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The university as a factor of urban re-composition

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This article develops a reflection on the ‘re-composition’ effects that university settlements may have on the urban structure of a city³.

In particular, this analysis examines the case of Bologna, a city where a deeply rooted, long-standing relationship between the city and the university (the presence of the university dates back to 1088) (Tega 1987, Ceccarelli 1999) has determined the historic evolution of the urban settlement and has been a key issue in the public debate, often giving rise to moments of acute conflict.

The university as a superplace

The university as an urban transformation factor, in its economic, social and spatial organisation implications, is attributed a growing significance as an element affecting the development of the contemporary city (Perry, Wiewel 2005).

More in general, in the structuring of the contemporary city, an ever greater role has been acquired by the so-called ‘superplaces’, i.e., those functionally specialised places that often take on the form of ‘citadels’ in the urban fabric, and where “the attention of many observers and designers has always focused with a mixed sense of concern and fascination” (Gabellini 2010: 34). This applies to railway stations, airports, intermodal centres, shopping malls, outlet villages, multiplex cinemas, sports and entertainment cities, cultural poles, theme parks, university and hospital campuses, trade fair grounds...: “a diversified number of containers and condensers of spaces and multifunctional activities, around which a large majority of contemporary society public life practices gravitates and takes shapes” (Di Giovanni 2010: 74). Converting such spaces from highly specialised functional nodes into urban central places and cores (Tyrwhitt, Sert, Rogers 1952) is one of the challenges that contemporary urban regions must take on, for purposes of a better habitability (Fini 2010). To an increasing extent, the system of centralities of present-day urban regions – the geography of their high-density relational places – is seen to take shape as a blend of ‘old’ historic centres and new superplaces (Storchi, Armani 2010; Bonfantini, Di Giovanni 2011).

Between 2006 and 2007, on these contemporary spaces the Province of Bologna conducted an interdisciplinary investigation whose results were collected in a book significantly entitled *La civiltà dei superluoghi* (Agnoletto, Delpiano, Guerzoni 2007). This book was followed by a publication produced by the Province in collaboration with the City of Bologna (Province of Bologna 2007) that described five “transformation superplaces” of Bologna which included - besides the airport, the intermodal facility, the trade fair district and the railway station - the university.

Bologna, a ‘university city’

Ample evidence of the relationship between the university and the organisation of the urban structure of Bologna, and the conflicts that may originate from it, can be found in the vicissitudes described in a recent autobiography by one of the main protagonists of the city’s urban design and planning activities in the second half of the 20th century, Giuseppe Campos Venuti. The following quotation from this book has a bearing on the issues addressed in this article:

³ The considerations expressed herein constitute an extended and critically revised version of an article to appear in *Urbanistica*, Journal of the Italian National Institute of Planning (Istituto Nazionale di Urbanistica).

“In the late Sixties a policy that I had opposed unsuccessfully prevailed and resulted in a drastic reduction in the number of people residing in the historic centre, which was almost entirely taken over by university facilities, banks, offices. And precisely on this issue I often got into clashes ... with my young friend Cervellati ... Having been appointed city planning alderman in 1964, shortly after I left the Town Council in 1966, he aimed for limiting the growth in the number of university students and retaining their presence in the historic centre of the city; to this end, he encouraged the university to occupy and remodel many historic buildings in the north-eastern quadrant of the inner city. At the same time, with a view to securing the restoration of other historic buildings, he promoted their use by the main city banks; as a result, the university and bank premises strengthened their hold on the historic city centre and attracted a variety of additional private and public service providers which otherwise might have settled in the newly developing nearby peripheral areas ... For Bologna ... I proposed [instead] ... a decentralisation that might make a decisive contribution to what I referred to as the functional defence of the historic centre ... Initially I succeeded ... in persuading the university to establish a modern decentralised campus – that was referred to polemically as the ‘Campos campus’ – and to this end the university acquired a huge estate (ca 1000 acres) in Ozzano, in the periphery to the east of Bologna situated between the two municipalities; but this project came to nothing when, in 1968, the students, with the backing of their conservative teachers, fiercely opposed this ‘deportation’” (Campos Venuti 2011: 65-67).

