Modern Urban Open Spaces and Contemporary Regeneration.
The Milan case and the Lombard experience

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Introduction

One of the most important issues against which contemporary town planning has been measured in recent decades, in various European cities, is redevelopment of the suburbs. Alongside the recovery or transformation of industrial brownfield areas, government efforts have frequently focused on the redevelopment of social housing estates built between the two wars and after World War II. Often designed in line with strict rules of modern town planning, generally endowed with wide open spaces and buildings of recognisable architectural quality as well as the highest level of community facilities required by town planning standards, above all the popular neighbourhoods of the Fifties, Sixties and Seventies have nevertheless turned out to be among the most problematic parts of European cities, where phenomena of social unrest have been most evident. Despite the knowledge that the reasons for this crisis have burst the disciplinary banks in which the work of architects, engineers or town planners was confined in the Twentieth Century, it would nonetheless be wrong to forget that among these we should also consider the modern architectural and town planning models that entire generations of designers trusted in. The degradation, but especially the distorted and sometimes illegal use made of public space is probably also due to its physical form and, more generally, a concept of a city that – alongside indisputably positive results – has shown its limitations no more than half a century later.

The attitude with which the issue of redesigning modern public spaces has been tackled – as much from a theoretical as operational point of view – oscillates between the two extremes in which redevelopment of social housing estates occurs. It ranges from philological restoration to complete redesign: cultural positions that are both unconvincing. In fact the first, in the name of uncritical conservation of all that is expression of modernity, seems to avoid the social needs and objective critical elements that clearly emerged during the later decades of the last century. The second, on the contrary, in the name of an equally dogmatic and ideological attempt to remove the experience of modernity, seems to attribute the causes of the Twentieth Century space crises solely to town planning. In between lies a wide range of experiences – of which it is still difficult to assess the long term effects – which demonstrate how the terms 'redevelopment' or 'regeneration' are loaded with ambiguities, so much so that they run the risk of adding new elements to the misunderstandings that characterised the design of urban open spaces in the late Twentieth Century.

1. Neighbourhood Contracts: a tool for urban regeneration

Over the last two decades in Italy Neighbourhood Contracts ('Contratti di quartiere') have been used as instruments for planning and largely implementing the regeneration of urban environments characterised by phenomena of physical and social decline. Of course they are not the only tool used. Significant interventions have been implemented through the use of other regulatory and planning orders, both European – such as the URBAN programmes – and Italian – such as the 'Programmi Integrati di Intervento' (Integrated Intervention Programmes), 'Programmi di Recupero Urbano' (Urban Recovery Programmes) or 'Programmi di Riqualificazione Urbana e di Sviluppo Sostenibile del Territorio' (Programmes for Urban Redevelopment and Sustainable Development of the Territory). Nevertheless in the framework of the old continent's extensive experience in urban regeneration and redevelopment – for example in historic town centres (such as Genoa or Manchester), dismantled industrial areas (such as

Leipzig, Essen or Nottingham) or the deteriorated outskirts of large European cities – the innovative and experimental nature of the Neighbourhood Contracts has meant they can be considered an interesting case study for some more general reflections on the methods and strategies to be adopted for the redevelopment of problematic urban areas and, more generally speaking, for the re-examination of those problematic parts of the city that so often characterise urban areas developed in the last century (see, for instance: Balducci and Fedeli, 2007; Magatti, 2007; Bricocoli and Savoldi, 2010; Galdini, 2008; Laboratorio Città Pubblica, 2009).

