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## **Linking landscapes: green infrastructure as a tool for urban connections**

*Legare paesaggi. L'infrastruttura verde come strumento per costruire relazioni urbane*

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### ABSTRACT AND KEYWORDS

#### **Linking landscapes**

This paper deals with the issue of the urban landscape of the Municipality of Padula, in the Diano Valley (Vallo di Diano), Salerno. Here, the historic city centre in the highest part of the town sits opposite the valley, where there is the famous Padula's Charterhouse and a widespread system of archaeological sites. Soon, in Padula there will be a new station linked to an under-construction high-speed railway line connecting Salerno to Reggio Calabria. The new station will be at the southern limit of the city, close to the Tanagro River. Whilst the new station is a great opportunity for the development of the region and for its tourist identity, conversely it risks underlining the territorial disconnection between different parts of the landscape. This paper studies the opportunity to design a strategy for the city starting from new connections between its different landscapes and its main sites of historical and archaeological interest. This is undertaken utilizing an understanding of the Mill Valley's role and value, a forgotten landscape to be transformed into a green infrastructure that is to be a new public space for the city and a sustainable tool for experiencing the city and crossing the traditional landscape of the Cilento region.

**Keywords:** Green infrastructure, strategy, urban design, Padula, Charterhouse

#### **Legare paesaggi**

Il contributo propone una riflessione sul paesaggio urbano del Comune di Padula, nel Vallo di Diano, in provincia di Salerno. Qui il centro storico, arroccato nella parte più alta della città, si confronta a valle con la presenza della Certosa e con un sistema diffuso di emergenze archeologiche. A Padula è prevista la realizzazione della stazione della nuova linea dell'Alta Velocità che collega Salerno a Reggio Calabria. L'area scelta è a ridosso del limite sud della città determinato dalla presenza del fiume Tanagro. Se questo da un lato rappresenta una grande opportunità per lo sviluppo del territorio e per la sua identità turistica, dall'altro lato rischia di sottolineare la disconnessione urbana che oggi caratterizza la città. Il contributo riflette sull'opportunità di costruire una strategia per il futuro della città a partire dal costruire relazioni tra i suoi paesaggi diversificati ed i suoi principali siti di interesse storico e archeologico. Questa è esplorata a partire dalla comprensione del ruolo e del valore paesaggistico ed urbano della Valle dei Mulini, un paesaggio dimenticato trasformato in un'infrastruttura verde, un nuovo spazio pubblico per la città e dispositivo sostenibile di attraversamento del territorio.

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**Parole chiave:** Infrastruttura verde, strategia, progetto urbano, Padula, Certosa



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## 1. Introduction

This paper deals with an urban design strategy developed within the framework of a scientific consultancy agreement between the Municipality of Padula and the Department of Civil Engineering at the University of Salerno, with the aim of supporting the preliminary stage of the Municipal Urban Plan.

Padula is a town within the Salerno province. It is part of a cluster of 15 municipalities identified as the Vallo di Diano, a wide, longitudinally shaped valley nestled between the Cilento and Lucanian Apennine mountains, bordering the Basilicata region (Il Vallo di Diano, n.d.) (Figure 1). The area stretches over 130 km and has a population of approximately 60,000. A portion of the territory lies within the Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Alburni National Park, declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1998, together with the archaeological sites of Velia and Paestum and the monumental complex of the Certosa di San Lorenzo, located in Padula (Parco Nazionale del Cilento, 2016).

In the next few years, Padula and the surrounding valley will be significantly impacted by a new mobility infrastructure for southern Italy. The planned high-speed rail line connecting Salerno to Reggio Calabria will cross the Vallo di Diano, with a concomitant station being constructed near the southern border of Padula (Nuova linea ferroviaria AV Salerno - Reggio Calabria, n.d.). The new rail line is designed to cut across the valley's central axis, running parallel to the highway and the Tanagro River, which is an important tributary of the Sele River.

The new station will be a great opportunity for regional development. At the same time, due to its location, it risks becoming a so-called “cathedral in the desert,” echoing what happened with the station in Afragola, designed by Zaha Hadid in 2017, and still today disconnected from the cities around it (Lento, 2017).

**Figure 1. Case study location**



Source: Graphics edited by the author.

The proposed strategy deals with critical issues and challenges, but first and foremost, the impact of the new high-speed rail station on the valley.

The strategy, by recognizing the environmental, natural, and cultural-historical value of the landscape, aims to reactivate lost urban connections and create some new ones, promoting new mobile systems for exploring Padula's landscape and its heritage. The idea is to support alternative typologies of tourism that are in touch with nature and then to promote new opportunities for local entrepreneurship.

## 2. Padula: city of stone and water

The special morphology of the territory and its natural boundary, with the

surrounding mountain ridges, have greatly influenced Padula's historic city centre which developed on the top of a hill around the cathedral (AA.VV., 2018). The city centre is medieval. It is crossed by a main road sloping up with wide hairpin bends towards the highest peaks of the Magdalena Mountains - the natural city border towards the Basilicata Region. A network of small alleys and compact stairways spread out from the old city centre, connecting different neighbourhoods that have grown up along the main street and the main urban axes shaped by the natural outlines of its geomorphology.

The area is characterized by hillsides along the mountainsides above the city, while the slope gradually decreases towards the valley, which is completely flat. The historic city centre has a compact form, characterized by narrow streets bordered by historic buildings, architectural landmarks and museums, with special panoramic views and belvederes. The viewpoints are denoted by contemporary art placed in particularly scenic locations.

In contrast to the dense and closely-knit layout of the historic city centre, the plain is wide. It runs down to the Tanagro River - the natural southern boundary of the city. This flat area has been progressively urbanized, but still holds evidence of its historic rural landscape, with several culturally significant sites (Figure 2).

The Diano Valley has a long and significant past, having been densely inhabited since the prehistoric era (D'Agostino, 1981). Its strategic position, between the Lucanian Apennines and the Alburni and Cilento mountains, made it a crucial crossroads of routes and paths covering the Mediterranean area. This is proven by the archaeological remains and ruins that show signs of several civilizations.

Padula is particularly known for the San Lorenzo Charterhouse, the largest monastic complex in southern Italy (D'Alessio, 2018). Its construction began in the 14th century BC and was completed five centuries later. In the early 19th century, due to suppression of the monastic orders and ecclesiastical property confiscation, the monks were expelled, and the complex fell into a prolonged state of decay. Declared a national monument in 1882, it was only in 1982 that rehabilitation began, leading to its rediscovery and renewed interest.

