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Paolo Avarello An ocean of houses

Problems, policies, and research

edited by Mariavaleria Mininni The planning for the landscape
Alberto Clementi Landscape. Betrayal, innovation
Pierre Donadieu Landscape studies in Europe: a difficult harmonization
Mariavaleria Mininni A culture for the landscape
Arturo Lanzani Between two shores, looking for a land in between
Pier Carlo Palermo Dilemmas and divisions in the landscape culture. Disciplinary consequences

Projects and implementation

edited by Paolo Galuzzi The structural plan of Reggio Emilia
Graziano Delrio The Municipal structural plan (Psc) of Reggio Emilia and the challenges of a new citizenship
Ugo Ferrari For a city of person
Maria Sergio The stages of the process
Giuseppe Campos Venuti The reformist strategy of Reggio Emilia
Giuseppe Campos Venuti A revolution in drawing up the plan
Rudi Fallaci A new instrument for new policies
Maria Sergio Services plan: the experience of the municipality of Reggio Emilia
Giuseppe Campos Venuti Town planning equalization
Rudi Fallaci 'Rue', the crucial instrument for urban quality
Maria Sergio, Elisa Iori Environment and ecological network
Oriol Bohigas A new planning hopei

edited by Giuseppe Scaglione Calabria in transformation: to project the future governing the present
Michelangelo Tripodi A new season for town planning in Calabria
Maria Grazia Buffon Guidelines of regional planning in Calabria
Rosaria Amantea Competitiveness and attractiveness of Calabrian territorial systems
Alberto Ziparo Substantive landscape and territorial sustainability
Giuseppe Fera Structural planning in Calabria: some reflections
Giuseppe Scaglione Snapshot: light versus shadows
Alberto Clementi Between strategies for the territory and regional plans

Profiles and practices

Luca Fondacci The future is dependent on the offering of the projects

The reformist strategy of Reggio Emilia

Giuseppe Campos Venuti

There are certainly very few Italian municipalities that, as Reggio Emilia, have chosen to give themselves as many as five town plans since the end of the last World War. Plans approved and duly carried out, except the last one, now being adopted; some of them perhaps debatable, but all based on the conviction that the territory to be governed, the town, has to fix rules and has to respect them. The first post-war plan, adopted in 1953, is definitely the least successful one; and as all plans at that time it fully felt the burden of the cultural backwardness of Italian town planning in that period. Moreover the dimension of the plan was wrong, assuming that Reggio 'had to' reach at least 300,000 inhabitants. It was then not yet understood that many building areas foreseen by the plan did not create competition, lowering market prices, but served only to multiply the land rent.

The town-planning deregulation of the Eighties in some way affected also Reggio, which in 1984 adopted a new Master plan less concerned about the clash with land rent. Writing about it in 'Urbanistica' (no. 76-77), Roberto Gambino defined it euphemistically as a 'consensual plan', recalling that until then a plan adopted unanimously 'would have aroused suspicions and diffidence'. Private destinations again started growing, with the widespread diffusion of tertiary destinations, but offsetting this there was a parallel increase also of forecasts of green areas and public services. In the Nineties the reformist urge affected the whole of Italian town planning. And Reggio Emilia became the centre of the first innovative

experiments, as its specific requirements fully coincided with the reformist movement. Thus, while Inu finalized the 'principles and rules' of the reform (1995), the Municipality of Reggio Emilia prepared a preliminary draft of the Master plan which suggested the new 'ecological' strategy required by the town, and also the new model of implementation, intended to substitute expropriation, by then inapplicable because of the high costs involved, with 'town planning equalization'.

The brand new implementation mechanism needed time to be understood and accepted, which meant that the Master plan was not adopted until 1999. The private building forecasts were reduced, transforming a large part of the diffuse tertiary and reducing building densities. Accompanying this was the systematic application of town planning equalization, with the free granting for public uses of at least 40% of the area in all sectors of implementation, and 60% of the areas earmarked in the old plan as public services, against modest forecasts of new building.

The 1999 Master plan, which strongly contributed towards developing the strategy of town planning equalization of Law 20/2000, was to be the last one approved by the Region (2001) when the reform had already been approved. It is understandable that the municipality of Reggio, not wanting to adapt just formally the plan to the new law, postponed the drawing up of a completely new plan. Meanwhile however the very rapid increase in immigrants, generally well inserted in the local productive and social fabric, and the good productive trend of the industrial system, inevitably led to new presences on the market and stimulated a great upswing in building

production, with record growth rates. And the market responded by exploiting in an exasperated manner the legislative possibilities of building in the 'porous' spaces of the urban fabric. Perhaps to offer an alternative to this negative choice of the market, the municipality adopted an over-dimensioned Ppa, which produced a quantity of detailed plans greater than the normal trend of implementing the Master plan. And it was then that the municipality decided to start the Structural plan as per Regional law 20/2000.

