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Strategic requirements of urban projects

Pier Carlo Palermo

In *Urbanistica* not many years ago Nuño Portas presented a wide ranging outline of international experience in which Italy was only referred to in passing. Compared to other contexts, Italy still lacked a clear cultural and administrative legitimacy for the principles and specific instruments used in 'area projects'. Notwithstanding the attempts at reform beginning in the early 1990s, in relation to the planning system, interpretations of 'operational town planning' were still sources of considerable uncertainty. Consequently, in Italy there are a multiplicity of initiatives, instruments, and sites of urban transformation that often make relevant changes to the territory's form and assets. After long phases of inertia, a reawakening of the desire and ability to act has become evident. But above all the legitimacy of these experiences seems to be more mature. The case of Milan illustrates this. Here the ability to evaluate the conspicuously available urban spaces using an innovative strategy of renewal and redesign of the metropolitan structure is missing, thanks to the distribution of rare functions in the peripheral suburban areas. That is, a public strategy able to orient market forces is lacking. For some years now a second generation of area projects has been emerging whose contents and purposes are more useful. But these actions cannot really be said to form part of a shared vision of the metropolis' future providing efficacy, direction, and coherence to the individual events. These limitations may be thought of as being the result of weakness on behalf of Milanese town planning,

which some disciplines have always contested vigorously. However, the problems are more general and depend on the very nature of the urban project itself, which in my opinion requires several disciplinary revisions.

I do not believe that indiscriminate adoption of the 'urban project' formula is suited to designing all the varied initiatives and instruments subtended on the new construction sites. An 'urban project' should meet several specific requirements. It should be a relevant transforming intervention with notable effects on the structure and the form of the built environment, requiring suitable actuation, construction, and management techniques and procedures and should be part of a strategic vision in a time scale that must not be the immediate. These requirements create problems and practices for which more traditional models cannot provide complete answers. In this sense, it seems that the urban project cannot be reduced to a project of urban architecture. The strategic dimensions are extremely relevant, the problems of 'assembling the project', the need to make progressive adaptations through time requires the ability to imagine the operation as a typical architectural planning problem. The project culture must not be formalistic, and even more so it must lack self-reference. Relationships with the context cannot be limited to the physical and formal dimensions. However, a more sophisticated project culture compared to the many current simplifications is not enough. The quality of urban projects depends on the demands and needs identified by a shared vision in a specific area. Above all, the quality of the urban project depends on the force and influence of the

'structural plans', which is a strategic operation. To make strategically important area projects feasible, it presupposes an understood agreed mature policy and secure conditions. If structural planning anticipates this complexity, it is more likely that urban projects will take place and be part of a coherent guiding vision contributing to quality transformations.