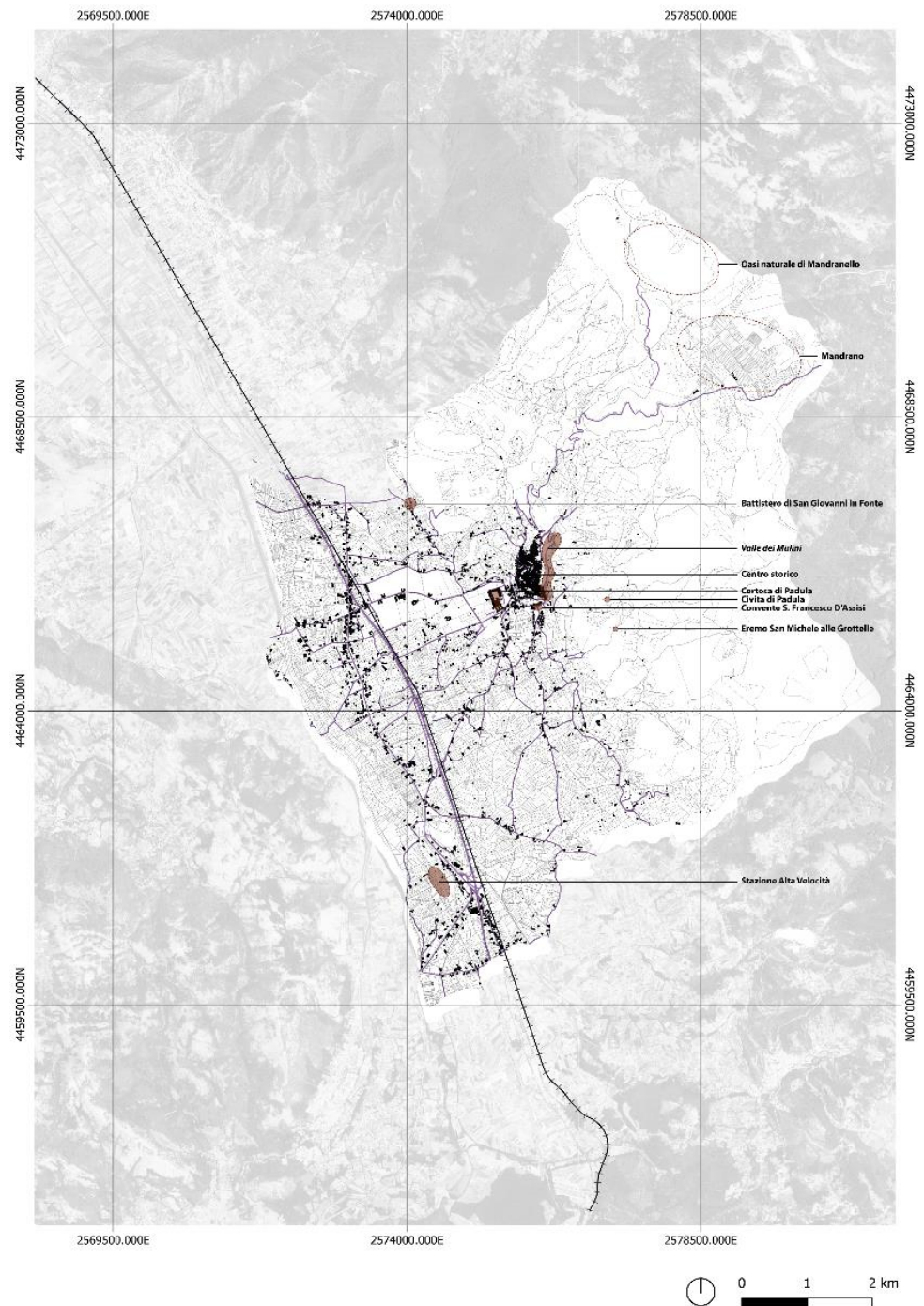
Archaeological evidence suggests that the medieval city centre was not the first permanent settlement in the area. On the Civita Hill there is the archaeological site of Consilinum, an ancient Lucanian settlement that in the 1st century BC became a *Roman Municipium* (Gallo & Rota, 1994). It was then abandoned in the 9th century BC due to Saracen and Arabic invasions. Today, only a few remains are visible, such as segments of perimeter walls and fragments of wall structures. These signs underline the settlement's original urban form, characterized by terraces sloping towards the southwest part of the city. Nearby there is the rupestrian sanctuary of San Michele alle Grotte, characterized by 14th-century frescoes showing St James's life (Soprintendenza, 2018). Both these sites have special locations with panoramic views of the city and of the valley. They are accessible via naturalistic paths and are very popular among hikers.

In addition to the archaeological remains and remarkable architectural heritage that attest to the historical and artistic wealth of the region, Padula also has significant environmental and natural heritage.

In particular, the city is characterized by a dense hydrographic network that runs transversally from the Magdalena Mountains to the east, toward the Tanagro River (Tamburini & D'Aniello, 2017) (Figure 3). The configuration of this special water system is shaped by the Magdalena Mountain ridge. It is like a watershed between two basins: the Diano Valley, which drains towards the Tyrrhenian Sea, and the upper Agri Valley, which flows towards the Ionian Sea. Between these mountain

ranges there are the Mandrano and Mandranello plains, karst basins that separate the Diano Valley from the Agri Valley. The two basins are important natural reservoirs of drinking water, supplying the Campania, Basilicata and Puglia regions (Geremicca, 2015).

**Figure 2. Padula's main significant sites**



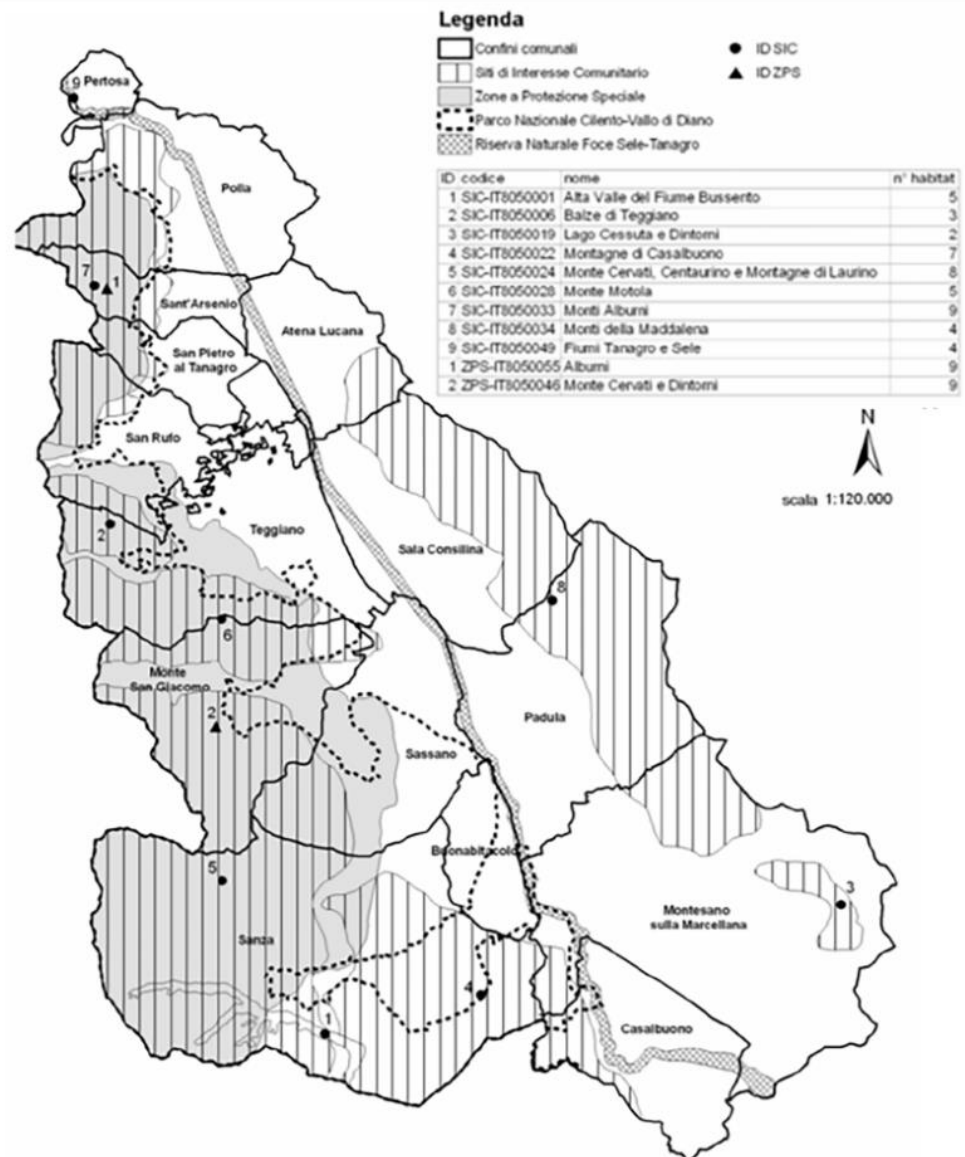
Source: Plan edited by the author, with Octavio Lopez.

