. The first factor is the intensity of relationship between individuals. Starting from the assumption that the urban field concerns human life in society, urban density has to do with the way people congregate and move on a given space. This leads us to the second factor: the relational intensity between man and soil. Often reductively identified with the numerical ratio between the number of inhabitants (or dwellings) and a given surface area, the urban density linked to the way in which the land is occupied reveals the quality of living conditions. Eventually, the third factor puts the former two in relation: the relational intensity among the built spaces denotes a qualitative relationship between full and empty spaces.

The latter factor triggers a multiplicity of dynamics: first, the aggregative way of different housing cells generates a certain architectural typology, thus it generates a territorial morphology and some specific mechanisms of urban functioning; second, architecture directly affects relations between individuals on two levels that coexist at the architectural and at the urban scale. Only a simultaneous consideration of these urban properties could generate an comprehensive view which includes the rhythms and temporalities of spaces.

Consequently, urban density turns out to be a complex system composed of different equations. First of all, it is a relational measure on three scales - architectural, urban, territorial - to which the timescale and “socio-relational” one should be added.

Therefore, the notion of urban density acquires significance only as means of understanding the different and interrelated forms of urbanization. More precisely, it reveals urbanities differently defined by specific indices of proximity and relationship among architectural volumes, urban fabric and territory. Even if the debate on the urban development is still oftentimes posed in terms of contrast between compact and diffuse urbanities, vertical growth and territorial sprawl, we need to globally rethink relationships in its entirety at the scale of the urban block as well as at one of the urban agglomeration.

4. Density and urban models

The massive production of the last decades resulting from global economic expansion has been generally traced to the two foregoing development models: on the one hand, the vertical growth, oriented to an increasingly “dense” form of settlement; and on the other hand, the horizontal sprawl. This dualistic approach has generated a background biased position, based on the the condemnation of the “peripheral” and of “dispersed urbanization” territories. Since the 1990’s, it has been almost unanimously attested that the “revenge of density marks a new challenge for the future of our cities” (Reale, 2012).

However, after more than fifty years of studying from and about the “architecture of the city” and the “territory of architecture” (Rossi, 1966; Gregotti, 1966), several enlightened authors explicitly affirmed the need to overcome the 20th century dichotomies in light of an hybrid approach more focused on the quality of all built forms and relationships to the surrounding space.

Specifically, the debate on the density question should not forget that the term density refers to a ratio which, in itself, does not necessarily indicate a “high”, “low” nor - above all - a “right” quantity. Placing the debate once again in dichotomous terms - city versus countryside, density versus dispersion - seems to be an approach still excessively anchored to a past that is rigidly categorical declaring density at all costs and without compromises.

It is true that lot of research demonstrated the economic inefficiency and energetical unsustainability of a “low-density” territorial development, suggesting to “build the city on the city. This remains a valid principle for at least two reasons: first, the need to abandon a “foundation culture” in order to promote a transformation one; second, the compactness of human settlements is certainly desirable from a social point of view.

Nevertheless a relatively recent research line turned the tide demonstrating that some forms of urban dispersion, albeit entailing territorial risks, have the potential to develop innovative projects for the urban space (Allen, 2003; McGee, 1991; Viganò, 2013). This approach re-enabled horizontal relations which unhinge the traditional vertical and hierarchical lecture: “compenetrating rural/urban realms in a decentralized and multi-polar - but cohesive and self-organizing - system , a layered territorial construction where agriculture and non-agricultural economic activities create also an original mix” (Viganò, Cavalieri, Barcellona Corte, 2018). Hence, it is precisely a hybrid interaction among different urban layers that can be relevant for more flexible planning approaches, inciting new practices and lifestyles². For instance, a review of the traditional transport system could generate favorable solutions to overcome the trivial “centre-periphery” dualism. The density infrastructural support could ensure a widespread habitability offering “the same conditions in all directions” (Viganò, 2014).

Notwithstanding the main problems of the last century related to urban sprawl, attributable to the

lack of coherence between the parties and of a shared logic based on collective values, the critical analysis of past dynamics should not inhibit (and rule out a priori) future alternative scenarios.

Reconsider the urban space as a heterogeneously inhabited landscape, accepting and improving its intrinsic diversity, would allow hypotheses of a more peaceful coexistence between humans and “territory as a common good” (Magnaghi, 2014).

