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What is the point…
Paolo Avarello

What is the point of an urban structure plan if it doesn't grant, or deny, development rights? This is what is usually asked by those who assume that the main task of a plan ought to be to limit the 'land income'. Urban master plans grow out of a desire to organize the process of urbanization, and therefore the activities of the relevant administrative organs according to their needs as well as to their economic capacities. This, at least, was the situation until the Law of 1942, which 'authorized' to produce the urban master plan, and requested a 'financial plan' to go with it. This is the reason why it has always been held necessary to have a 'design' drawn up that points to the future: defining and 'quantifying' the tasks and duties of the administration as the goal of the plan, even if the plan and its regulations were also the point of reference for private initiatives.
Over time the urban master plan has been burdened with other tasks, metabolizing the regulations; and in order to respond to specific local references and requirement, these regulations have become more rigid and bogged-down with designs that are more and more detailed. Thus law 1150/42 and its implementation mechanisms were betrayed. They have become practically useless, except in order to 'amend' the plan, while lengthening the time required, immediately raising interests and desires that the plan only foresaw after twenty or thirty years. This type of plan was complicated and burdensome already by the '60s, but it seemed the only feasible plan. Attempts at reform in those years did not update the plans but rather tended to modify the legal statute of land values in order to legitimate them. And this type of plan was codified by the 'bridging law' (legge ponte) and by decrees regarding standards that rendered obligatory the 'best practices' of the day.
Drawing up the urban master plan and gaining approval for it ended up being considered an administrative formality, with the progressive decline of its technical as well as 'political' contents. With this the master plan lost its original functions, being limited to 'dictating rules' for utilization with (private) construction of 'developable areas'. Following on from the wellknown constitutional remarks, the duration of the master plan was reduced, down to the level of buildings rather than at the level of urban transformation. What objectives can be seriously considered with only ten years to hand and scarce resources?
The structure plan therefore serves above all to reclaim the real significance of urban planning, setting forth choices and objectives over longer times, without immediately deploying the 'land supply', neither positively (buildability), nor negatively (expropriation).
But the structure plan also serves to establish a dialogue with the other institutions that engage in urban planning: the Region, the Province; and the question becomes highly important in a system in which the institutional 'hierarchies' have declined, but culture, politics and techniques able to compensate have not yet been developed. It will have to be taken into account, as well, that the large builders and operators of infrastructures can no longer be assimilated with 'public institutions'. This should be discussed, and not (only) about who is doing the building or not, how much and where.
The third function of a structure plan is to give direction for the transformational choices to the relevant parts of the territory that will be invested in, or to fix the respective criteria with which to evaluate individual interventions, whosoever should propose them. It is clear the difference between old local plans ('conforming' to the design and to the regulations of the master plan, or instead 'amending it') and the new modes of verifying the compatibility and coherence of the proposed transformations to the master plan, but also their contribution to reaching these objectives. There is no doubt design activity and evaluation are today much more articulated and complex than the 'verification of compatibility' once used, and they require different capacities than those of the professions deployed until now, requiring also a greater responsibility on the part of those actors involved in the process.
It is this that seems the weakest point of the experimentation of these years, in the Regions that have embraced this model, but bringing with it, unfortunately the remains of the old master planning. From here, perhaps, comes the nostalgia for the 'master plans of old', often formalist and often unmanageable, but also perhaps more reassuring. The 'planning process' only works if it always brings us to the same type of plan, but not when it forces one to consider alternatives, to evaluate them and to motivate ones choice.
"Is Urban Planning a public policy that is technically assisted, or is it a technique politically assisted?" A minimum amount of respect for democracy suggests the response, but the question also takes into account the difficult relationship of urban planners with political decisions, and therefore of the difficulty to abandon the false, but consoling, certainties of the past.