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A strategy for territorial transformations balance

*Giuseppe Campos Venuti**

Fifty years ago, urban planning was considered very important by politics, culture and media. Today, it has not been included in the list of European Union competences. It doesn't mean that it is less important than it was, and that urban and territorial transformations aren't important factors for European countries. Fifty years ago urban rebuilding, houses, factories, public facilities building were already a topic problem for European countries. It was not the same for Third World countries: their biggest problem was the end of Colonialism and how to find a way out of underdevelopment. And even today, cities like Bologna or Barcelona haven't always the same urban indicators than Shanghai or Mexico City. For this reason, I'll speak about Europe not for Eurocentric attitude, but because this is the context I know more. Fifty years ago Italy and Spain focussed on urban transformation less successfully than other North European countries. Spain and Italy decided to solve housing emergency choosing quantity, and not quality, allowing a big growth of urban interests. Italy made worse, rebuilding the most part of the fabrics demolished during the war and concentrating them in the northern part of the country, leaving to South the only possibility of emigration, towards the richer North or elsewhere abroad. And even when national policies decided to invest in industrial development in the South, only isolated fabrics were built, and soon condemned to fail. Italian and also Spanish cities lived the contradiction

of a life together with an old capitalism based on urban interests and a more dynamic one, able to create, in Italy and after in Spain, a real economic boom. This contradiction caused territorial lack of balance bigger than in the rest of Europe.

Firts attempts of territorial balance

Italian lack of balance was determined also by old laws and urban plans, able to foster urban interests: the process of reform tried to fight against these laws and plans, but unsuccessfully. But what the process of reform proposed, nationally refused, was considered very carefully by some Italian left wing local administrations: Bologna above all.

During the '60s and the '70s the administration of Bologna bought almost the 85% of available rural lands, to be directly urbanized. As a result, popular neighborhoods were built in the city center, and private houses and offices districts were built outside, saving the historic city center and the chain of hills, saved from urban development. A new road network helped this process of decentralisation, even if the city didn't take enough initiative to build a strong network of railroads, a big mistake above all for the future development. In the same period, a strategy of balance was used to plan all the region around Bologna, deciding to stop the natural growth along the historic route of Via Emilia and fostering perpendicular development lines, crossing Padana plain and connecting directly the foot of Appennini.

After the first big oil crisis after 1973, European cities began to face more complex problems, like mobility and environment, and just connecting these two aspects European cities launched new attempts of territorial balances. German

metropolitan regions have been supported by the development of regional railroads networks; Dutch and French urban regions have been developed by large investments of regional railroads and giving a new role to environmental resources.

From urban to territorial transformations

During the '80s and the '90s big industrial and territorial transformations occurred in Europe. Fabrics and industrial building were decentralised outside the cities, supported in Europe by a new development of railroads, while in Italy industrial decentralisation was not helped by any transportation policy and produced new territorial problems.

In Italy and in Spain, where economic and territorial lacks of balances are deeper than in other countries, urban transformations are considered and discussed without considering a territorial perspective. This is the reason of the strange diatribe between plan and project and between urban planning and architecture. I always refused to fall into this trap. The reason is that I always refused bureaucratic and dogmatic plans and laws, and I always favoured flexible, pragmatic planning decisions, with a clear regulation. In my opinion, "total deregulation is the same and the contrary of total, dogmatic and strong regulation". In my opinion, plan and project are not one against the other, but they must be integrated, and urban transformations must be integrated within territorial transformations. In this perspective, the topic of derelict and abandoned industrial areas is only one of the problem of urban transformation: it is an occasion that must be used according to the territorial general vision, and it cannot be left to casual or unregulated decisions. In

Italy, the effects of industrial, and consequently residential sprawl are worse than in the rest of the continent: it is stronger in Italy the power of urban interests and the lack of a contemporary law to rule cities and territories; public works get at their disposal only one third of the money other European countries public works can get; it is still live the Italian 'genetic anomaly' of cities without railroads; and there is still a weak environment culture.

Territorial balance strategy

I'm not familiar with questions on long term alternatives: I'm used to analyze yesterday and today problems to find good solutions for tomorrow, for Italy and Europe, whose experiences can be reflected on Italy. I believe that in Italy and in Europe the future of the cities must be helped by integration, decentralisation and polycentrism, and not left to unrulled competition, concentration and congested cities. Many of the reforms suggested by European Union, refused by national politics, have been approved regionally in Emilia Romagna, giving me the possibility to work to a new model of plan, after fifty years of political fight. The reform is about a masterplan, called in Italy 'structure plan', with a strong program but without prescriptions, as required by the 1942 National Law. The 'operative plan' puts into practice its provisions, for five years, the same five years of the length of a local administration; it is prescriptive and supported by real financial investments included into the local budget and private investments, selected among the available and able to put into practice the ideas included into the structure plan, using frequently urban projects. The process is flexible, but it respects public rules; it

gives real possibility to realize public ideas with private transfer of rights after private development; it assures equity of transfer of rights from private to public sector and it fosters constantly urban quality. The model is simple, new, ethic and democratic. But it is not enough to regulate urban transformations: territorial transformations must be considered as well. The new plan for Rome is a typical example of this frequent underestimation of territorial strategies. All the urban strategies are well known: the strong investments on railroads, the new idea on the city center, considered as a city itself, the new compensative mechanism to put into practice the provisions, that caused a big debate and some stops to the plan process. But the territorial strategy is not so well known. Rome is a metropolitan municipality. It has a territorial extension larger than the Province of Milan or Naples, made by a collection of big neighborhoods without a center. For this reason, the new plan programmed 'new centralities', to create a new heart to these neighborhoods, supported by a strong development of railroads. This territorial balance strategy is quite similar to the strategy chosen twenty years ago by Madrid, whose politic of public facilities balance in the southern sector of the city was so ordinary to be misunderstood.

Future and territorial balance

At a smaller scale and in a different context than the Roman one, I worked once again to a territorial balance strategy for the city of Bologna.

The city changed its strategies in the last years, forgetting what it did in the old process of territorial balance. The city decentralised in the last

years all the industrial activities, giving the way to office development and high costs houses to the city center. Young people, immigrants, poorer people left the city. Transportation policies have been car oriented, without strong regulations.

But in the same time, smaller cities within the same Province grew creating a strong integration between houses, jobs, public facilities and environmental quality.

Today, 14 municipalities in the Bolognese Province, with a population of 120,000 inhabitants consider themselves as 'Cities-Neighborhoods' of the bigger provincial city, asking to Provincial administration to create a strong debate with the major city of Bologna. The proposed strategy is a decentralisation for office locations, using the already working regional railroad network. This strategy gives the possibility to the major city, Bologna, to invest in urban design to create new quality for the city, as Barcelona did and as it is possible to read in Jordi Boria's book on public space.

In my future, I see a strong commitment in modernizing urban transformations tools and in integrating plan and project, as Catalonia did. In my future, I see a strong commitment in fostering metropolitan balance, helping the transition from monocentric cities to polycentric cities, asking to European Union an involvement in economic, social and territorial balance, towards a 'European policy of integration and territorial balance'. Perhaps, this a too ambitious proposal: but I'm not asking it for the rest of the century, it is enough for the next future; and quoting Gramsci, this is the "willingness optimism".

* This contribution is a synthesis of the opening speech of the World City Forum held in Barcelona in September 2004.