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Fausto Curti

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edited by Carlo Gasparrini

Carlo Gasparrini

Ariella Masbouni

Pier Carlo Palermo

Paolo Ceccarelli

Cesare Macchi Cassia

Paolo Avarello

Federico Oliva

Paolo Fareri

Carlo Alberto Barbieri

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Maurizio Marcelloni

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Carola Gattorna

Francesco Gastaldi

Maurizio Cazzullo

Simona Gabrielli

Giorgio Gatti, Anna Maria Nicoletti

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Franca Balletti

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Mysteries and professions of the urban project in Italy

Carlo Gasparini

A good many years after other European countries, Italian town planning has come to appreciate well researched high quality innovation in urban transformation processes affecting space and architecture, accompanied by consultation instruments, facilitation of decision making, and interaction with local development policies. That is, in the past, phases of great urban projects supported by the State and local government were not able to take advantage of wider opportunities due to the crisis in public funding. Furthermore, the property market is no longer able to promote astonishing transformations which produced otherwise important although debatable results. Nowadays the city and its problems are *de facto* hidden by the national government's agenda and political programs, which are not the exclusively property of the centre-right. The dispute is also widened by the objective impossibility of generously evaluating the results of work, and of measuring the effectiveness of different positions on the basis of tangible results. Few European countries such as Italy have experienced such a wide gap between town planning rhetoric and its ability to influence transformation processes. The 'urban project' is an illuminating example of this anomaly and of the difficulty in applying reason to developed programs and projects, and not only because of the weakness of institutional and governmental apparatus, or legislative delays and legal minefields, or the shortcomings of private promoters. So it is better to start by

summarising what is not an 'urban project'. First of all, it is not the great signature architectural project which nourishes international competition between cities as seems to have taken hold of both the media's imagination, and un-fortunately, that of many thirsty and renowned griffe administrators who can put political action into effect. Neither does it coincide with the rich repertoire of vision found in some strategic or structural plans. It does not coincide with the concepts attempting to evaluate the essential proposals and interpretations contained in a strategy, and nor with the three dimensional proposals and interpretations in the new plans that Giancarlo De Carlo scornfully calls "little puppets". Lastly, unlike some simplistically suggest, there is no correspondence in law to the 'complex programs' of many administrations who have put this type of instrument into operation. Above all, this can be seen when these are reduced to a banal residential-tertiary lotting or to modest building reform in a neighbourhood (refreshment of facades, a little more greenery, some sad and perishing 'urban furniture', as well endless streams of meeting after meeting). Urban projects encompass none of these activities, but: - in common with these activities they share the choice of deciding to work on selective accounts or discrete parts of the city without pretending to treat them as a global whole, to propose physical, functional, and social transformations which cross over the boundaries of each project; - to be credible and effective they need to interact explicitly with strategic visions of the global whole and the shared structural frameworks, recognised and accepted within a democratically formal planning and project development process, and

not to appear like a rabbit out of a hat with the trappings of a genial author or agile promoter (or both of these): this requires a strong and explicit public will and decision making power; - on the other hand, they must also be able to visually preconfigure the scenery of the modification by sagely distinguishing the resistive elements of the city and city landscape from the malleable ones, from the large scale to the details of its constituent elements, and to welcome the inevitable future and physiological planning of settlements throughout their shaping, management, and attuation; - they are therefore conceived not so much as a suitable and convincing final design but as planning, negotiation, and decisional processes within a transparent framework of public regulation, able to intercept social and economic demands and integrate resources and subjects of varying natures, such as the internal components of the processes themselves, and not as incidental items occurring during the course of events; - consequently, they are not merely attuative plans, but complex and transverse procedures which can be regulated using general town planning instruments capable of activating a planning process with certain rules, able to solicit the important strategic and structural choices, and at the same time, to activate a multiplicity of project details which are formalised and attuated in time, with *virtuoso* results on all scales of the planning and project development process; - for all these reasons, they solicit wholesome interdisciplinary interaction between different expertise and subjects, which forms the basis of their effectiveness: therefore, as in the French experience, in

order to assemble project operations not only the project manager but also the contracting authority, and figures all but unknown in Italy, such as experts in communication, marketing, and management are required to assemble project operations.