1.1 The first generation of Neighbourhood Contracts

Neighbourhood Contracts were first introduced by various legislative measures passed in the final years of the last century and effectively implemented from the early years of the new millennium onwards. Instead of actual town-planning tools – in the sense of a means for planning and managing the physical transformation of the urban and rural territory – they acted as orders for the implementation of complex urban policies. They would introduce innovation into the Italian framework, with regard to content, development procedures and the people involved in project development and implementation. In fact, town-planning and construction work were integrated with social action, participatory practice was initiated in the drawing up of projects and interdisciplinary expertise was involved from the very beginning (Di Angelo Antonio, Di Michele and Giandelli, 2001; Zajczyk et al., 2005). It is highly likely that even the extent of resources put toward urban regeneration and the procedures for allocation of public funding were regarded as innovation. Indeed the public funding was assigned through a ministerial call for tender (regulated by Ministerial Decree 30 January 1998) on the basis of specific preliminary projects developed by local communities.

Forty-six projects were approved throughout Italy. Three of these were in Lombardy. Not one in Milan (Di Angelo Antonio, Di Michele and Giandelli, 2001). As far as the Lombard capital and its hinterland are concerned then, apart from the important case of Cinisello Balsamo (Armandi, Briata and Pasqui, 2008), it was an experience that had very little effect "in terms of the importance and capacity of planning interventions on the city's governing policies" (Bargiggia, in: Bargiggia and Bricocoli, 2006, p. 6). Generally the opportunities offered by these tools were not always fully exploited. On some occasions this was due to the lack of preparation or inadequacy of the people involved, on others to resistance to innovation from the bureaucratic apparatus. At times even "the experimental and innovative component [of these tools was] sacrificed by an attitude [intent on] the appropriation of financial resources in order to complete public works of a different nature, that had generally been planned for a long time" (Armondi, Briata and Pasqui, 2008, p. 125).

1.2 The second generation and the Lombard experience

Second generation Neighbourhood Contracts were introduced by law no. 21/2001 and regulated by subsequent ministerial decrees from December and the following year. These too were intended to be tools that could "bring together construction and town-planning interventions for redevelopment and implement initiatives in the fields of unemployment, marginalisation and social exclusion", through the multiplicity, heterogeneity and interdependence of the interventions (Cagnoli, in: Rabaiotti and Cagnoli, 2007, p. 12). Unlike on previous occasions, this time the calls for tender were issued directly by the Italian Regions that co-financed the projects and established the main objectives to be pursued (Cella, 2006). Overall, at

a national level, the predicted economic investment was significant: "approximately 1 billion and 350 million Euros from state [...] and local [...] financial resources" (Delera, in: Delera and Ronda, 2005, p. 13).

The call for tender by the Regione Lombardia was published in 2003. The Region stated that the projects had to involve initiatives aimed at "developing and increasing social housing", improving "the functionality of the urban context, also through the introduction of varied permitted uses [...] and users", "adapting and/or expanding the provision of infrastructural and service works [...] both through the redevelopment of mobility infrastructure and the recovery of buildings used for public services" (Cagnoli, in: Rabaiotti and Cagnoli, 2007, p. 12). It established furthermore that the planned initiatives should be characterised by the "integration and concentration of policies and resources" and that it should embrace the "method of subsidiarity and partnership" (Cella, 2006, p. 10).

Other than the singular importance of using funding for public residential building – which allowed for the inclusion of both "renovation works or extraordinary maintenance works, and new construction or replacement construction" in the projects (Cagnoli, in: Rabaiotti and Cagnoli, 2007, p. 12) – in Lombardy, particular emphasis was placed on the integrated character of the initiatives undertaken, as well as so-called 'participation'. In other words, the method of developing the projects in such a way that the inhabitants were involved "in the identification and definition of the objectives and interventions" (Cagnoli, in: Rabaiotti and Cagnoli, 2007, p. 12). The 'participatory dimension' was thus attributed a 'planning dignity' that it had never previously had (Rabaiotti, in: Rabaiotti and Cagnoli, 2007, p. 7). This choice had significant consequences on the programmatic objectives, the suitability of the projects to the demand from the contexts and their concrete and practical realisation. Making players who had roots in the urban environments that would undergo the intervention (individual citizens, committees, associations, decentralised structures of public bodies, etc.) into participants was an antidote to the standardisation of planning choices and those spontaneous reactions incurred by such interventions being issued from the top down. It promoted therefore the development of local human, economic and cultural resources, it guaranteed the "consensus of a player normally not taken into consideration but able to block any redevelopment initiatives" (Bargiggia in: Bargiggia and Bricocoli, 2006, p. 7) and it definitively permitted – and in some cases continues to do so – the implementation of the projects.