Specifically, in the Mandranello Basin there is a military site, once used as a munition depot and today decommissioned, characterized by a network of buildings located along an 8-kilometre ring-shaped path surrounding the water surface (Oasi Naturale di Mandranello, n.d.).

From the Magdalena Mountain water flows down toward the plain through a series

of ravines and seasonal streams, reaching valleys such as Fabbricato, Fossato Maggiore and San Leonardo.

**Figure 3. The Vallo di Diano ecological network**



Source: Tamburini & D'Aniello, 2017

Water flows converge into the Tanagro River, a tributary on the eastern side of the Sele River, running through the centre of the vallo.

The special geological nature of the area also supports the flow of groundwater. This is particularly evident in Fonti, a place at the foot of San Leonardo's Serre, where the remains of an early Christian baptistery, also known as San Giovanni in Fonte, can still be admired (AA.VV., 2018). The site was part of the *Roman Statio of Marcellianum*, the first Christian Diocese of the region. A baptistery, a sui generis example, was built directly above a natural water font, with baptismal rites celebrated by full immersion.

Recently, the plains have become intensively urbanized. This phenomenon is partly due to easier occupation of the flatlands, compared to historical centres located at higher altitude (Tamburini & D'Aniello, 2017). Urban agglomerations with combined residential and utility blocks have developed along the main roads. As a



result, growing disconnections between the upper and lower parts of the city have emerged, with the population steadily moving away from the historic city centre, now at increasing risk of being abandoned.

The area also is characterized by the broader challenges typically affecting the inner part of the Cilento region, including demographic decline, low economic activity and the abandonment of the younger generations looking for better life opportunities abroad (Vallo di Diano, n.d.).

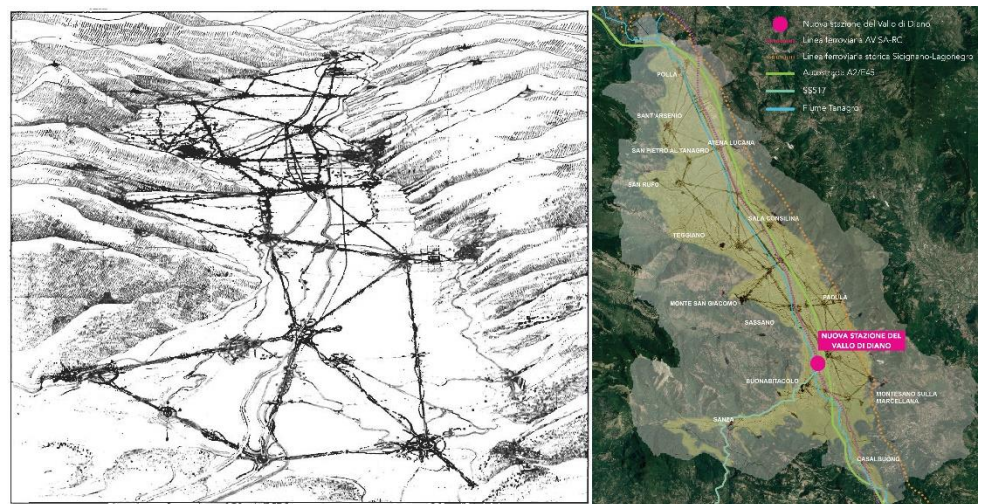
Despite these challenges, Padula is still a key touristic destination within the Cilento region. Indeed, in the last few years, local governments have promoted the development of new and innovative sights and museums, particularly in the historic city centre (Padula Sistema Museo, n.d.). However, available tourism data suggest that although the Charterhouse does appeal to many visitors, most of them do not engage with additional local touristic sites, highlighting a disconnection considering the limited touristic interest in the medieval monastery (Sharing Tourism, n.d.).

Today, the city is characterized by fragmented development and spatial disconnections, and future urban development could exacerbate these tensions. The new high-speed railway station in Padula is a significant opportunity and challenge. Located at the southern edge of the municipality, near the Tanagro River, the station could become a strategic hub, connecting the new mobile node with the city and its most significant historical and naturalistic paths. This opportunity provides a crucial opportunity to re-imagine urban connections linked to the landscape and cultural heritage of the city.

### 3. Building urban connections: from the “Città Vallo” to the new high-speed railway station

Padula is part of the Diano Valley Mountain Community, an administrative organization established in the mid-1970s by a group of people who claimed a unified identity among the municipalities belonging to the Vallo (D’Amico, n.d.). The famous Roman architect Paolo Portoghesi was commissioned to design the Città Vallo. Portoghesi interpreted the geography of the Città Vallo as “a high plain enclosed between two continuous mountain ranges that, compared to the surrounding plains, form the boundaries of a closed space like the walls of an ancient city” (Portoghesi, 1981).