The relationship between the city and the university has retained its significance through the years and was explicitly acknowledged by the latest Municipal Structural Plan, approved in 2008. In its initial part, the Illustrative Report of the 2008 Municipal Structural Plan for the city contains a short profile in which seven elements deemed essential to describe the role of Bologna are singled out. One of them is that of “The University City”: “The ancient university ... comprised of 5 regional poles with ca 100,000 students ... makes Bologna into a scientific and educational centre of European standing, having a significant impact on the local economy: about 30,000 people employed, and an incidence of 6% on the provincial GDP” (Comune di Bologna 2008a: 9).

In the Structural Plan, the new university facilities were viewed as one of the factors that qualified the City of the Railway, i.e., the most important of the seven strategic elements that went into the vision underlying the new plan (Gabellini 2008a), according to a prospect of rebalancing and decongesting the central portion of the city, whereby the strategic objectives to be pursued included the “decentralisation of university and management functions”, the “requalification of public space” and the “dissemination of centralities throughout the city” (Evangelisti 2008: 111). The new university facilities were placed along a pathway that was meant to become the new urban backbone, “a concatenation of urban spaces ... housing the activities around which international relations take shape, where maximum accessibility and the highest concentration of excellent functions bring together the different groups that characterise the current population mix” (Comune di Bologna 2008a: 29). Not by chance it is a concatenation of ‘citadels’ and ‘superplaces’: “By identifying a City of the Railway, the Plan intends to commit to a strategy of physical and functional connections between the urban spaces that host, and will host, activities and uses of excellence: the central station, the

Marconi airport, the trade fair district, the university development areas, the agroalimentary centre” (Comune di Bologna 2008a: 32).

The notion of Bologna as a ‘university city’ is reasserted in a recent study that accompanied the definition of the Regional Plan (approved in February 2010), *Immagini del cambiamento in Emilia-Romagna* (Gabellini *et al.* 2012). In this study five visions are proposed as keys for an across-the-board approach to the interpretation of regional space. These visions are: “Bologna metropolitan city”, “The city-territory of Emilia”, “The multipolar city of Romagna”, “The polarised frontier cities”, and “A European park”. The “Bologna metropolitan city” vision is built around six images one of which - “In Bologna people study” - focuses precisely on the university system and its urban and territorial role.

The university transforms space and urban relations

Though fascinating, the relationship between the universities and their surrounding territories is a theme that runs the risk of remaining indefinite. As a matter of fact, many are the facets of this relationship and many are the possible ways to address this issue. For instance, we may view the university as a functionally independent organisation and a specific political-institutional player; as a keystone in the productive system geared towards innovation and technology transfer, or as an activity which in and of itself may have significant repercussions on the local economic-social base; as a superior service and territorial factor of excellence, an element providing a competitive edge for urban systems; an urban development agent, bearer of explicit policies (Savino 1998a, Bianchi 2010, Pasqui 2010).

Each of these possible conceptions (the list is open) has spatial implications. However, within this wide spectrum, in rigorous city planning terms, the issue of the relationship between the university and the city is about the contributions that university facilities - in their various ‘models’ and infinite variety of forms - can make to the organisation and the setup of the city, within the structuring and restructuring over time of space and urban relations.

In this connection, the university has been accused of having failed to develop a suitable strategic concept of its localisation within the city and having proceeded by rule of thumb, based on the opportunities that presented themselves and according to a logic of expediency, with a basically self-referenced mindset. The urban plan was blamed instead for not having spelled out a ‘project’ for the university within the city, a project taking into due account specific aspects and possible repercussions on the urban fabric and habitable space, and having merely acknowledged the presence of the university in the generic and banal terms that befit a standard resource, terms that apply to this as well as other essential service facilities and functions (Savino 1998b: 42-43).

And yet, it cannot be denied that university settlements have great transformation potential for a city (and a brief description of two recent cases may help to underscore this).

In Milan, the Bicocca University creates a new centrality open to the urban region

In a city that over the last decades has accentuated its characterisation as a “city for studying” (Balducci *et al.* 2010), Milano Bicocca is a significant example of adaptive reaction, in which a university localisation that was not envisioned to begin with and has come about in the course of the events has triggered a process of effective ‘territorialisation’ - among the most interesting in Milan’s transformation scenario - bringing about a new potential centrality open to the urban region. The reconversion promoted by Pirelli on its areas situated along the historic Milan-Monza link is outside the scope of the strategy pursued in the program documents of the time (*Documento direttore del Progetto Passante*, 1984): it came to the fore through an international competition (1986) getting across the idea of a technology park (Tecnocity), which then changed into a residential-tertiary sector district, and the presence of the new university soon became the keystone of the entire transformation process (Bolocan Goldstein 2003, 2010). The situation today is not without problems: the initial accessibility problems have been compounded by the ‘hard’ contraposition between different settlement areas - and the relative ‘populations’ - rigidly characterised by their own connotations, to the point of making the Bicocca district into a gigantic ‘puzzle’ with “high architectural, spatial, temporal (and social) fragmentation”. And yet, in an urban territory that serves as a hinge, where traditional and new settlement patterns give rise to an original composition, “the image of Bicocca ended up coinciding to an ever greater extent with that of the university, which, in some way, symbolises the ‘new soul’ of the place. In recent years, the university has been the player that has done the most in terms of trying to establish networks and relationships with the aim to make the area into a district with an identity of its own” (Zajczyk 2010: 116-117, 118).