5. Reinterpreting the urban mosaic

To bring the reasoning to a pragmatic level, the case of the Parisian agglomeration is emblematic. The above reflections are clearly exemplified by certain dynamics that have marked the public debate on development policies and operational practices over the last few decades. Overcoming old cascading operational processes linked to the “urban project” practice from the ’80s, in the new century new hybrid, non-linear, and multi-scale approaches emerged, focusing on “global and transversal figures for the metropolitan territory” with particular attention to the limits, thresholds, interstices and components of the territorial identities (Mazzoni, 2020).

Since the revision of the ancient SDRIF³ (2007), and due to the Atelier International du Grand Paris (AIGP)’s work, new design attitudes arose around the “urban intensity” theme as a key planning instrument. With the aim to achieve a “new shared sense of belonging” (Ferri, 2020) through the integration of the peripheral territories gravitating around the Parisian agglomeration, the political vision has been translated into several “territorial narratives” (Mazzoni, 2020) differently intertwined with the urban density issue. Some more focused on the “formal translation” of the urban development - such as “the polycentric metropolis” or “the multipolar metropolis” models - and others more focused on quantitative and qualitative assessments - such as “the compact metropolis”, “the soft metropolis reinforcing existing poles”, “the porous city”, “the horizontal metropolis” or “the light and diffuse city” models. In this framework, a common denominator - the dogmatic assertion of the urgent need of a «*more and more dense and compact city*» - again revealed a dangerous approach which flattens the interpretation of the urban. It forgot to translate, consider and respect diversity and heterogeneity of components.

Nonetheless some “exploratory scenarios” (Mazzoni, Pommier, Magliacani, 2020) showed to be interesting in their attempt to understand local realities without denying the importance of an overall view (fig. 1). Among them, the BMCA⁴ atelier proposed “Le grand Paris des densités dispersées” project (fig. 2, 4), focusing attention on the peripheral territories (The so-called “Grand couronne” or “Sub-agglo”).

According to the researchers, these places reveal profound contradictions due to strongest demographic dynamics and social inequalities⁵,

2. A similar principle underlies the approach that lead French administrations to hypothesize a new polycentric model for the Parisian agglomeration - opposed to the traditional “radio-centric” one - through the total rethinking of the regional infrastructural system.

3. The SDRIF (*Schema Directeur de la Region Île-de-France*) is the Île-de-France regional masterplan. rethinking of the regional infrastructural system.

4. Brès + Mariolle et chercheurs associés.

5. These areas are characterized by a construction index of 4.3 (compared to the 2.7 in the city of Parisian metropolis), and only 20% of rich municipalities as against 30% in the metropolis of Paris, and only 2 out of 3 municipalities who voted more than 15% in the legislative elections of 2012.

representing also the main natural resources for the Parisian metropolis in terms of water, energy, crops, wood. On these grounds, the atelier proposed to rethink the whole urban space starting from the dispersed urbanization territories.

This inverted perspective has been translated in an inclusive design approach that enhances the interfaces with natural environment and incentivizes the integration of agricultural lands and various forms of production in the urban texture. A logic of productive exchanges makes it possible to consider the anthropized environment as a potentially positive part of the whole ecosystem. Moreover, in response to the sustainable mobility challenges posed by dispersion, the proposal reveals also an intention to seek efficient solutions connecting the local micro-reticular system to the large high-level transportation network and enhancing the nodal points of interconnection with new services and functions. Furthermore, the project focuses on the proximity housing conditions at the local scale (fig. 3). Reconsidering how to favor the fundamental relationship between residence and services, they theorize innovating ways of life which would retroactively enrich the living conditions in the more densely built-up areas. A new “Contemporary vernacular” design (BMCA, 2013) thus starts from here.

6. Conclusions

The raised awareness of the urban condition - made by different “urbanities” with featuring intensities, ways and rhythms of life and different relationships with the environment - actually reflects the famous “genius loci” already described by Aldo Rossi (1966). At the time, he proposed that the architecture of the city is something that directly arises from the dialogue among the parties, as well as their symbolic characters and meanings: the tension between the city’s elements, the territory and their memories reflects the real essence of the urban intensities.

