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The future of town planning and *Urbanistica*

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**Problems, policies, and research**

A new water culture. Opportunities for territorial planning

The commitment of the Scientific Community for a New Water Culture

Hydrogeological stability, water protection, territorial and urban planning

Sustainability and policy innovation in water management

Participation and negotiation process for water basins management

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**Projects and implementation**

The government of urban transition. The new masterplan of Ivrea

From the didactic to the expert city

Ivrea, yesterday and tomorrow

A plan for the government of territory

Territories of masterplan

The two historical cities of Ivrea

Social expectations and plan

---

*Elio Piroddi*

*Gianluigi Nigro*

Cassino: new town plan

The plan as a program for the complexity

A deep-felt innovation

---

*Nicolò Savarese*

**Profiles and practices**

Seven important questions and some implied considerations

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**Methods and tools**

Manuals, handbooks, good practice for designing roads

An alternative experience

The Italian experiences: between atlas and guide-lines for the road projects

The use of guidelines abroad: Vermont case study

Road's integrated planning in Emilia-Romagna

The 'complex' road planning

Building on Buchanan: evolving road hierarchy for today's urbanism

The architecture of the street of Lyon

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**Received books**

**Sustainability and policy innovation in water management**

*José Esteban Castro*

It is increasingly recognized that the reasons for the global 'water crisis' are not merely technical or economic-financial as it is often argued, and that understanding and successfully tackling the problem requires the consideration of social, political, and institutional factors. At the global scale, this has prompted renewed commitments from the international community such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, despite these laudable formal commitments there is an increasing recognition that achieving these goals may not be possible unless radical decisions are taken, both in developed and developing countries. In short, the global 'water crisis' is mainly a crisis of water governance.

**A fragile consensus**

In this connection, there is a broad consensus about the need for effective water governance, based on active citizenship and participation, to achieve the goals of fairness and sustainability in the management of aquatic ecosystems and water services. However, this is a very fragile consensus because it has been built on the assumption that there is a shared understanding of the meaning and implications of 'governance', which in fact does not exist. In practice, the process of governance results from the ongoing confrontation between rival political projects, defended by rival actors. Governance results from the interaction between the key power holders, the state, large businesses, political parties, civil and other organizations representing sectoral interests (e.g. workers'

unions, religious organizations, peasant movements, etc.), international agencies (e.g. international financial institutions and other agents of the process of 'global governance'), and other relevant actors. However, the process of governance is often presented in the official literature as being the result of a balanced partnership between equals, neglecting the fact that there exist fundamental asymmetries of power and knowledge between the actors which determine the characteristics and direction of the overall process. These contradictions between confronting intellectual and political frameworks underscore much of the institutional and political transformations undergone in the water-related fields of activity. Uncovering the intellectual roots of the governance models being designed and implemented is a crucial component of any discussion that aims to make a meaningful contribution to the problem.

**Contradictions of governance**

These caveats of the definition of 'governance' have been identified and form part of the wide-ranging debates taking place around the world. However, the evidence gathered in our research suggests that the prevailing practices of governance continue to alienate and exclude 'civil society' rather than fostering meaningful partnerships. Although officially most water policy programmes acknowledge the multipolar character of governance and the need for a balanced interaction of state, market forces, and citizens, in practice these policies tend to justify the pre-eminence of market competition to the neglect of democratic control and civil society participation. Thus, implementing market mechanisms to manage

complex aquatic ecosystems or privatizing water and sanitation services have become main drivers of water policy worldwide. Moreover, although most policy documents highlight the importance of citizen participation in practice the system aims at limiting people's involvement to their role of consumers, and 'participation' often means 'willingness to accept' decisions already taken with little or no consultation. This is a crucial problem, because good governance and the exercise of substantive citizenship rights imply social participation and control over the decision-making process, in our case, decisions about how aquatic ecosystems and essential water services are to be governed, by whom, and for whom.

Moreover, though water governance is closely linked with issues of overall societal governance, the interrelationship between the two can adopt very different forms. For instance, a democratic and participatory system of governance at the national level does not guarantee democratic governance of water or ecological processes. Also, sound and efficient water management systems can be perfectly developed and sustained in the context of highly authoritarian and undemocratic governance systems. Therefore, the consensus around adopting democratic, 'good governance' water practices is not the result of an empirically proven model, but is rather derived from a complex array of factors including normative preferences and social struggles for the democratization of decision-making processes.

**Opening the debate**

Achieving the goals of the international community in relation to water cannot be

achieved by blurring the existing confrontations between competing understandings of what governance means or how it works. Contrariwise, we believe that there is a need for open debate to uncover the underlying confrontations between social actors defending rival sets of ends, values, and means in relation to water governance. However, these confrontations do not happen in the vacuum and are rather framed by structural conditions. The actors of the governance complex constitute a highly asymmetric and evolving configuration of power and knowledge holders. In relation to water, this is expressed in concrete policy decisions, such as constitutional reforms to change the status of water from public to private good or institutional innovations to create market-based systems of water rights. These institutional developments are grounded on certain values and aim to achieve specific objectives which often express the interests of particular economic and political actors, even when they are presented as reflecting the 'general interest' of the citizenry. Summing up, fostering conditions of 'good governance' is essential for enabling the development of the innovative policies and institutional arrangements needed to achieve the goals of the international community in relation to water sustainability and equality. Achieving these goals requires the development of a social force that in matters of satisfying essential human needs such as water and sanitation, food security, or environmental and public health is still weak and largely underdeveloped, even in the wealthiest countries. In turn, developing this social force would require a very high level of balanced

coordination to overcome the asymmetries of knowledge and power that underpin the existing conditions of structural inequality. One crucial obstacle for success is that, even if the political will needed to meet the targets existed, unfortunately current mainstream water policies, which have so clearly failed to promote good governance and the exercise of substantive citizenship rights, continue to commit efforts in the implementation of programmes that are largely blind to the needs, requirements, values, opinions, and preferences of people in developing countries, especially the most disadvantaged. However, there are important lessons to be learnt from successful water policies. For instance, in relation to the crucial field of water and sanitation services, the achievement of universal coverage in developed countries around the mid twentieth century was made possible by the adoption of policy principles whereby social rights and the common good were given priority over market interests. These policies and principles were supported at the time by a wide range of social and political forces, including sectors that in other respects defended free-market liberalism but accepted that the extension of essential water services to the poorest members of society required different arrangements. It is our hypothesis that achieving success in the design and implementation of present and future water policies as those required to meet the MDGs can only be achieved through the amalgamation of a similarly broad and universalistic set of social forces, not just composed by the illuminated elites but also able to incorporate the large sectors currently excluded or marginalized.

The good news is that these processes are already taking place, however imperfect or limited they might be. Critically supporting them and contributing to their multiplication and expansion is an intensely political endeavor.