The reformist plan model
It would be an exaggeration to describe the strategy of Reggio Emilia's Psc without recalling the extraordinary diversity of the new plan model, compared with the plans that, also in Reggio, had been used for half a century, and the drawbacks of the old discipline, by then unbearable, and the simple but radical changes introduced by the reformist regional laws for Reggio by Regional law 20/2000. Which changes, I repeat, the last plan of Reggio drawn up on the basis of the old law had contributed to bring about. But even so the 1999 Master plan had a basic defect, namely that of being a prescriptive type of general plan, i.e. one that as soon as it was approved, caused private rights and public duties, treated in an extraordinarily unequal fashion, to leap ahead. Private building rights, in fact, had no deadlines and were attributed - precisely by the municipality, with the Master plan - in exchange for frankly inadequate payments.

The programmatic character of the new Psc, intended to cover the medium term of 15 years, transformed the approach to the private city no less than to the public city: private rights are expressed guidelines and thus their dimensioning is

not cogent but just a strategic choice of the town planning operation. And this is not expressed in quantity of building areas, but as 'urban load' the total of which may not be exceeded, and which later reappeared in the 'Valsat', an instrument of self-control inserted in the plan by the law in lieu of the Eia (Environmental impact assessment), a typical instrument of verification a posteriori, and therefore of dubious practicability and validity. In fact, the respecting of the guidelines of the Psc, also for private building rights, was assigned to subsequent Pocs (Operative plans), whose (prescriptive) dimensioning could not exceed the overall sustainable urban load. At least not until a new Psc, if it so wished, might change the guidelines of the previous one.

The innovation of the Operative plan
The right of prescription, eliminated from the general plan, except for cultural and environmental assets, is attributed to the Psc, whose forecasts are made for five years and lapse if in that time they are not translated into executive instruments, i.e. into Urban implementation plans (Pua), which can take the form of real 'urban projects'. Thus a conception that on the one hand imagines a medium-term programme, but on the other hand foresees its execution in successive phases; and the Psc was to allow contractors to accept, among the indications suggested by the Psc, those that they consider they are able to design and carry out within five years. For the choices of the future Pocs, the Psc of Reggio Emilia offered sites, not defined in advance within urban confines, as well as town-planning and environmental parameters that were to condition the characteristics of the measures.

Choice of the measures to be included in the Psc could in fact stem from municipal indications, respecting the parameters foreseen for the typology of the measures. But the municipality could consider various territorial sectors of equivalent value, in which case choice would be made among these on the basis of a competition among those able to offer to improve the planning and environmental parameters already fixed.

The implementation of the Psc, assigned to the Poc, is thus totally different from that of the Ppa, which in practice limited itself to selecting the areas of the Master plan authorized to formulate a plan of implementation, with no obligation to present it - as in the case of Reggio Emilia - to be able to take advantage of the norms of the current Master plan. Instead, the Poc was to be the outcome of a real agreement between municipality and owners, to carry out the transformations in the priority areas, or of a competition to select, among areas of equal town-planning interest, the one for which the private operator could offer the best proposal to increase the pre-established planning and environmental parameters. Town planning equalization, in any case, was to enable the Poc to produce the entire public city of quality, alongside the private city.

Regional reform added a third town planning instrument to the Psc and the Poc, intended to govern the part of the existing town where the Psc did not foresee any radical transformations. Unfortunately this instrument has been defined as Urban building regulation (Rue), in that way placing the emphasis on the normative aspect, for the large part of the town due for maintenance of minor transformations. It must

however be made quite clear that, at least in Reggio's case, the Rue - of which the Psc programmes only the guidelines - is conceived as a real management plan for existing assets, both urban and extra-urban, as well as looking after the 'acquired rights', i.e. the already approved forecasts of the Pua. And the general strategy is to refuse systematically any increase in the urban loads of the existing town, and always privileging the improvement of environmental quality.

The law of the three E's
The defects of the old plan, making the obsolete law of 1942 unusable, are therefore to a large extent avoided with the new reformist laws and especially that of Reggio Emilia. The private city is programmed and flexible, but its times and parameters of implementation are fixed a priori, finally offering reasonable contributions to the community, in exchange for the building rights assigned by the plan. The public city is for its part guaranteed entirely, at the expense of the private city, which obtains direct benefits from it. Urban revenue, contested at the time of the urban expansion under the unsuccessful reform, is again addressed with a regional reform, adequate to the new generation of urban transformations. Urban revenue has been contested by the classical economic outlook of Anglo-Saxon liberals, represented in Italy by Sylos Labini, Fuà, Saraceno and Andreatta, who defined urban revenue as 'an economic factor extraneous to production, which in an orderly economy is not permitted'. A view that has always guided Inu, up to the proposed reform of 1995. And I am pleased to recall how this proposal was welcomed by Nino Andreatta: "A good reform, which I hope will be

approved. It will be the law of the 3 E's: Ethics, Equity and Efficiency". To this day I cannot find a better definition.