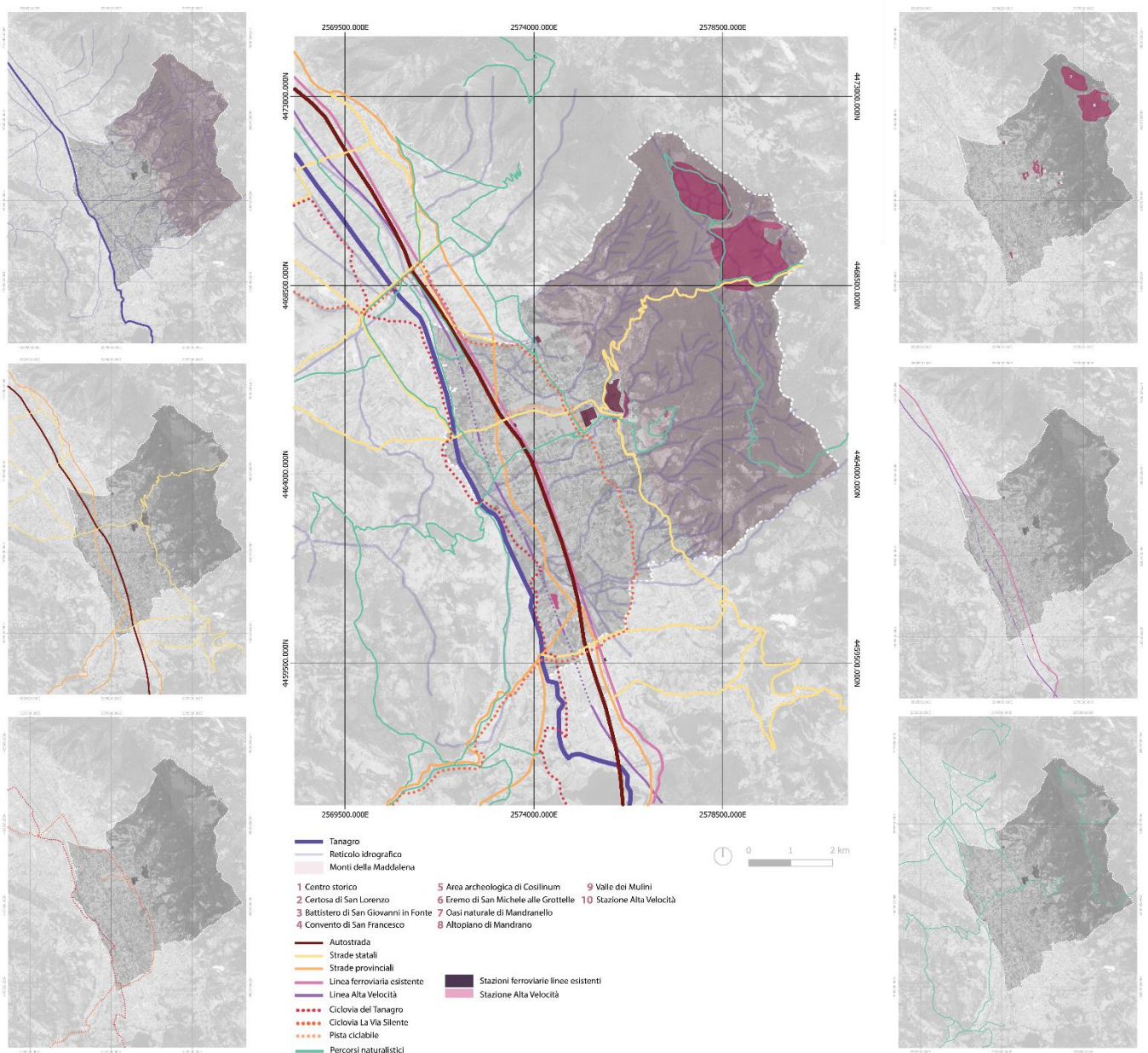
**Figure 4. Portoghesi’s Vallo City design and the new high-speed railway line**



Source: Portoghesi, 1981(a); RFI & ITALFERR, 2023 (b)



Figure 5. Urban analysis



Source: Graphics edited by the author.

Portoghesi described his design project not as an urban development plan, but as a “perceptive design”, emphasizing the area’s need to be recognized as a community, affecting its inhabitants with a sense of shared identity. His concept did not envisage a new city but rather offered a critical discussion about how to stop urban sprawl in the valley already spreading haphazardly across its rural character and nature.

He proposed a polycentric urban model, making the different local authorities autonomous bodies connected through a network of roads and pathways.

The project emphasized the relationships between towns and the shared landscape of the valley, as the key point for a new territorial balance between urban and rural environments, respecting the identity and role of each municipality within the wider network.

Today, looking at the technical documentation for the future Padula high-speed railway station, Portoghesi’s design of the Vallo City is the underlying urban vision. Indeed, his drawings can be read as overlapping with the proposal for the new high-

speed line (RFI & ITALFERR, 2023) (Figure 4). More than 40 years after its design concept, the project's legacy still is part of Vallo's identity.

The Padula high-speed railway line and station will create a new intermodal hub that will connect different mobility systems. The railway line will be connected to the city and the surroundings through existing road networks, highways and cycle paths. It will give opportunities for new mobility systems for both residents and tourists.

The high-speed station will become a gateway to Padula, to Diano Valley and to the wider Cilento region (Figure 5).

The new railway line will cross the landscape, running parallel to the highway and the Tanagro River, the natural southern border of the city. The Tanagro River, running through the centre of the Diano Valley, is a powerful connective element and is widely recognized as a symbol of territorial identity. A proposal for a river park aiming to link the municipalities of the Vallo along the river path was submitted and currently is under discussion. The project includes the environmental redevelopment of areas along the river and the design of sports and leisure facilities, including a cycle path (Padula, 2021).

Today, several paths are used to explore the valley from a tourism-oriented perspective. The Silent Path, a roughly 600-kilometre cycling route, winds through landscapes and villages within the Cilento National Park (Fiorin, 2022), as well as different urban and nature trekking paths that connect the main points of interest across the region (Faija, 2020).

Padula also hosts a station on the historic Sicignano–Lagonegro railway line, which is currently closed and recently identified by the Campania Region policymakers as a potential touristic railway (Sasso, 2021), that could once again activate connections across the region.

The proposed urban design strategy aims to reinforce and highlight the value of these existing urban networks within Padula, strengthening the town's role within the landscape of the Vallo. At the same time, the strategy identifies the necessity of new connection systems to improve accessibility to the most archaeologically and historically significant sites, and the most attractive landscapes.

#### **4. Mills Valley as a green infrastructure for urban and landscape connections**

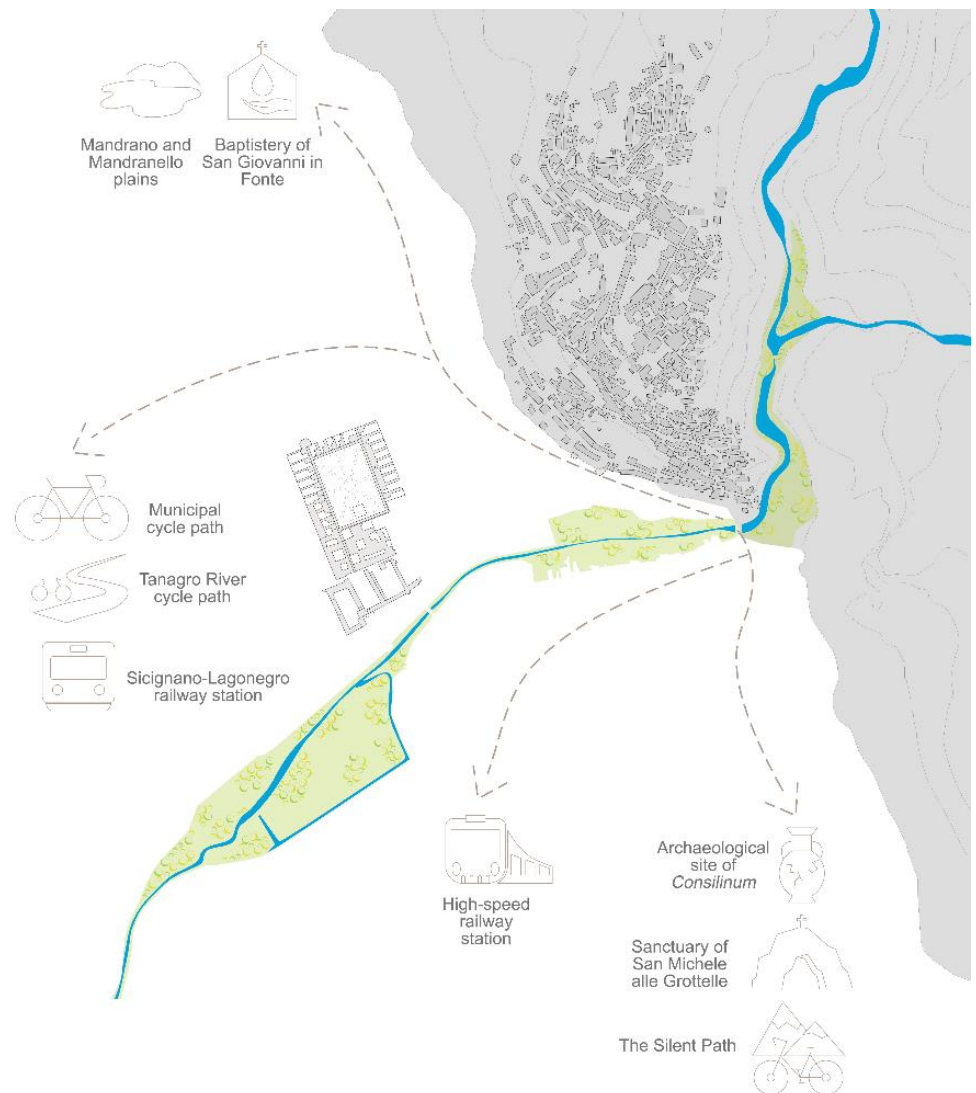
Padula and the Diano Valley have grown in a disintegrated fashion with isolated opportunities rather than through coherent and long-term visions. The aim of the proposed urban design strategy is to re-establish connections between valuable landscape systems and points of interest that are currently fragmented and insufficiently connected.