Participatory and subsidiary processes also had an impact on the bureaucratic apparatus. In fact, despite simplifications and resistance, they required a change in the mentality of public, civil and technical administrators "in passing from a working approach that aimed at control to a method for accompanying" the projects, which are managed in part externally to the administrative apparatus (Cagnoli, in: Rabaiotti and Cagnoli, 2007, p. 15). But there is more. This and other experiences in Italy represented an interesting field for experimentation and "learning how to handle problems of administrative nature and interventions in difficult housing contexts" (Bricocoli, in: Bargiggia and Bricocoli, 2006, p. 17) and, despite the limited extent of the environments examined, even ended up influencing the legislation concerning governance of the territory. Today, in fact, various regional laws "(in Lombardy this refers to regional law no. 12/2005) make explicit reference to the need to activate concerted models for the involvement of local inhabitants and representatives" in processes of urban and regional transformation (Rabaiotti, in: Rabaiotti and Cagnoli, 2007, p. 6).

Processes of participatory planning were also indicative of a series of ambiguities and critical situations, with regard to the allocated time for the development and implementation of the projects; the identification and role of the players involved and the suitability, cohesion and legitimation of the proposals (Balducci, 2001; Bellaviti, 2005; Bricocoli, 2005; Delera and Ronda, 2005; Ciaffi and Mela, 2006). However it could be stated that in Italy – despite some ups and downs – they contributed along with European Union policies to triggering a process that has resulted in the more sensitive local government today being increasingly oriented toward negotiation with the community and the sharing of decisions regarding certain types of urban transformation.

2. The Milan case

Between 2004 and 2005 twenty-six municipalities would participate in the call for tender from the Regione Lombardia. Seventeen of these would receive regional and state co-financing – equal to approximately three-hundred million Euros – divided between twenty-three projects. The Comune di Milano and ALER - Azienda Lombarda per l'Edilizia Residenziale (the Lombard company for social housing), which alongside the municipality handles a large part of social housing in the Lombard capital – nominated, with the effective contribution of the Department of Architecture and Planning of the Politecnico di Milano (Bricocoli, 2005), five neighbourhoods from the Milanese suburbs: Mazzini (2,320 houses) and Molise Calvairate (2,700) built in the second half of the Twenties, San Siro (6,100) in the early Thirties, Gratosoglio (6,100) and Ponte Lambro (500) between the Sixties and Seventies (Rabaiotti, 2005). All the projects were accepted – although they received regional funding of 140 million Euros and not the 245 million expected (Cella, 2006) – further enriching a structured panorama of town-planning transformations either underway or planned for the Lombard capital (Biondi and Curtoni, 2006) and contributing to the solution of the age-old housing issue that has always tormented Milan and its hinterland (Centro Studi Pim, 2008).

Figure 1. Location of Neighbourhood Contracts in Milan (Source: Cella, 2006).

The neighbourhoods were identified on the basis of two principal criteria: whether the situation within the context was critical – which was determined by cross-referencing information regarding physical and social aspects from various databases – and the "capacity of every individual environment to respond

satisfactorily to the framework of objectives set out by the regional call for tender" (Cella, 2006, p. 11). This second aspect was essential and paradoxically discriminating toward the more problematic neighbourhoods. In fact, the regional call for tender foresaw the final solution to contexts of decline and social distress by establishing a priori the potential exclusion of neighbourhoods in extreme critical conditions – as research has shown (Mezzetti, Mugnano and Zajczyk, 2003; Zajczyk, 2003) –, where these situations are clearly so widespread that they do not guarantee the successful outcome of the policies implemented.