Scale

The entire conceptual apparatus supporting our way of appreciating and thinking about the scale of transformation in the contemporary city crumbles away. This is not only because it is incapable of describing and understanding the very characteristics of the diffuse city, where some traditional hierarchical references are irremediably omitted, but because it is ineffective in evaluating the impulses solicited from the great engines driving the transformation, the infrastructure and environmental networks, the multiplicity of landscapes, scales and places which it solicits simultaneously. Therefore, what is required are visions of the contemporary city constructed to suit the relationship between the great regional, national or even transnational processes of transformation and the discrete dimensions of local demands. Even when examining the individual fragment, what is necessary here is, firstly, an interscalar vision and ability to act on all scales, and secondly, fulfilment of the spatial and multifunctional potential of the new infrastructure and its nodes. In addition to these, the presence of a plurality of transversal spaces need to be contained within great ecological links, and fourthly, modifications induced by traditional and alternative energy condensers and dispensers which intercept and run through the inhabited fragments of the city prompting fertile

relationships, re-composition, and discontinuations. The development of this ability is not a problem of large-scale public operations or large self-referencing landmarks, but affects new places with a collective identity created by a renewed ability in the citizens to recognise urban forms. An identity which no longer lives alone but spills over into the reconstructed historical piazzas, enjoys better quality municipal public buildings, or improves the neighbourhood public garden, as required. Along with other places, these form part of a multiplicity of inhabitant's mental maps which remain unknown to us. We often delegate their construction to the commercial centres and other analogous demarcated spaces which, on the other hand, we should be able to intercept within pertinent and unpublished narratives running through the city. One of the more ruinous simplifications of the urban project has been the adoption of its own attention and action on an exclusive scale, that is to say, of many fragments that form the contemporary city. For example, often being blandly suited to demarcated public spaces in the neighbourhood or in the declining area. Ignoring or undervaluing the ability inherent in physical and social relationships between the fragments composing the archipelago-city, is to ignore or undervalue one of the most powerful levers activating urban redevelopment processes resulting from the aims of the great models and the large number of mediocre decisions. It is a mistake also certainly induced by the methods used to draw up the controlling legislative regulations of so-called 'complex programs'. In spite of their many merits, these have de facto contributed to

the closure of the projects within these demarcated spaces, impeding choice of operational boundaries, procedures, the required length of time, etc. They have not become either urban and landscaping projects, or solid and shared processes producing enduring collective values. Our cultural and disciplinary approach now resonates with these regulations. For example, the case of projects (urban?) for the public neighbourhood is symbolic. The cultural heritage left by Quaroni's legacy of "size conformity", and more generally of the 'neighbourhood' during the lengthy post-war period, has been greatly esteemed for avoiding or delaying the dismembering of the two terms (the city on one hand and the building on the other) which the Athens Charter produced. However, being progressively explained by a more ample repertory of connected views and instruments in the Italian tradition, this has certainly influenced the inability to reread the necessary interscalarity so that projects and programs in the peripheral suburbs have urban and strategic valency. It has helped impede the fulfilment of the potential of spaces and distances 'between things and people' in search of the transformational germs. This has also been targeted in the specific rethinking of networks as carriers of new physical values, symbolic and practical, crossing and overcoming the boundaries of the fragments in search of new unconventional geographical environments, as well as a new vocabulary and a new syntax. Furthermore, this also applies to significant structural relationships between the parts to which non banal local development politics can be attached. On the other hand, in a convergent objective

framework, from the social point of view the confirmation of the neighbourhood has also been an ideological choice. The expression of 'resistance' in the territory, rooting the social solidarity and cohesion, and the implacable enemy of identity, combat dispersion, impedes the outburst of new objectives and demands, of dynamics possible in the social geography born of obsolete explosion and confinement of separate demands within a territory. Not realising that, in these nomadic times, very little is enough to cause social change in a settlement's groups leads on to discussion of how the desired roots can be put down with the same ease with which the provisions in the plan have often been denied by the speed of unforeseen events. Being two sides of the same coin, both positions have proved to be negative and have brought about negligible and asphyxial results. Whereas in daring to take more adventurous directions, obstacles and resistance from diffident subjects have been met because they are not used to rationalising on different scales to those of appease-calm down in demarcated spaces.