When transposing this mindset to the contemporary debate on the urban condition, it becomes clear that this awareness should not be neglected but further deployed. It is therefore essential to reason in terms of flexible exploratory approaches which take into account all the factors related to the urban issue. Last but not least, the “uncertainty” factor should also be included since it leads us away from passed models built on convictions and resulting from functional and quantitative approaches.

The richness of the urban landscape originates from the dialectical relationship between unity and multiplicity. It is the respect, the improvement and the integration of the constituent singularities, and not their isolation, that strengthens and gives value to the urban intensity.

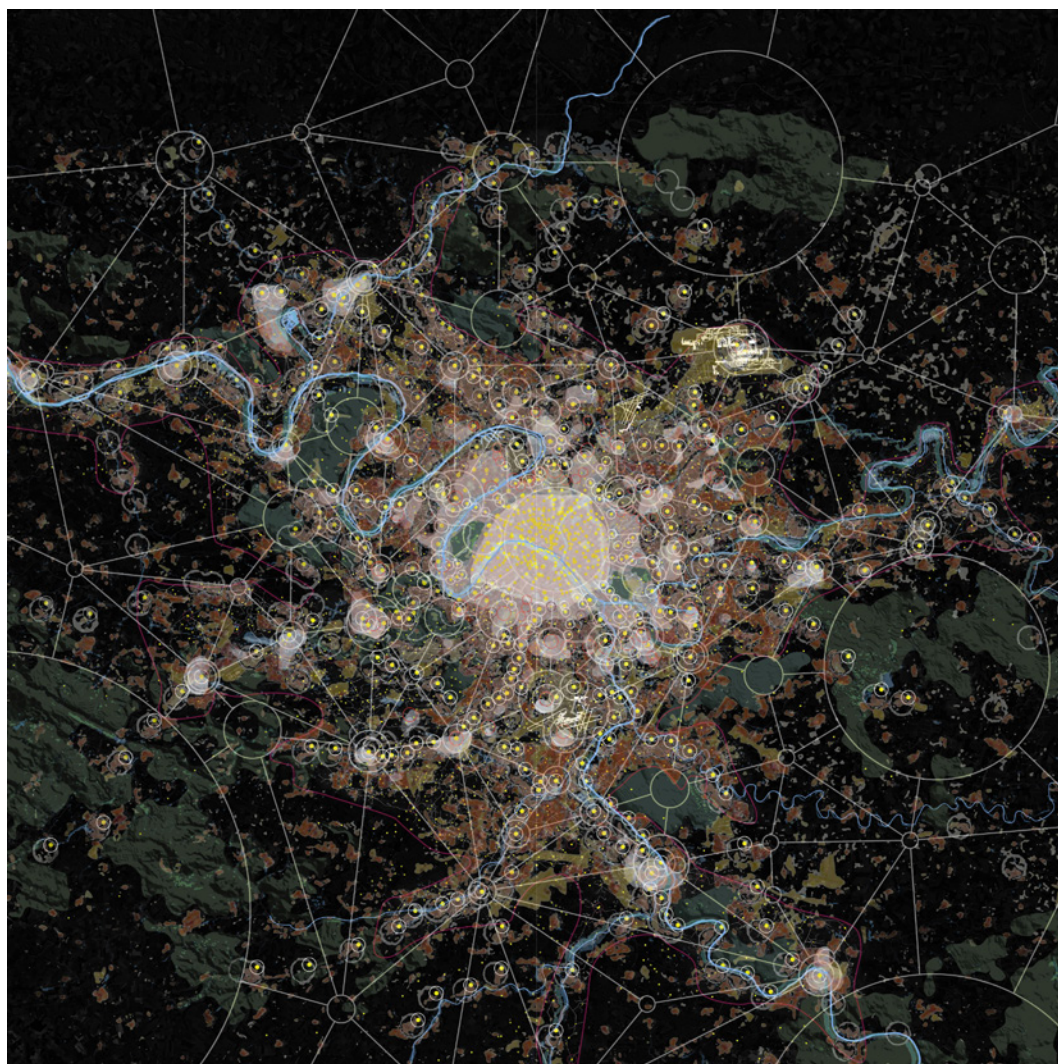


Figure 1

AIGP study seminar “Metropolitan systems”, 2013-2014. Personal re-elaboration of the maps produced by the Ateliers. 6