The implementation phase got underway in 2005. 'Neighbourhood Workshops' were established, with the task of guaranteeing [- under the guidance of specialised operators and the direction of public administration -] maximum accessibility for awareness and participation in the projects on the part of the citizens and residents, the main recipients and beneficiaries of the interventions planned in the different neighbourhoods" (Cella, 2006, p. 12; see also: Calvaresi, Cognetti, Cossa, 2011). The definite projects (concerning construction/infrastructure work and social interventions) were drawn up in just 180 days and once more submitted for verification in order to obtain the allocated funds.

In Milan, in general, the work concentrated on: social housing – with redevelopment work and the implementation of social housing –; community spaces – with the "redevelopment of the road system and rationalisation of parking and, in line with the orders of the 'Piano del Governo del Territorio Urbano' (Governance Urban Territory Plan) to create environmental islands" (Cella, 2006, p. 17) - and community – with initiatives aimed at the reduction of social distress through initiatives in the field of safety, social services, professional education and training, employment and local entrepreneurship -.

Figures 2-5. Some social housing redevelopment works in Mazzini neigbourhood in Milan.

3. Some critical considerations

Though requiring a certain refinement to approaches and procedures, the Milanese and Lombard experience of Neighbourhood Contracts can be deemed good practice, transferable and reproducible in other contexts (and not necessarily marginal contexts or those marked by degradation). Nevertheless, as is the case in other Italian realities where these planning instruments have been applied successfully – such as Turin (Città di Torino, 2003; Gagliardo, 2003), Padua, or various cities in Emilia-Romagna (Bottino and Zanelli, 2005) –, some criticalities have emerged with regard to how the urban form was perceived, which might give rise to misunderstandings rather than supporting the public administration in the initiative and direction taken.

3.1 The settlement model

The settlement model that dictated the building of neighbourhoods in line with twentieth century social housing was one of the factors that in Milan and Lombardy – just like in other European contexts – played a part in their crisis. It is by no means the only one. And perhaps not even the most important. Among the principal causes for the detachment of these urban environments is the fact that they house a concentration of people who struggle to manage daily life. And the fact is that, in various realities, having been built, these neighbourhoods were then abandoned to their fate both from physical and social perspectives. Over the years therefore, support for the socially weak through the creation of accommodation and services was transformed into a sort of ghettoization which has given rise to phenomena of marginalisation and social decay across Europe. Nevertheless, as town-planners accustomed to reflecting on the relationship between form and function, we cannot help but note that part of the problem is determined by the physical structure of these urban environments and in particular by their relationship with the surrounding fabric and, more generally, the rest of the city.

Figures 6-8. Social housing and urban open spaces of Gratosoglio neighbourhood in Milan.

If, by way of example, we constrain ourselves to examining the neighbourhoods that underwent interventions in the Lombard capital, we might observe that these are essentially based on two settlement types. The first is characterised by multi-storey buildings that extend horizontally, either arranged in open series (the San Siro neighbourhood) or closed blocks (Molise Calvairate and Mazzini). While inserted into the urban fabric, due to their structure these are impenetrable and relate poorly to the surrounding area (for instance the access system of blocks and the uses of ground floors help lead to this situation). The second – typical of the

second half of the century – consists of self-sufficient neighbourhoods, characterised by large vertical rise or horizontally extended isolated buildings in green areas. This type of neighbourhood is generally designed as a stand-alone enclave; it is located on the outskirts of the urban fabric and is more often than not detached from it.