In Genoa, the university triggers the renewal of the historic centre

Genoa - its waterfront and its historic centre - may be viewed as one of the most significant instances of urban regeneration in recent years (Gabrielli, Bobbio 2005; Gabrielli 2010). As is known, besides a wide range of integrated planning tools, this great process was accomplished thanks to a policy that was able to bank on and cumulate the effects of a rather unique sequence of major events and the relative funding channels: 1992 Columbian celebrations, 2001 G8 summit, Genoa capital of European culture 2004.

However, the one factor that really triggered the transformation was the transfer of the School of Architecture to Stradone di S. Agostino, in the historic centre: this started a process of renewal of a portion of the city which in the late 1980s appeared inexorably hit by the “deterioration of the historical housing heritage, social conflict, progressive marginalisation ... and an image ... increasingly characterised by criminal phenomena and decadence” (Gastaldi 2009: 94). Students moved into the area and rented living accommodations at advantageous prices giving rise to a revitalisation of local retail outlets and a spontaneous reclamation of the building heritage, resulting, in the mid 1990s, in a ‘patchy’ requalification, which then gradually attracted other social groups. The historic centre became an attractive place to live and work in, and where to go for entertainment and leisure time activities, in a deliberately pursued process of real estate revaluation and gentrification (Gabrielli 2010: 67). Needless to say, in the

wake of this process, new problems arose, such as social polarisation, conflicts regarding the spatial and temporal use of the historic centre between the provisional population and the permanent inhabitants-gentrifiers (Gastaldi 2009, Briata 2010).

The two cases summarised above both show how the university works as a powerful catalyst of urban transformation processes while, at the same time, giving rise to new 'unbalanced' situations requiring the urban plans to be continuously redefined as a function of these developments. As a matter of fact, "Urban policy makers often view the presence of university facilities as an opportunity to revitalise (and enhance the value of) entire rundown districts ... But then, the presence of the students, especially when they are not engaged in learning activities, is regarded as the root cause of many deterioration processes" (Legnani 1998: 165).

Salient traits of a university city

What is a 'University city', how pervasive should the characterising role of a university be for a city to be called such, what types can it be? The answers to these questions may lack the necessary precision and may fail to settle the question once and for all (Savino 1998b: 39). However, undoubtedly, time (i.e., the taking roots over the years of the university function in a city) and relative size (i.e., the 'mass' of students and its impact on the host city) are key factors.

In some cases, the relationship between the city and the university is quintessential, rooted in a centuries-old heritage. Sometimes the relationship runs just as deep, but it is more 'secular', as its origins do not go this far back and date to a time associated with the construction of the modern city, when the university was viewed as one of the great 'equipments' of the nineteenth-twentieth century city. Finally, the university can be a recent event that bursts into the present-day urban scenario. These aspects are intertwined with size-related factors: the 'figures' of the city and those of the university are mutually correlated in very different proportions.

In 1988, the University of Bologna celebrated its ninth centennial (Tega 1987). And on the eve of the year 2000, in taking stock of the cycle of activities undertaken in the second half of the 1980s, Giorgio Praderio, coordinator of the planning commission for the Program Plan for the Territorial Development of the University 1990-2000 (Praderio 1990), underscored that "today ... one inhabitant in four is a student or is directly connected in some way or other with the university (if we include teachers and personnel). However, in addition to corroborating the claim that the city has become a 'university city' to all intents and purposes, the size reached by the Bologna University is evidence of the urban interconnection between the interventions implemented. The urban plan for the university may no longer be defined in terms of ad hoc places, reserved districts (the so-called 'study citadels') in that it has become a system pervasively interconnected with the city" (Praderio 2000: 16).