Time

We also have problems shuffling our cards when faced with time as a variable. I speak of time as revealing a problem in our culture, of knowing how to build descriptions, instruments, and procedures suited to the complexity of questions posed by the contemporary city. On the other hand, is it not the case that time is one of the factors causing this problem because it has been one of the more problematic components in the process of constructing the contemporary city. For example, public suburbs have frequently been the

result of final projects impermeable to process modification, the expression of a project culture inclined to large-scale and complicated architectural machinery, and to large-scale self-referencing landmarks, as well as to refined morphological jointing lacking open space projects. And not only these but also to the production of spaces lacking historical context which grow old badly and without grace, becoming obsolete and are eventually intercepted by a nefarious order, such as that of being 'scrapped'. On the contrary, in declining areas time has suddenly stood still. Markets for their products have rapidly disappeared causing the devitalisation of these often monofunctional areas and transforming them into black holes inside the city, unable to stop unwanted and unexpected processes returning these areas to nature or partial reuse by unwelcome minorities. Faced with not only needing to reactivate the time machine in these places, but also introduce functional complexity, and solicit a multiplicity of objectives and force them to converge, our projects, starting with the urban, might lose their final value. They might be able to estimate the shared aims generated with the passage of time and through other not only human events (for example, I think of the very limited ability to fit in with the dynamics of natural components in our landscape). These events come to pass because they are collectively adopted by a multiplicity of actors, with all its consequences for the method of constructing, designing, communicating, and managing our projects, to provide and implement the many and successive decisions that, in addition to feasible operations, will make for collective ownership. In our plans and programs, there are two project

attitudes that, on the other hand, are very distant from this approach. First of all, once again the complete town planning 'grand project'. This time not only from a functional point of view, as in old-rationalist plans, but also a physical point of view with strong, synchronised architectural designs, by one single Author of course, to be adopted and attuated as they were designed. Another position, developing within the 'governmental' component of town planning, and often opposed to the preceding direction, ignoring or compromising the project's physical direction, which is often reduced to an exercise in dialogue merely composed of procedural regulations. As a result, visionary ability in projects as a communicative instrument is ignored, and space is reduced to a secondary component incapable of carrying out a purposeful role in the progressive post-ponement of decisions. Both have proved to be losers and the Milanese case is symbolic of this wide gap. On the one hand, the recent direction of several transformation programs has been constrained by the framework of the choice of plan, both strategic and structural. These programs pay attention to formal aspects only leading to the extreme paradox of a city as a collection of design objects, a luminous and prestigious shop window for the beautiful goods usually displayed in a 'drawing room'. On the other hand, those who have on occasions rejected the plan a priori as a healthy visioning activity and as project exploration of urban quality, with exclusive faith in safe procedural rules managed by a small office bound élite taking distant decisions in distant rooms. Thus this city of a presumptuous 'new

Renaissance' affirms an intensively exported view of the idea of urban project. That is, a view of it as an assembly of architectural projects or as a list of objectives and criteria contained within a strategic framework, sweeping away a wide slice of our project culture. In this sense they are very distant from the Bilbao-model whose cultural soup is composed of and invoked by the fertile interaction between the symbolic edifice of the Guggenheim, the Strategic Plan for the city, and the Ria urban redevelopment project. Very distant too from experiences such as those of Turin and Genoa who have identified a fundamental principle in their actions regarding the planning process and management of urban projects that also base their success on an architectural point of view.