The Atelier International du Grand Paris was created in 2010 at the request of the Head of State, following the international consultation “Le Grand Pari(s) de l’agglomération Parisienne” (2008). During the “Systèmes métropolitains” work session, in occasion of the “Métropole du Grand Paris” administrative unit creation, the Atelier debated on Parisian “metropolitan systems” in accordance with the regional scale planning (cfr. SDRIF Horizon 2030: Île-de-France 2030 Master Plan) and the redevelopment of the Ile-de-France transport network (Cfr. the “Grand Paris Express” project). Some “exploratory scenarios” and proposals of several atelier showed an interesting field of research in their attempt to interpret local realities without denying the importance of an overall view. The picture above represents a personal re-elaboration of the author that summarize and hybridize some of the contributions.

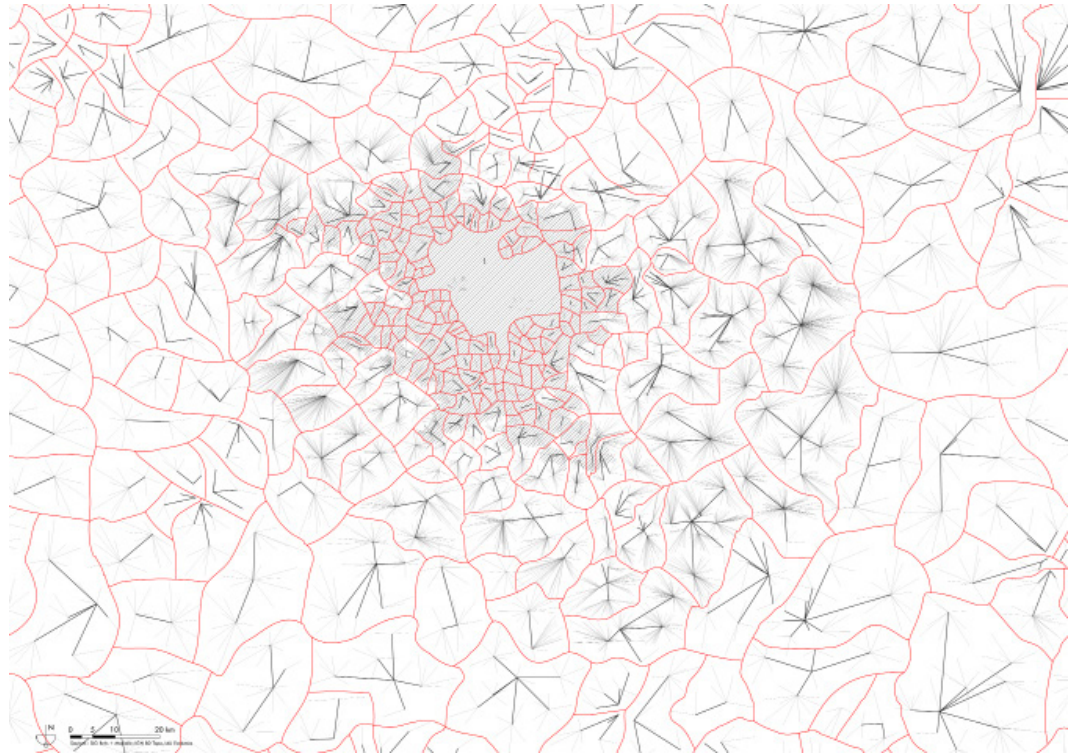


Figure 2

AIGP study seminar “Metropolitan systems”, 2014. “Le Grand Paris des densités dispersées ; chapitre 2, MÉTROPOLE EN RELATIONS”, Brès + Mariolle et chercheurs associés. chercheurs associés.

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Through the notion of “dispersed urbanization”, the atelier tried to understand and represent the properly spatial characteristics of the contemporary urban reality featuring the Parisian agglomeration, focused on territories “where things are moving and going badly” (BMCA 2013).

To demonstrate that “dispersion” and “proximity” are not irreconcilable condition in the contemporary urban space, they focused above all on the local scale, elaborating the concept of “proximity clusters” (represented in the figure above). The latter reconsider the basic relationships to be favored between residence and service, hypothesizing new forms of living.