Bologna: the university and the historic centre

“The university of Bologna was born and has always lived within the city”⁴ and, more precisely, in its historic centre.

“Bologna has approx. 373,000 residents, but during the day its population increases to about 550,000 people, about one third of them concentrated in the historic centre” (Bovini 2008: 20). The resident population of the historic centre underwent a drastic reduction from 1951 to 1971 (down from 113 to 80 thousand inhabitants), and then again from 1971 to 1991 (56 thousand). Then it stabilised and remained virtually the same from 2003 through 2007 (53 thousand people), with a renewed attractiveness - not least from the residential standpoint - of this part of the city, which is characterised by a greater demographic turnover.

Besides the residents, another component of the local population consists of ca 20,000 people who do not take up residence in the city (mostly, but not only, students from outside town). Every day, about 63,000 commuters (22 thousand students and 41 thousand workers) enter the historic centre (data from 2001). To these three groups (adding up to a total of about 135,000 people), we must add occasional visitors to the city centre, estimated to be about 45,000 per day. Thus, 180 thousand people, or even 200 thousand at times, crowd this 4 sq. km city area, which suffers from the clash of different practices and utilisation modalities, especially where the diversification of people and behaviours is replaced by a stiffer polarisation and contraposition.

The age-old problem of the general (*and* student) overpopulation in the historic centre (Legnani 1998) is taken into account in the new city planning instruments by way of a broader program that addresses the overcrowding of this city area by contemplating “a selection, a reduction, a far-ranging cure, for which the 2008 Municipal Structural Plan and the 2009 Building Regulations laid the necessary foundations by proposing a strengthening of stable residency (with consequences in terms of basic services and proximity stores) as a protective measure of decisive importance; collective and slow mobility as a priority; a balance in excellent and congestion-inducing land uses (programmed decentralisation); the protection and reinforcement of specific settlement features and values (maintenance and upgrade regulatory strategies); a mix of interconnected actions and urban policies” (Gabellini 2008b: 98).

This policy for the historic centre, whose role is redefined through a recognition of a wider and more diversified Historic City (Comune di Bologna 2008a: 110-111), is well in keeping, in the overall effects pursued by the plan as well as with specific reference to the university settlements, with the strategy of The City of the Railway.

⁴ Words from a report by Francesco Evangelisti (2010), senior manager of the municipality of Bologna (City Quality Department, Strategic Programs Unit, and Historic Centre Preservation and Management Unit), head of the team in charge of drafting the new urban planning instruments (Municipal Structural Plan - Psc, Urban Building Regulations - Rue, Municipal Operational Plan - Poc). The approval of the Psc, on 14 July 2008, was followed by that of the Rue (20 April 2009) and that of the Poc (4 May 2009), which completed the series of new municipal urban planning instruments as required by regional law 20/2000. The basic contents of the three documents are illustrated in the book, *Bologna. Leggere il nuovo piano urbanistico* (Comune di Bologna 2009).

The new university facilities as agents of urban restructuring

Within the framework of the new strategy for the development of university sites within the city defined jointly by the Municipal Government and the University, the Structural Plan provides for their redistribution and diffusion according to two lines of action: remodelling and enhancement of the central sites; strengthening and construction of new facilities integrated into the 'inner periphery', i.e., within that concatenation of urban spaces (The City of the Railway) that is characterised by maximum accessibility and the highest concentration of excellent functions, and that plays a key role in the restructuring process that the plan aims to govern.

Through a process that is already under way and partly implemented, the historic model of localisation of university facilities, centralised and indiscriminate, is gradually being replaced with a configuration involving several specialised poles integrated within specific settlement contexts, with homes for rent for the students being provided in the vicinity of the new sites so as to reduce the pressure of excess demand for accommodations in the inner city and adjacent areas.

Thus, the new campus for the technical-scientific faculties (Chemistry, Astronomy, Pharmacy, Biotechnologies) rises in the Navile area, in the vicinity of the National Research Centre (CNR), the Industrial Heritage Museum, and student accommodation facilities to be constructed in the nearby zone of the former Fruit and Vegetables Market. In the Bertalia-Lazzaretto area, the new Engineering complex is being widened, through an intervention encompassing university buildings, housing units (for students too), management, hospitality, sales and service facilities. The Faculty of Agricultural Sciences is located next to the agroalimentary centre CAAB (Centro Agroalimentare Bolognese), and the location of the new premises for the Faculty of Sport and Exercise Sciences in the university sports area in via dell'Industria (where student accommodations have already been built) proposes an integrated use of urban and university sports and recreational facilities (Evangelisti 2010).