The strategy focuses primarily on the urban disconnection between the upper and lower parts of the city. This gap is due to the unique geographical background, with the dualism between the upper and the lower part of the city, that over time has become a marked separation. These two urban parts of the city have evolved separately, effectively becoming opposing poles, with growing urbanizations toward the valley - particularly around the main mobility routes - causing a decrease of the agricultural landscape.

Fabbricato Stream is a key natural element that reinforces this disconnection. From the hills it flows along the east side of the city centre down to the valley. The landscape that stretches along this stream is known as Mills Valley (Trezza, n.d.) (Figure 6). Here, the remains of hydraulic systems and ancient mills still bear witness to an ancient productive and vibrant system. The flowing waters, once abundant, were diverted through various canals to power nine mills - some owned by the

Carthusian monks. Water was diverted from its natural route, elevated through a system of canals, and directed - via stone conduits - onto the blades of the mill wheels. Where the terrain did not permit, arched aqueducts supported the canals.

**Figure 6. Green infrastructure**



Source: Diagram edited by the author.

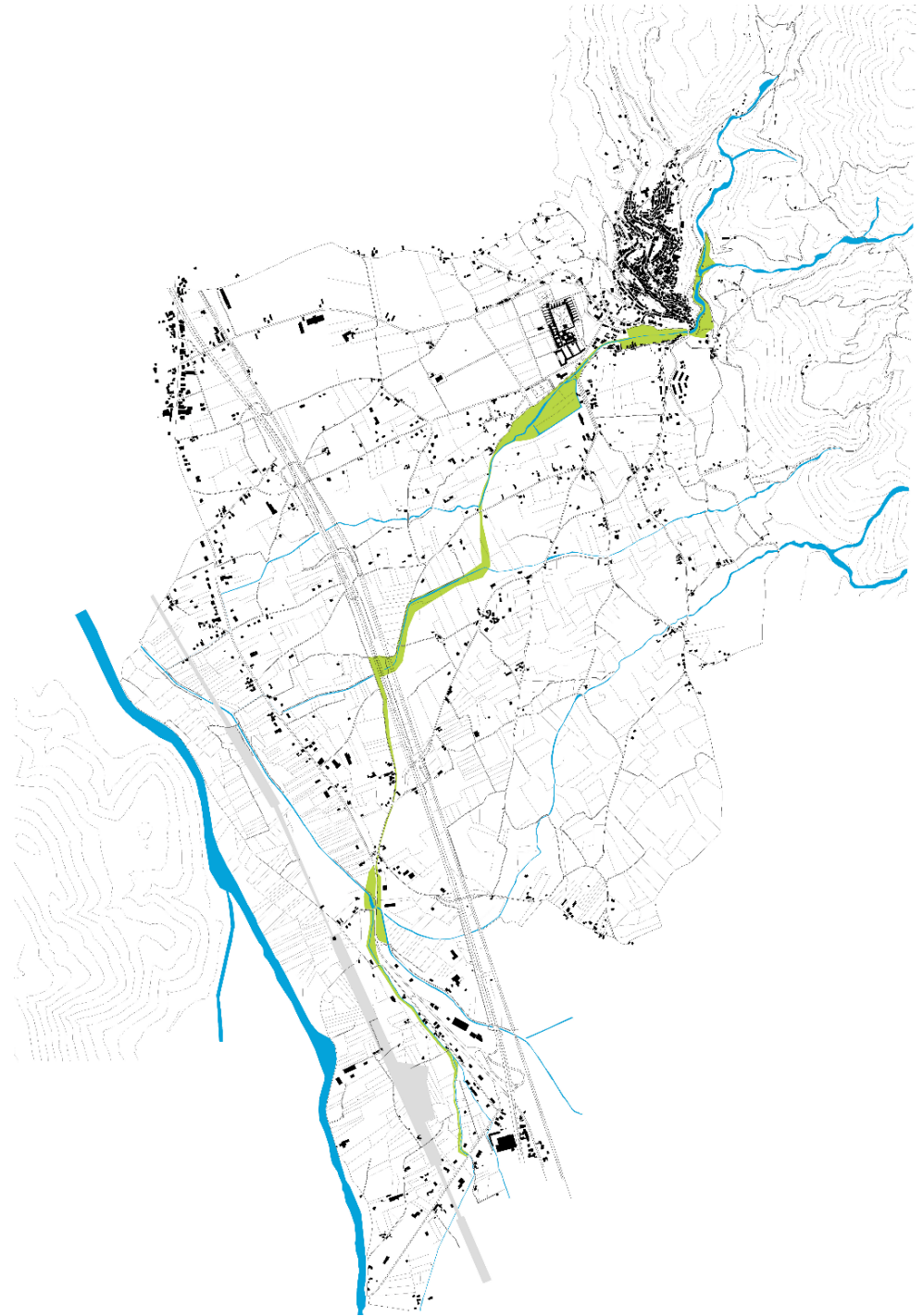
Old lithographs show that the stream once ran very close to the Charterhouse of Padula (De Cunzo & De Martini, 1985; Siniscalchi, 2014). Water was even routed inside the monastery and managed through an aqueduct designed specifically for the monastic community's needs. Over the years, the monastery suffered repeated flood damage leading to a diversion system that altered the flow of the river (Miccio, 2004).

The strategy defines the Mills Valley as a new green infrastructure for the city, bridging the gap between the upper and lower parts of Padula and becoming a structuring urban element that connects the town's main points of interest, the new high-speed rail station, and the future Tanagro River Park (Figure 7).

The green infrastructure is articulated through new open-air spaces linked by a network of slow mobility paths, alternative to existing roads (Figure 8). The paths are connected through unusual landscapes, allowing a truly different experience within the cultivated lands.