Figures 9-11. San Siro Neighbourhood Contract and Mazzini and Molise Calvairate Neighbourhood Contracts: intervention area borders and location of works (Source: Cella, 2006).
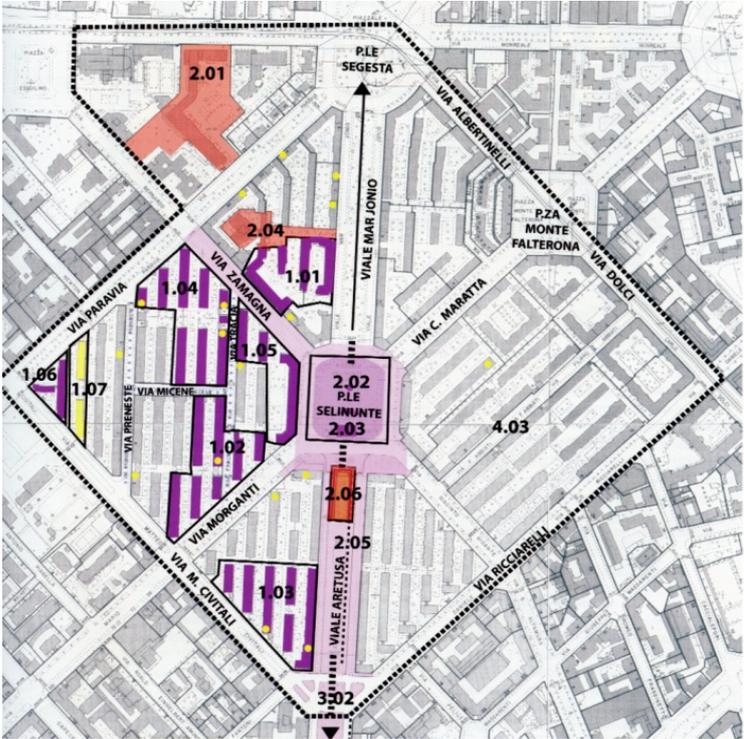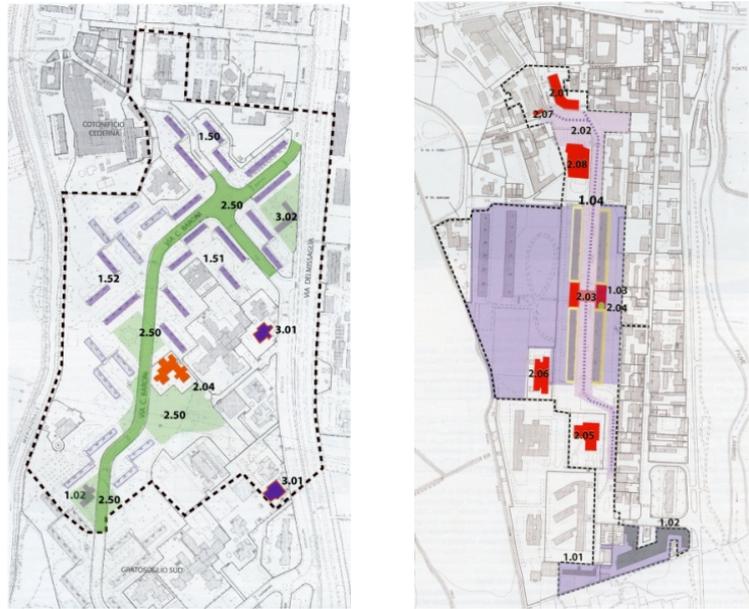
Figures 12-13. Gratosoglio and Ponte Lambro Neighbourhood Contracts: intervention area borders and location of works (Source: Cella, 2006).

This is the case for the Gratosoglio or Ponte Lambro neighbourhoods: "if there is […] something that defines [this latter], more than any other neighbourhood on the outskirts of Milan, it is precisely the fact that it is located outside the consolidated fabric of the city, beyond the East ring road, the only direct connection with the centre of Milan" (Calvaresi and Cossa, 2011, p. 78). Both settlement models, the second in particular, have contributed – along with the fact that these are actually one-social-class and one-use areas – to the physical and social isolation of these neighbourhoods, meaning that decades after their construction they are often extraneous to the rest of the city, excluded from the close knit of relationships that characterises the rest of the urban fabric.