In the plan documents, these policy decisions and the transformations underway can be seen most clearly in the Regulatory Framework of the Structural Plan, and it is highly significant that most of the indications regarding university settlements are concentrated in article 20, where the issue of the "Areas in transformation" is addressed. These are specific portions of the so called "Urban territory to be restructured" for which "urban planning implementation instruments have already been adopted or approved" or for which "direct interventions have been defined to put into effect the pre-existing Land Use Plan, whose provisions, whether already underway or about to get under way, find confirmation in the Structural Plan." This is one of the key elements characterising the relationship between the Structural Plan and the processes underway in the urban territory: their interaction clearly expresses "the intention to steer the transformation of the city without putting a halt to ongoing processes but rather by making an attempt to integrate them into a new vision of the city of tomorrow, while enriching them with new meanings stemming from this new vision" (Evangelisti 2011: 58).

Four urban planning moments and four different spatial strategies for the university

The decisions regarding the university matured during the years immediately preceding the Structural Plan, and were incubated by the Program Plan for the Territorial Development of the University, which chronologically came between the previous General Land Use Plan and the new city planning instrument, and was meant to serve as a bridge between the two.

That document was designed to organise into a coherent system a “hierarchy of settlements” in which it would be possible to identify four distinctive belts or territorial sectors for the localisation of university premises: an inner city sector, consisting of the historic locations in the city centre; a second city sector, comprised of the poles located in the urban belt that surrounds the historic centre and extends into the plains, north of the historic core; a third sector consisting of university sites arranged according to a pattern radiating into the metropolitan hinterland; a fourth sector made up of poles and centres that may be ascribed to the regional scenario (Praderio 1990: 71-72).

However, a better understanding of these developments, that the Program Plan wanted to recompose in a systematic 'chorography' can be provided if we look at them in a diachronic perspective as a sequence of significantly different moments, characterised by specific localisation strategies that prevailed from time to time, and which then often overlapped and merged in the course of their gradual and partial implementation. The ‘first sector’ is the area that was the focus of the 1977 University Building Plan, which fostered a widespread reuse of the historic containers, as a means to spread the university sites throughout the historic centre, doing away with the current polarisation in the East and West districts of the inner city, and to make sure that the new additions would not be so univocally characterised by university-related functions but would rather serve as more complex structures in the service of the city. The ‘second sector’ was the focus of the 1985 General Land Use Plan, which, by identifying urban sites outside the historic centre, inaugurated a line of action that, through the 1990s and the early 2000s, found development and reconfiguration in the new Structural Plan. The ‘third sector’ is where the plans provided for decentralisation on a metropolitan scale: an idea hatched in the 1960-70s that was subsequently realised albeit on a smaller scale than initially envisaged⁵. The ‘fourth sector’ - the one earmarked for the region-wide dissemination of a multi-centre network of university sites - is the expansive model completed in the 1990s and currently being strengthened.

In the relationship between Bologna and the university, we therefore see the advent of a new geography, where the creation of new integrated urban poles engenders an action front for the coming years. We should underscore the non trivial nature of the integration pursued: not an empty, hackneyed formula, but rather a contextualised settlement that is able to capture and promote the specific calling and evolution of the different urban parts, in a continuous dialogue between the university and the city.

⁵ The two options, decentralisation and confirmation of the primacy of the university in the historic centre, were the focus of an intense confrontation throughout the Sixties and the Seventies; see Cervellati, Scannavini, De Angelis (1977), and Campos Venuti (2011), quoted at the beginning of this article. As for the 1977 University Building Plan and how it was superseded by the 1985-89 General Land Use Plan, see Scannavini (1987, 2000).

The successful engraftment of the new university poles and their capacity to serve as catalysts for transformation will be decisive considerations in assessing the implementation of the process of urban reorganisation and city-wide diffusion of university sites. The compenetration between the city and the university is reasserted as an element that characterises the city of Bologna, albeit with a difference in terms of a less stressful relationship, in which a new distribution of university settlements contributes to the redesign of a centrality system less univocally concentrated in the historic city centre, thereby alleviating one of the main stress factors in the conflictual use of its spaces. Now, however, this scenario and its implementation in the near future have been rendered more uncertain by the economic crisis⁶.

⁶ On the plan implementation process against the background of the economic crisis, see Evangelisti (2011).

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