**Figure 7. From the Mills Valley toward the new station**



Source: Plan edited by the author.

The paths follow the canals and the hydrological networks that define the area's watershed, highlighting water as a key natural element linked to local identity. Through slow routes, the landscape could be experienced at different speeds, with a perception not possible from conventional roadways.

The green infrastructure gives a comprehensive perception of the different Vallo landscapes. It crosses the land, linking the upper part of the city to the new high-speed rail station, connecting it to other cycle and naturalistic paths and to the most important existing sustainable mobility networks (Figure 9).

Due to the altitude variation along the paths, it is not feasible - nor inclusive - for all users to rely on a single model of mobility. For this reason, interchange hubs are

strategically integrated, allowing for intermodal connections that make the overall journey more flexible and dynamic (Figure 10).

**Figure 8. Cycle-lane within the landscape**



Source: Image edited by the author, with Federica Stoia; The Large Cloister of the Padula's Charterhouse and the lowland and mountain landscape, photos by the author

The green infrastructure runs predominantly alongside rivers. In addition, it also is a platform for mitigating hydrogeological and landslide risks. In fact, through the integration of nature-based solutions (Como et al., 2023), such as sustainable urban drainage systems and mechanisms for reusing surface and subsurface water, it can help manage flood risks through floodable ditches and water storage basins for agricultural use.

Traditional water collection tanks, historically used for irrigation and water management (Sereni, 1961), remain a visible feature of the designed landscape.

Along the paths, new architectures are also designed as mobility exchange and touristic information hubs. The urban design strategy transforms the action of crossing the city into an immersive experience of the traditional landscape, enhancing the symbolic value of traditional landscape as a monument.

The deep connection within the landscape also emerges from the rediscovery of its traditional uses, specifically, from signs showing how agricultural practices have historically shaped the territory through the lines of agricultural land and water canals.

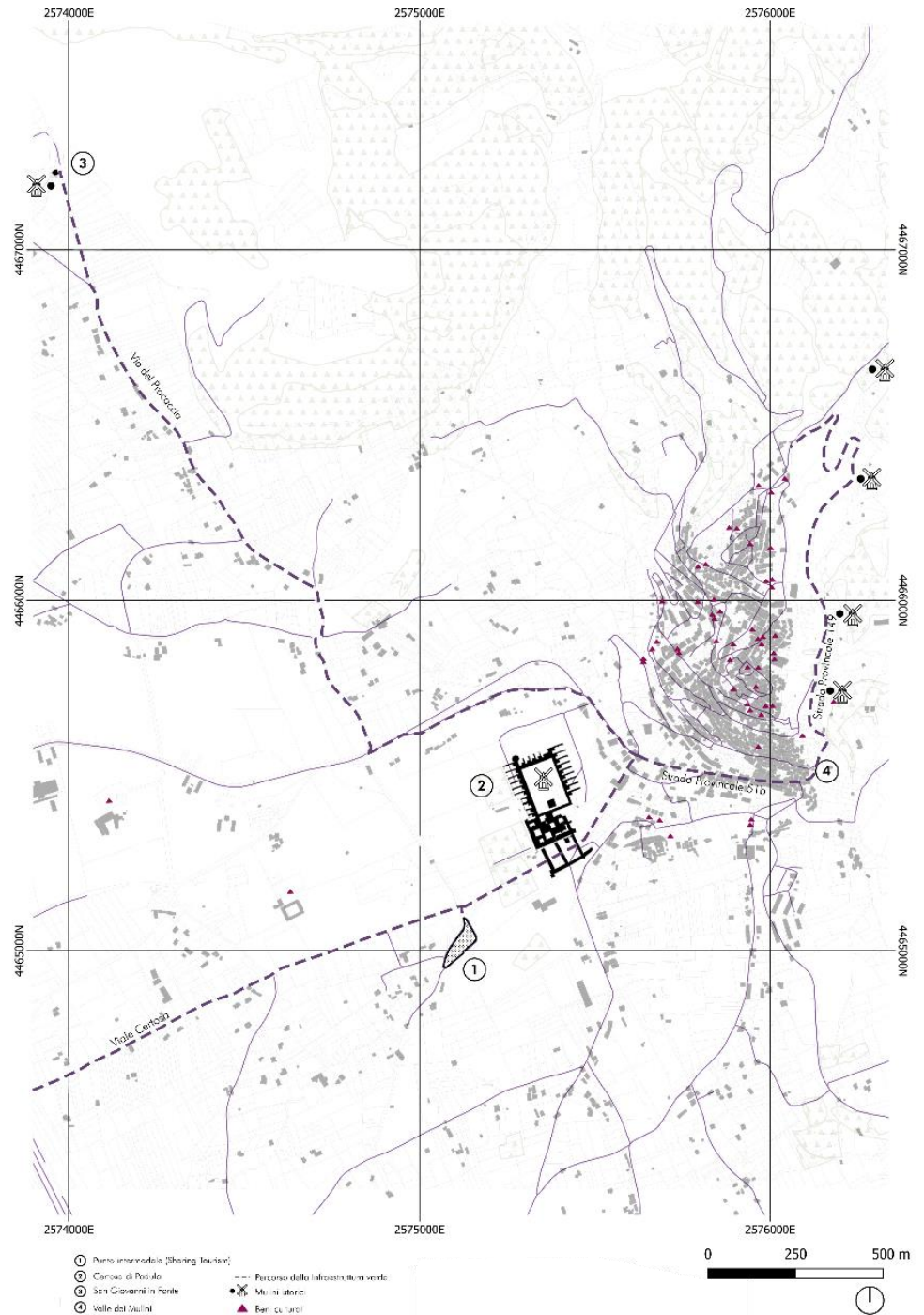
The mixed-use farming within small plots, often located close to water lines, represents a distinctive sign of the traditional and agricultural landscape that characterizes the Cilento National Park (Martucci & Di Rienzo, 1997).

This landscape is also closely linked to the structure of the Cilentan family, with agricultural production largely aimed at self-sufficiency. It is within this cultural context that the Mediterranean Diet has its roots, a lifestyle and nutritional model

that was officially recognized by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Dieta Mediterranea, 2024).

This authentic, lived experience of the landscape becomes a central feature of the journey where water emerges as a cultural paradigm of the territory.