Figures 14-16. Some examples of the relationship between buildings and public open space in Mazzini, Molise Calvairate and Ponte Lambro neighbourhoods in Milano.

The Milanese and Lombard experience of urban regeneration through Neighbourhood Contracts was not insensitive to the need to "support interaction with the city" (Bricocoli, 2005, p. 11). However this objective was apparently pursued without discussing the town-planning layout of the neighbourhoods that

were subject to the intervention. And, above all, it was mostly pursued through immaterial action focused on social integration – cultural initiatives for example or events held within the neighbourhood but aimed at the whole city – than through physical and spatial redefinition that would neatly stitch the torn urban fabric. Perhaps instead attempts should have been made – and probably will have to be made – to repair and mend, attempts to smash those physical elements of separation and segregation that impair all urban vitality (not only, and not even significantly, from the perspective of traffic flow). To find a way – even by changing the town-planning layout – for these neighbourhoods to fully enter the relational system of the contemporary city, without losing their long since consolidated identity.

3.2 The architecture of urban places

A second factor of crisis in large urban sectors of the modern and contemporary city is represented by its spatiality. The neighbourhoods of social housing created in Italy during the twentieth century (in particular during Fifties, Sixties and Seventies) – like elsewhere in the old continent – were a response to the housing famine, but not often to the problems of urbanity. The open urban spaces produced in those years were certainly valuable from the perspective of hygiene and traffic, but they neglected – and sometimes even ignored – many relational values. In other terms, they apparently neglect the role of the architecture of urban places in promoting social relations. The last century therefore saw an age-long culture thrown into crisis, one that throughout Europe had made architecturally harmonic and functionally structured roads and squares into privileged places for socialisation and community identification.

Figures 17-18. Public open spaces in Mazzini and Gratosoglio neighbourhoods in Milan.

Unlike other European experiences – which in the last two or three decades have made the formal and functional redevelopment of community areas the focus for the regeneration of the entire city (see, for instance, Galdini, 2008) – the Lombard and Milanese Neighbourhood Contracts did not appear to assign a central role to this aspect, at the risk of reiterating errors of modern town-planning. If we restrict ourselves to the examination of the interventions that were planned to redevelop the open urban spaces, we notice in fact that from a functional point of view the presented and completed projects generally favoured aspects connected to vehicular and pedestrian mobility (roads, car parks, pavements, pedestrian zones and squares, if we can call them that), to areas for leisure and sport (green areas, playgrounds, cycle paths, community gardens) or to infrastructure (drainage, illumination, district heating). From a formal point of view, on the contrary, - other

than isolated cases of limited importance - work was mostly limited to paving, street furniture and public green areas, which were certainly an improvement on the previous situation but had no significant impact on the architecture of these places. In short, the relationship between architecture and open space was never re-examined, never – as the history of the European city teaches us (Benevolo, 2011; de Seta, 2010; Romano, 2008) – was architecture given a role in generating aesthetically pleasing and hospitable community spaces.

Figures 19-20. Public open spaces in Ponte Lambro neighbourhood in Milan before and after redevelopment works.

Figures 21-25. Some examples of urban open space redevelopment in Mazzini and Molise Calvairate neighbourhoods in Milan.

The fact that the call for tender did not consider the architecture of open urban spaces as an element capable of enhancing the relational nature, safety and aesthetics of community spaces – but simply planned to "increase the functionality of the urban context" and "adapt and/or expand the provision of infrastructural