The reformist strategy of the Psc

I believe it was worthwhile dwelling on the new planning model, as the strategy chosen for the Psc of Reggio Emilia would not have been possible without this model. The objective of transforming the city, pinpointing the most significant places most suitable for this transformation, by this stimulating private enterprise and committing the albeit scanty municipal finances, is without doubt today the most frequent objective in European cities, which always have to rely on private and public readiness to strive for this objective, with all the expected and understandable difficulties involved. In Italy's case, however, quite apart from such difficulties, there was another unsurmountable one, as pursuing these aims with a rigid, prescriptive planning model, derived from the law of 1942, was assuredly an impossibility. The new planning model has certainly not cancelled out the private property regime, but it can largely reduce its negative effects, due largely to the old planning model, which had come down to safeguarding only the interests of revenue. And at Reggio Emilia it enabled a strategy for the Psc to be chosen aimed at gradually transforming the present town, selecting the parts most in need of transformation, with new qualifying presences. Such is the programme of the Psc of Reggio, which will endeavour to mature in time the transformations gradually assigned to successive Pocs. Knowing that in time the programme may undergo adjustments, to be formulated even with

a new Psc, but without changing the totally new strategy, for Reggio Emilia and for Italian town planning this is a plan that proposes essentially the transformation and the improvement of the existing city.

Frankly it must be admitted that the courageous town planning choice of the Psc does not automatically guarantee that the programme will become reality. It will be up to the ensuing Pocs to materially carry out the programme. And for this to happen, the municipality must have the force to overcome whatever difficulties may occur to block the carrying out of this policy, and the operators must have the intelligence to link their own interests with those of the city - which, after all, in the long run, are also the interests of their economic prospects - succeeding in creating value in the urban transformations: more industrial profits than urban revenues. The Psc has endeavoured to formulate upgrading proposals, without forgetting that these will be carried out by private operators, who must themselves obtain an advantage from them.

A normalized trend for building production

The other courageous strategic choice of the Psc of Reggio regards the dimension of the guidelines. Already the new plan model has downgraded the dimensioning of the old prescriptive Master plan. The dimensional guidelines no longer appear as the sum of building rights assigned a priori to the areas for private measures, but just as an overall urban load not to be exceeded in the next 15 years. On the basis of these elements the Town council has made a courageous choice, programming with the Psc a guideline for housing production that will bring it back to a normal

trend, thus explicitly toning down recent trends which, were they to continue, could have general effects for the town that would not be positive.

Planning sustainability

The term 'sustainability', as the word 'reformist', are undoubtedly abused, and almost always used out of place, but with regard to planning, I think the first one is more abused than the second. Also because urban and territorial planning can certainly contribute to wards environmental sustainability, but only within the precise limit of its disciplinary competences. It would be an enormous advantage if the oil companies were to refine their petrol better, thereby reducing the percentage of CO₂ emitted by cars. An urban plan cannot do this, but it can make all housing projects plant a good number of trees, which absorb a considerable part of the CO₂ produced by the cars running on not properly refined petrol. The sustainability pursued by the Psc of Reggio falls rigorously within the category of objectives of ecological interest. Starting with the sensational aim of obtaining in all the areas of intervention, with the sole exception of the productive zones, a soil permeability rate of 70% of the transformation areas. This is particularly significant, remembering that 2/3 of the measures programmed regard already built urban areas, where grass and trees will be taking over from concrete and asphalt. And as 5 trees are prescribed for each housing unit, after 10 years these trees will be able to absorb much more than the CO₂ produced on the urban roads by the cars parked near the housing unit. The large quantity of tree-lined grassed areas, public and private, will in any case make a great contribution towards the quality of the air

and the climate in the town, as well as reducing noise pollution and helping the aquifers to be recharged. The trees planted for 12,000 new houses, plus those to be planted by the municipality in the parks and service areas, will number 100,000 in 15 years, i.e. more than 600 acres of woodland. And while on the one hand the high percentage of urban upgrading will certainly avoid the consumption of fresh land, this policy, really sustainable, will substitute urban soil used badly - because almost all impermeabilized - with urban soil used very well, as its high permeability and the tree planting will have a far higher environmental value than farmland. Environmental sustainability could bring about a real revolution in the energy/building sector, in which the municipality of Reggio Emilia is already in the forefront in Italy, second only to Bolzano. In the new constructions, the combined effect of the new national law and of Reggio's 'Ecoabita' project should enable energy consumption to be reduced by 60%, and the emissions of CO₂ to be reduced by 46%.

Mobility and financial uncertainty

Mobility is the decisive factor for environmental sustainability and at first sight should be totally conditioned by the plan choices. However, these choices can only be implemented with financing which is beyond municipal possibilities. But a national policy that selects choices and financing for the infrastructures of urban and territorial mobility, has never existed in Italy. The municipality of Reggio has done well, however, over the years to keep the three railways under concession (to Cavriago, Sassuolo and Bagnolo). These lines can thus be reused for a metropolitan

railway service or for a modern tram line. In conclusion, the Psc of Reggio may be called 'a wholly new plan'. Having contributed towards transforming the plan model, improving its strategy, has been my commitment in the last 15 years. And helping to try out the first results thereof with this Psc has been a pleasure and fortune, for which I am truly grateful. I trust and hope that in 10 years' time those with the task of verifying the results may be able to give a basically positive assessment.