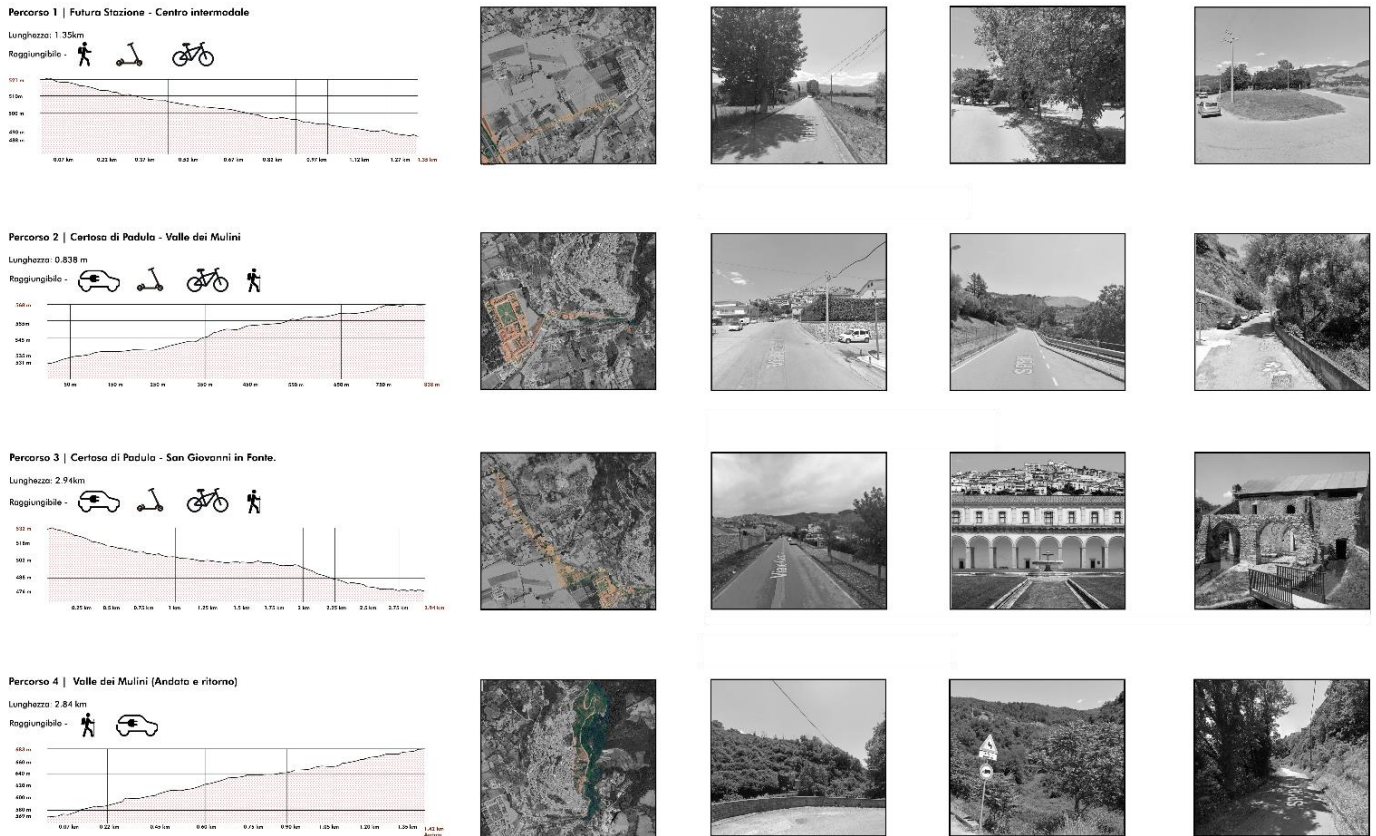
**Figure 9. The Mills Valley and the mobility networks**



Source: Plan edited by the author, with Octavio Lopez.



**Figure 10. Studies about the main sustainable mobility routes**



Source: Graphics edited by the author, with Octavio Lopez.

**5. The collective appropriation of the landscape: Fabbricato urban park**

As part of the strategic vision, a detailed study has been carried out for the transformation of the Fabbricato streambed (Figure 11). This area is located between two key roads: the Provincial Road 51b, connecting Montesano sulla Marcellana to Padula and Via San Francesco, running alongside the San Francesc convent and converging into Via San Giacomo.

The area has the shape of a wedge that connects the Mills Valley to the historic city centre and to the famous Charterhouse. The Fabbricato stream flows through it. The river descends from the Valley and, skirting the town, continues its route approaching the Charterhouse and then turns towards the Tanagro to flow into its water.

The riverbed corresponds to the lowest altitude of the area, on its sides there are large terraces characterized by the succession of uncultivated and partially cultivated areas with vegetable gardens and rows of trees. The river flows in the centre of the area. The terraces from the low level of the river rise to the top. From the roads, the area is thus perceived as a void characterized by uncultivated greenery - impenetrable. From the top it is not possible to detect the presence of the Fabbricato.

The design solution proposed a park crossed by pedestrian and cycling paths (Figures 12-13). Considering its proximity to an existing parking area on Provincial Road 51b, an ancient building, now in ruins, will be used as a place for vehicle storage and exchange of mobility, including bicycles and electric car parks.

Inside the park, a pre-existing wall obscures views of the nearby urban area while simultaneously framing the historic city center in the background. This condition

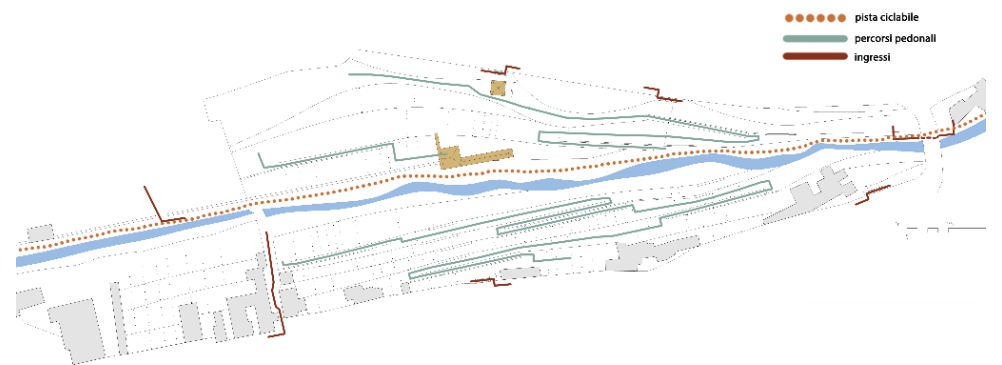
creates a sort of natural theatre where the wall acts as a scenic backdrop highlighted by the position of seats along the terraced slopes on the opposite side (Figure 14).

**Figure 11. Fabbriato urban park**



Source: Plan edited by the author.

**Figure 12. Paths and gates**



Source: Diagram edited by the author.

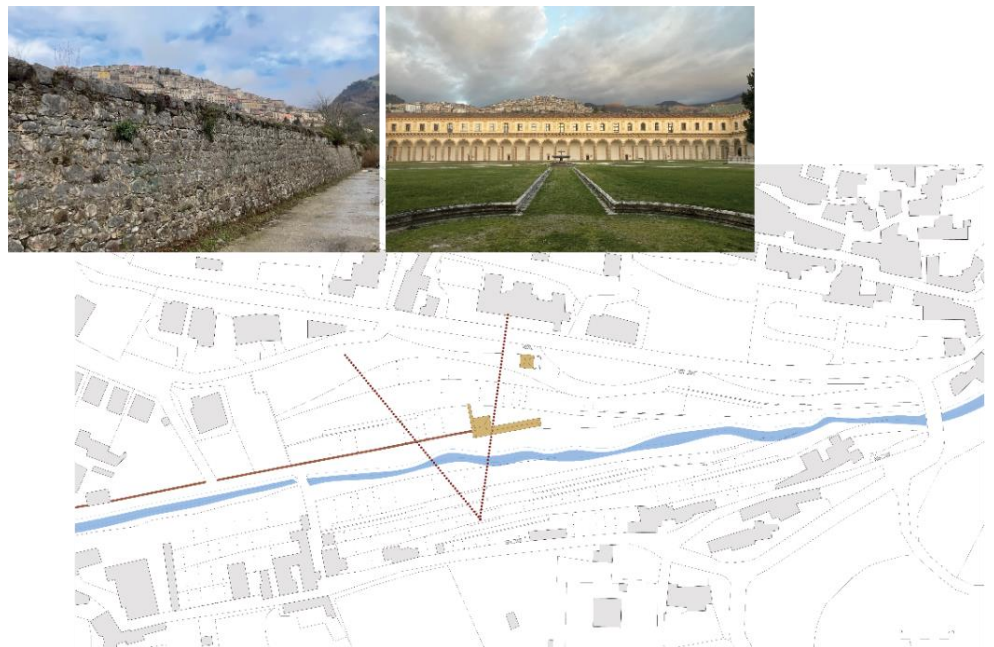
Above the wall, the city is visible with its houses rhythmically cascading down the slopes toward the valley, producing a distinctive skyline. The same effect is achieved within the Carthusian Monastery’s Large Cloister, where the architecture of the cloister underlines the historic center behind it.