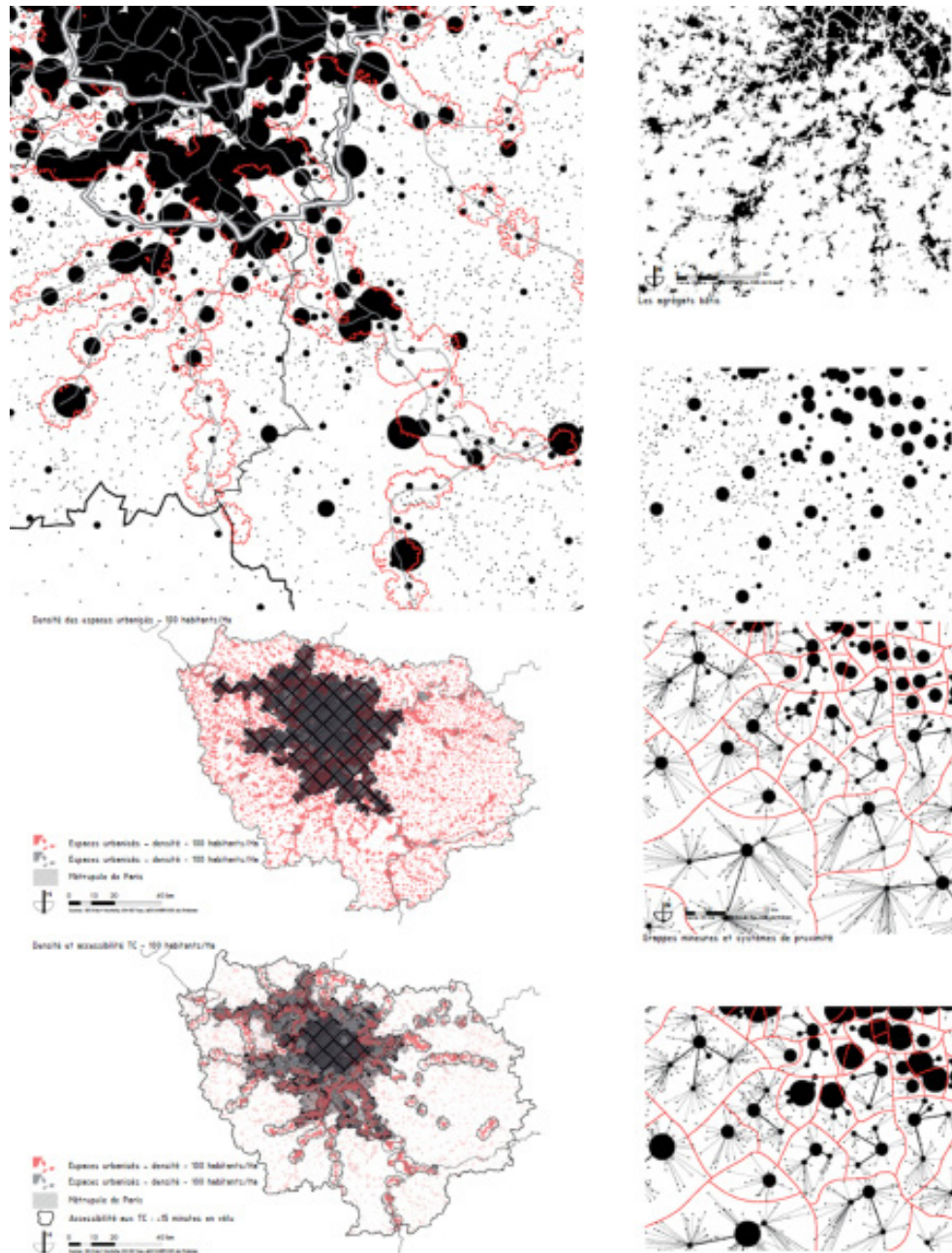


Figure 3

AIGP study seminar “Metropolitan systems”, 2014. “Le Grand Paris des densités dispersées ; chapitre 2, MÉTROPOLE EN RELATIONS”, Brès + Mariolle et chercheurs associés. hercheurs associés.

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