Subjects

In the last twenty years the urban projects developed in Italy, or at least that which aspires to be one, have referred to three prevailing subject types:

- the large and small owners in declining areas who have promoted urban redevelopment programs and transformation work creating new centrality, as is provided for in the latest generation PRG (general town planning scheme);
- real estate groups who repropose and update the old expansion zone and its completion;
- the IACP (Autonomous institute for economic housing), promoters of 'urban recovery programs' and of 'neighbourhood contracts' in the Economic and Popular Building Plan historical PEEP (plans for economic and popular building), with a significant but marginal ability to bring the inhabitants into the decisional process. And yet the phase that we have been through in recent years has seen a very

different situation emerge. In areas of industrial decline and obsolescence, the large-scale redevelopments have been finished with reconversion being activated from the 1980s, but it is ever more difficult to find quality recorded. The liberalisation caused by the drastic simplification of the qualification procedure for interventions is associated with chronic decisional uncertainty in the Public Administration that prolongs the time required for attuation. This has seen the small and medium promoters fall back on direct intervention, widespread and interstitial building restructuring, and demolition with reconstruction. Of course, operations are less éclat and profitable but certainly more effective and swifter, but from a town planning point of view they bring all the easily imagined negative consequences of lack of control over the effects induced. This little investigated new situation takes a share of relevant subjects and resources away from the shared processes involved in transformation and all its stages through to construction i.e. quality components involving a shared interest suffer. The real estate groups have continued to hold on to shares in the 'residue' of Plans in the big cities, cheerfully resolving the theme of the project's urban profile by involving the architecture assigned. This almost always making the operation's functional content banal, re-launching middle-class residential areas with only a few non-residential crumbs which are almost never 'central' and almost never affecting the overall order of the urban attitude. Lastly, in fact the IACP and the redevelopment operations in the public city have been cancelled by attention from new programs of national investment, always oriented

towards achieving the 'president's great works' involving a shocking waste of public resources (this is eloquently demonstrated by the 'Ponte sullo Stretto' operation). This picture sees an almost exclusive role emerge for public and state-controlled subjects connected with the large-scale processes of developing infrastructure and extraordinary emerging operations, processes which, however, we have been historically accustomed to seeing play a central role (the soccer World Cup, the Expo, post-earthquake reconstruction, and the Olympics). It is a given that the drive behind latest generation urban projects, while they manage to be welcomed by the local authorities, are by now associated almost exclusively with these situations. They are seen in the controversial but often fertile planning processes involved in the new High Speed rail stations; the small and large competitions to redevelop the water front. With regard to major urban roads the new course taken by ANAS seems to demonstrate this, as do the opportunities offered by the Columbus celebrations in Genoa, by the Winter Olympics in Turin, and by the Vesuvius decompression program around Naples. For however much many signs indicate the almost exclusive emergence of these subjects in promoting the urban transformation operations, it may transform itself into a mass of sectorial operations which are closed in on themselves. While of course they pay attention to the architectural quality of the products, they are damaging if not devastating for the territory they invade. Starting with the infrastructure network, if the networks can and must represent an unmissable opportunity to transform the contemporary city and build new collective places, the

culture of town planning must accept the idea that even after any change in national policies they can be an extraordinary driving force organising the urban projects required. They can search for new terms for the 'principle of responsibility', which must animate project action in dialogue with the conglomeration of actors; to facilitate the local and district community re-appropriating and re-discovering their own identity, to re-vitalise them, to coax them now towards indefinable destinations once and for all. All of this aim is difficult to objectively put into practice, above all when the recent regulations introduced in the public works control regime simplifying and accelerating procedures tend to force the space into use as infrastructure, including symbolically.

Obviously this means a change of fashion in that the huge public investments in the networks enter the political agenda and become programmed actions, as well as the administration of the local organisations being reorganised. This aim is not to produce a repertory of manufactured benefits from dubious functional utility, but to create new structural and qualified relation-ships in the contemporary city.

A public policy for the new networks (infrastructure, but also for the environment and energy) able to leave the august confines of its imminent sectorial nature and to transform it into an opportunity to reconfigure the physical geography as well as the symbolic and social character of the city, and to solicit a wide ranging plurality of subjects around large and small urban projects, overcoming the wasteful and conservative logic of intervention in physical and social fragments practised up till now.

After having 'defuturised' the future, the future needs to

be talked of in different terms. Because we need 'risky future openings, able to believe in the new and the possible, approached from the position already reached, using an audacious project able to call on the reserves of energy that manifest themselves in moments of danger'. In realising urban projects our discipline and our trade can draw great benefits and advantages from this approach.