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Federico Oliva The new plan

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Vision for urban planning action, despite legislation and apart from rhetoric*Pier Carlo Palermo**

These are not easy times for urban planners in Italy. Public discussion seems to be increasingly rarefied, more fragmented and marginal.

The capacity for major reform, after almost twenty years, appears increasingly less credible, while legislation at regional level differs widely and is mutually indifferent. The capacity to govern and manage the processes of transformation, which lies at the core of planning in other countries, does not seem to show any apparent progress.

On the other hand, it is beginning to seem as if certain ideologies and methods of governance may become a further factor for inertia and confusion.

The ordinary functions of the Italian tradition remain: producing plans in the hope that they do not simply become formalities or rhetorical measures. The results are uneven, depending upon the contexts, but also upon the awareness and commitment of the urban planner. We need the innovative experience of experimentation and discussion, and the work carried out by Patrizia Gabellini offers interesting food for thought. After Jesi, Bologna.

I am interested above all in considering the contribution that this experience can make in the crucial area of 'urban planning visions', which are currently uncertain and subject to a variety of conditions, including restrictions imposed by sector legislation and the influences of the so-called 'new strategic trends'. My own view is that this is an essential topic and no less important than operational skills.

At Bologna, Patrizia Gabellini has demonstrated the possibility of a process where every legal formality is respected, but added to the usual summary schedules is a variety of original contributions, with a two-fold function: not only to better explain the choices relating to the territorial systems and land uses, but also to demonstrate the fertility of a different conception of the 'structural framework', whose contents are richer in interpretative and visionary terms and (in addition) in indications relating to the future project. It is based on an apparently reasonable conviction, which still however has little influence on practical procedures: there is no sense in separating strategies and structures, nor leaving every project examination to subsequent operational stages! The metaphor of the 'seven cities', the series of project themes and explorations, the preliminary project schedules for specific territorial situations, the relevant strategic interest, each represent, on a different scale, various possible ways of interpreting these requirements. Technically, they constitute a partial, but robust, synthesis of a variety of trends in Italian urban planning innovation and experimentation that has been going on for more than twenty years. Conceptually, they deal once again with a crucial question - the interpretation and development of strategic and programmatic aspects of urban planning. In this sense, I think that the contribution is also important for carrying out a critical review, which in my view is necessary, of certain recent trends in so-called 'strategic planning' in Italy. It is difficult for me to understand and share the (sometimes superficial) suggestions and (sometimes improbable) experiences that our

country is belatedly developing in this field. If the purpose is to emphasise the need for an 'interactive understanding' through adequate forms of consultation and dialogue, this is a principle that has been known for more than thirty years (thanks to Lindblom and Wildavsky). Any idea of strengthening the 'technologies of strategic choice' is even more dated and has never produced good results where the perspective is still essentially technocratic. Nor do I understand why the vision must be reduced to rhetorical exercises that are lacking in any kind of reference to the morphological and physical context: in Turin, just as in Venice or Naples. On the other hand, the experience in Bologna demonstrates how it is necessary and possible to give a strategic vision to the relative structural contexts, but also a place (a space, a form) to the strategic themes and objectives.

In other words, it demonstrates the possibility of a programmatic convergence between approaches that today are still wrongly separated. It therefore seems to me that the contribution is original and promising, not only as an innovative way of interpreting a legislative mandate, but also for reformulating a complex series of questions that can be considered as crucial, but are not always considered adequately.

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