and service works" (Cella, 2006, p. 11) – was definitely due to economic reasoning, but it is also symptomatic of a certain way of viewing contemporary living. This living seems confined to the trilogy of home/infrastructure/services so typical of the paradigms of twentieth century modernism and does not show any detachment from the cultural approaches that are in fact at the roots of the crisis of urbanity in wide areas of contemporary metropolis (Consonni, 2008). Today, on the contrary, urban regeneration cannot disregard this factor. "It is rather our duty to tackle the question of 'making a city', in the sense of collaborating on the construction of a new urbanity" (Delera, in: Delera and Ronda, 2005, p. 12). If it seems fundamental to redevelop houses and equip neighbourhoods with community services and facilities where they had none, it seems equally important to return centrality to the public space and the architecture of the places, "because on the basis of how we design the spaces of the city, it is either pleasant or unpleasant to stop in them, it might be agreeable to stop and chat or it might be disagreeable, it might be safe at night or unsafe" (Porta, in: Porta and Riboldazzi, 2005, p. 8). In short, depending on how we design community spaces, we create either lively cities or waste land. "It is a new (age-old) architecture that we need to bring into play, [focused] on the relationship between the space and the society that inhabits it" (Rabaiotti, 2005). This practice – which has been enacted in no few examples in Europe – has allowed "two results to be concretely obtained: the consensus of the citizens and the attraction of new economic activity" (Galdini, 2008, p. 52). That is to say, life has begun to flow once more.

Figures 26-27. Some examples of redevelopment of buildings and urban open space in Ponte Lambro neighbourhood in Milan (source: Calvaresi and Cossa, 2011).

3.3 The culture of urban design

We have already discussed the advantages and some of the critical elements inherent in participatory planning processes. However we have not referred to the "effective quality of the final project […], which a process of this type may struggle to monitor and which is not always of the same standard as the quality of the process itself" (Bruzzese, 2005). In fact there is no direct correspondence between participation and the quality of urban design. The history of European town-planning teaches us that parts of the city that were born of interventions initiated from the top down are not necessarily worse, from a formal and functional point of view, than those designed and built through democratic procedures (think, for example, of Haussmann's Paris compared to the Milan of post-war democratic plan). And the experience of the Neighbourhood Contracts (not just in Milan and Lombardy) generally confirms it: the open urban spaces that have been

'regenerated' in recent decades have never achieved the same aesthetic quality as many other places in the pre-twentieth century European city.

Figures 28-29. Some examples of redevelopment of buildings and urban open space in San Siro neighbourhood in Milan.

Awarding the town-planner the sole role of "stimulating the community toward a line of research", requiring that they limit themselves to "developing the capacity of expression of the inhabitants in a process of interaction in which nothing is decided or taken for granted beforehand" and restricting them simply to "making available, in their expert capacity, their technical expertise [to] stimulate images and planning suggestions" (Delera, in: Delera and Ronda, 2005, p. 18) is a method that has led to important results from various perspectives, but not from that of the quality of the contexts. Thus "The relationship between the planning of actions and the design of public spaces [remains] unpredictable and not in the least bit resolved" (Bruzzese, 2005).

Conclusions

Having defined and tried out instruments that can govern complex processes for territorially contained urban areas and having offered local government the means to draft policies that are consistent with social contexts has undoubtedly had a positive impact on the quality of houses and services and relationships with citizens. "Ponte Lambro [and – we might add – the overall Neighbourhood Contract experience] is a proof that peripheral areas can [and should] be redeveloped, that regeneration is above all about maintaining and reconstructing a sense of citizenship among the inhabitants" (Balducci, 2012). On the other hand, what does not seem clear is the relationship between 'bottom up' social demands and the culture of urban design. Participatory planning processes have reduced the "disparity between the implicit demands of the planner and the implicit demands made of the administrators by individuals within the community" (Ciaffi

and Mela, 2006, p. 79), but they have not resolved the problem of the quality of the projects that are born of this process. And this is one of the fronts that Italian urban policies will probably have to work on in the future.

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Web-sites devoted to Contratti di Quartiere II of Comune di Milano:

- Regione Lombardia
- **Comune di Milano**
  Ponte Lambro
  Gratosoglio
  Mazzini
  Molise Calvairate
  San Siro
- **ALER - Azienda Lombarda edilizia residenziale**
  ALER