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Coming closer to the town, experiencing life in the town.
Interview with Mario Dompè

The management and development of the plans and projects for San Donato Milanese presented on these pages was broken off after the defeat of the centre-left party at the 2007 local elections, won by a centre-right coalition headed by Mario Dompè, after an election campaign marked by considerable controversy on urban planning issues which scuppered initial attempts at cooperation between the majority and the opposition on strategic issues for the town. The change of administration, mirrored in several other towns in the area outside Milan, was an early indicator of the change that took place on a national level in the 2008 government elections. The work carried out left the new administration with the opportunity to make some major changes, thanks to the Strategic framework document and Integrated plans for the central areas, along with a focus on the details of the plan after the shared planning initiatives carried out in many districts. We asked the new mayor for his thoughts on three main issues: the major changes in the town so far, the role and significance of the central areas, and an overview of the planning experience in the town districts. (AB and AL)

I have been mayor of San Donato Milanese since May 2007, and I think my election victory was also linked to general dissatisfaction with the urban planning policies practiced by the previous administration. Victory by my coalition marked a break with the past, in which urban planning consisted of major changes carried out 'piecemeal'. This approach has been blamed for the crisis in the transport system and gradual failings in basic services. In the 1980s and 1990s the town developed like a jigsaw puzzle, without rhyme or reason (an example is the Torri Lombarde along the Via Emilia). There was no sense of proportion, and the town experienced a loss of identity in terms of its image. The choices made by the outgoing administration for the central areas and former ENI development areas were, in my opinion, too much a continuation of these critical aspects of the recent past - piecemeal, linked to external players, and too detached from the residents themselves.
Today the administration I am in charge of is in the difficult position - consolidated by choices made with the stakeholders - of having to manage these projects and bring development of the town closer to the feelings of the people. But a town is not a mechanical structure. It is made up of buildings, free areas, and in particularly people with a body and a soul. And I want this to be the starting point, underlining how we believe our future approach should be.
The town planning process and plans for San Donato presented in these pages focused in particular on areas external to the existing fabric of the town districts, and potential transformations with the support of a big landowner. One initial difficulty was the fact that a single major entity wanted to transform parts of the town with forms that were both distant and alien to the existing context. Moreover, the shared planning process in the areas does not sit well with the actual transformation put in place by the public works being carried out at the time. Many of the executive projects put forward by the administration at the same time or after the district meetings did not take into account the feedback from residents. On the other hand, when something has not worked for technical or construction reasons (for example, the defective road surface in a major road like Via Di Vittorio), this was identified as a fault in the planning process, which further undermined faith in the proposed process.
A second critical, and in my opinion dramatic aspect is the lack of a symbolic dimension in the projects proposed. Before plans were executed and a collective space created, they needed to demonstrate their symbolic value - a square, a library, a trading area, a large public building like the town hall should, in our view, have been definite, precise projects, not formally weak constructions just like any others. In the development stages of the integrating planning programmes, the plans proposed by Masterplan were uncertain, without identity, and in my view incapable of building an image for the town. With the proposal of new volumes and functions we are working towards creating a square surrounded by a collection of buildings with a strong symbolic value, as well as functionally necessary.
A new town hall, police station, restructured and expanded library, and a new school. We plan to create a central area that will be the heart of all the districts, with a strong identity for all the residents, a symbol and collection of everyday functions and spaces.
A third critical aspect that is especially important for us is the revival of personal interaction and social life in the town's public areas. The shared process initiated in the districts captured the importance of this, bringing and events and proposals to the shared planning exhibitions and meetings. Of course this is not enough, but it is a good starting-point - launching initiatives and stimulating the residents to use the city's public spaces will also help them to a certain extent to move away from a parochial, district-based dimension. With the support of traders and association we have proposed public initiatives, festivals, markets and late-night shopping throughout the town, to get residents used to the idea of moving around, getting to know their town, getting out of the house and also out of their own district. The focus needs to be shifted away from town planning towards the life of the town. This is the way to ensure communities do not become isolated, but interact, and everyone feels that they belong to the town.