The wall includes a new space that in its proportions and layout is a citation of one of the most emblematic spaces of the Charterhouse. Specifically, this space reinterprets the cells of the Carthusian monks, characterized by a repeating basic module that shaped the comb-like side façades of the monastic complex (Figures 15-16-17). Each monastic cell traditionally consisted of two rooms and a covered loggia opening onto a private garden. The privileged condition of the presence of a garden linked to the individual space of the cell is here proposed by inverting the meaning of this space, from individual to collective. The pre-existing wall becomes an anchor from the new loggia overlooking the park. This assumes the dimension of a community and vegetable garden, a common space in strong relationship with nature and the landscape.



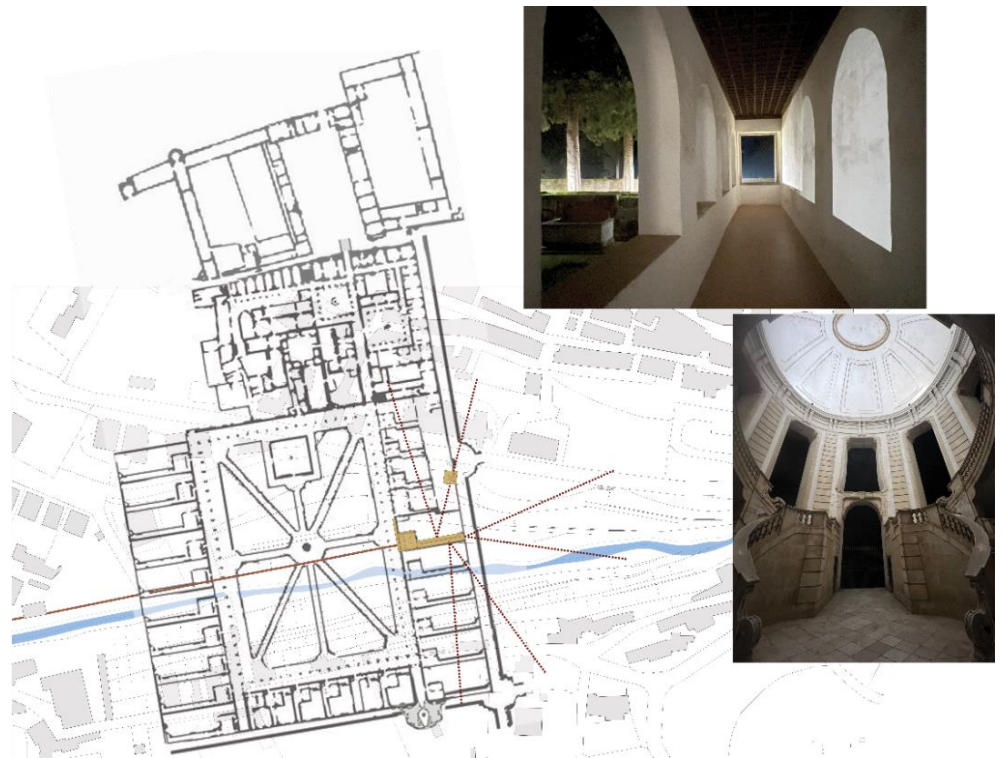
**Figure 13. Inside the park**

Source: Image edited by the author, with Federica Stoa; the existing condition of the Fabbricato's riverbed, photos by the author.

**Figure 14. Natural theatre with view on the historic city center**

Source: Plan edited by the author; the pre-existing wall within the Fabbricato's riverbed and the city center view from the Large Cloister of the Padula's Charterhouse, photos by the author.

**Figure 15. Design concept for a loggia in the park**



Source: Collage edited by the author with the plan of the Padula's Charterhouse; the loggia within a cell of the Carthusian monks and the Tower of the Elliptical Staircase of the Padula's Charterhouse, photos by the author

**Figure 16. The view from the loggia**



Source: Image edited by the author, with Federica Stoia; mills courtyard within Padula's Charterhouse and the baptistery of San Giovanni in Fonte, photos by the author



**Figure 17. The view from the loggia**

Source: Image edited by the author, with Federica Stoia; apothecary loggia and the Tower of the Elliptical Staircase of the Padula's Charterhouse, photos by the author

## 6. Conclusions

The project designs a strategic vision for Padula, starting from crossing its landscape as a value to get in touch with its identity and culture.

The idea of crossing the land is also a key point in the UNESCO designation of the Cilento, Vallo di Diano, and Alburni National Park as a World Heritage Site (Cilento and Vallo di Diano National Park, 1998). The criteria supporting this distinction emphasize the importance of the area as a key corridor for cultural, political, and commercial exchanges throughout the Mediterranean. The mountain ridges running from east to west were, at certain times, the only practicable communication routes between the Adriatic Sea and the Tyrrhenian Sea. This created a cultural landscape of exceptional importance, contributing significantly to the development of human societies in the central Mediterranean region.

Crossing the landscape thus could be a narrative thread to prepare Padula to embrace the high-speed railway, transforming it into a meaningful pause along the new tourist itineraries of Southern Italy.

From a methodological perspective, the project underscores the importance of

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combining traditional planning with a strategic vision for future development. This also includes assessments of the current opportunities aligned with regional objectives that need to be integrated into the existing urban plans.

At the scale of urban design, the strategy is explored in depth through key topics to build transformation solutions that deal with aspirations and the real needs of the city.

In this sense, the reinterpretation of the territory has highlighted the need for the strategic and urban design project to represent a critical tool towards reality, building gaps between concrete needs and visions that include cultural and identity issues.

Padula, the city of water and stone, is observed as an emblematic case study representative for the reinterpretation of the Diano Valley and the inner Cilento region. These places are still not prepared for valuing their resources, often trapped in rhetorical visions that fail to grasp the opportunity to network and be an alternative tourist interest.

At the same time, the research reflects on the impact that the modernization of infrastructure networks has on the territories that are still marginal today. If this is to be a great opportunity to bring places and communities closer together, it needs to be added value. From this perspective, it is necessary to understand the transformation in advance and to ensure that it as a real opportunity for a positive impact on the city and not just as a mere technical-logistical feat.

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The project was led by Professors Michele Grimaldi and Isidoro Fasolino as scientific supervisors, with Architect Luisa Smeragliuolo Perrotta as technical coordinator for architectural and urban design issues.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

### **Originality**

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