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The city beyond the crisis

Federico Oliva

Italy is now experiencing the effects of a general economic crisis and an urban crisis that manifests itself with an increasingly reduced competitiveness of cities. The situation clearly shows the problem of the limited resources available to provide efficiency and sustainability of the urban system and the building of the 'public city', due also to the drastic reduction in public expenditure which the economic crisis has led to. This is the main theme that Inu is proposing for the XXVII Congress of Livorno.

The urban crisis also depends on major changes which the Italian contemporary city has undergone in this phase of metropolisation.

In recent years, a 'new city' has developed, with a geographical dimension which no longer corresponds to the administrative size and in which alongside the traditional city, new low-density urban areas, have been added with a general situation of unsustainability caused by excessive land consumption and the growth of vehicular traffic. After a brief pause resulting from the most acute phase of economic and productive transformation, the contemporary Italian city has started to grow once again with an intensity higher than that of the previous period of urban expansion, without however providing any competitive ability.

The target of sustainable cities with the simultaneous arrest of metropolization regimes cannot be achieved without some specific state laws: the support for a sustainable collective mobility, the limitation of land consumption, the stability and hydrological balance of the territory, a proper program of social housing construction. As for the funds, the new system of local taxation under the emerging federal financial state will have to support the policies of territorial government. But for this fundamental aspect, Inu proposes to deal with land revenue, with a view, in particular, to social redistribution.

It is necessary today to resume the discussion on the negative effects of urban land revenue and hence the need for its regulation. Urban land revenue is an extremely topical theme, especially after many years of absence of this issue on the political agenda, and it has to be considered in the light of the profound changes which have taken place. Urban land revenue could be considered more as an opportunity to rule than a problem to combat, because it represents the surplus of wealth produced by the territory: if the cities have to compete with their own specific local projects, they must also secure the necessary resources by using the surplus generated within their economic system.

The theme of the institutional framework is equally important: the urban crisis was also linked to the failure to adapt correctly to the new institutional dimension of the city. Changing the institutional structure of Italy is not

easy, but a reorganization is needed in order to restore competitiveness to the settlement system, modeling it on the real situation. The objectives of the reform that Inu proposes with its XXVII Congress are not, of course, all immediately reachable, but represent current themes and claims in Italian society, which Inu has a duty to address, indicating the disciplinary solutions which are most effective as well as practical.

Of all the issues that emerge, therefore, the need to reconsider urban land revenue as a major theme is the most pressing. It is an issue which has been abandoned for decades at the legislative level and left to the negotiating practices of urban transformation, whose success is, however, dependant only on the dynamism of local housing markets, as well as the ability of individual local governments. The outlook for the 'post crisis' housing market is showing signs of the fragility of this approach and suggests that this problem needs to be directly addressed. The governance of urban land revenue and its social redistribution are therefore directly linked to the theme of the resources needed to ensure the quality of urban life along with appropriate urban welfare and a decisional model of government that corresponds to the real geography of the metropolized city.