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## **Between Urban Project and the City** ***Alberto Clementi***

To grasp the current reality of urban project in Italy it is necessary to go back to the more complex scenarios of the urban transformations and policies with which our country is endowed. In particular the new Urban Agenda, which has promoted from the European Union and Italy has been working on for some time, could contribute decisively by at least setting up a coherent base for future interventions. However our Agenda, because of its methodological inconsistency, the weakness of its programmatic fundamentals and above all because of the regressive style of the government of which it is an expression, is nothing but a banal exercise of aggregating interventions that various Ministries, regions and cities decide to carry out, rather than a well thought-out selection based on themes and actions to be encouraged in a partnership approach aimed at solutions for the most pressing problems of our cities. The intense scientific production on the subject pouring out of universities and other research institutions is mainly unutilized. In the meantime our public administrations on various levels of government continue to use the prevailing sectorial and self-referential logics.

The inconsistency of the Agenda is but a mirror of the disconcerting evanescence of public policies which have so far been delegated to local authorities – often burdened by serious limitations on available resources. Starting early this century the State abdicated its responsibilities for ecologically sustainable urban regeneration, social inclusion and technological innovation. Recent signs of a programmatic recovery under the Renzi and Gentiloni governments, located mostly in the form of calls for tenders in Municipalities, have not managed to even minimally limit the problem. The few actions taken are episodic and fragmentary, inconsistent or limited in effect or emergencies, absolutely not of the scale necessary to tackle Italy's grave urban question, not even as regards the common expectations of a normal quality of life.

After all there have been too many years of neglect and a desertification of policies. The accumulated backlog is becoming explosive, and in many cities the main problem seems to have become that of avoiding that living conditions fall further behind and maintaining the modest level of services which has been reached, rather than trying finally to improve the wellbeing and rights of their citizens. So Italian cities, quite differently from what is happening in a large part of European cities, are becoming "less and less just, cohesive and livable" and the tendency points toward a further worsening of living conditions in the near future (Donolo, 2016).

There is no way that the grave urban crisis of our times can be tackled with a few pilot programs financed by the State in the outskirts of our cities. We need to utilise the reserves of potentiality which exist within each city, and at the same time with a multilevel place-based national policy bringing into play focused resources to mobilise the many available actors, with the objective of *eliminating the excessive gap that exists between institutional actions and the perceived needs of the local community*. In essence we must develop *ways and instruments needed to intervene*, not

limited by the unwieldy and episodic procedures found in calls for public tenders which are currently used for interventions, but rather seek how to provide for a steady flow of public funds for focused and continual programs. Finally we require *an overhaul of our forms of government*, totally inadequate for cities and urban territories, as spread far outside their traditional boundaries.

Now we know that urban regeneration *needs both more State and at the same time more resident stakeholder involvement*. This plan is neither to strengthen a centralised vision of policies for cities nor do we propose that government abdicate its responsibility by decentralising interventions and their execution to a local level. It appears indispensable rather to bring about coherence among the various forms of intervention, *balancing national direction with a valorisation of the variegated grassroots experiences*, according to dosages that are to be determined each separate time as a function of the criticality of the situation on which we must act. The solution to our cities' problems cannot come from the State, but from a virtuous convergence of the mutual intentions of local actors: companies, administrators, citizens. In short, from *a joint push which comes from both the top and the base* (Florida, 2017).

Putting urban policies in place that are both effective and proportional to the nature and the criticality to be solved, it is indispensable to use set up a fair partnership among the several levels of government, as promoted by the European Commission, but this partnership should be articulated to apportion appropriate amounts of powers and responsibility, that are to be defined each time as a function of the specific contexts of the intervention. Using additional resources, involving markets and above local companies is also useful. We can exploit their capacity as protagonists to implement the planned interventions (Urban@it, 2017).

As far as architecture and city planning go, it is quite obvious that traditional experts in the sector find their usual weapons no longer effective in tackling the current deep urban metamorphosis, in which the yearned-for future in which modernity brought hope seems to be tending toward its opposite, a threatening future in which we shall have to defend ourselves (Benasayag, Schmit, 2004). They are impotent as concerns the perverse mechanisms of biased real estate taxation which determines the costs of urbanization and seems aimed above all to cover the costs of the municipalities, by infinitely incentivizing the consumption of new suburban land. At the same time city planning generally appears old and cumbersome, focused mostly on government rents from property and real estate rather than on improving the city's performance and on an effective managing of on-going changes. Urban projects are manifestly in crisis, and even when they are implemented by the most willing of administrations, they still work out to be series of unconnected functional works, often speciously aggregated under such instruments as "Plans for the City" enacted some time ago by the Ministry of Infrastructure (DL No. 83/2012) or programs for the requalification of degraded urban areas (October 2015) or those for the recovery and safety of outskirts (May 2015) under which they do not belong.

Most of these on-going experiences are nothing but a dismissing of urban planning, if by this we mean a method to give form to the shared values of our cities in the future. They favour episodic and fragmentary solutions as long as construction can be financed and started immediately. In this regressive situation one feels an urgent need to introduce new paradigms, innovating profoundly our cognitive framework, ideas and instruments for intervention. For example we realise that urban projects must be freed from the formulistic reductivity of the current approach and become rather an opportunity to bring together place-based and people-driven, with variable geometry for policies from multiple sectors: construction, city planning, environmental, transport and public works, together with those of social cohesion, employment growth and increased security. Becoming as it were a precious strategic instrument and at the same time conforming aimed to the objectives of the sustainable, inclusive and competitive development of the city (Clementi, 2017).

City planning itself is destined for a significant change, becoming an instrument of strategic valence capable of setting up relationships of a close interdependence between local development programs and urban projects, and consequently mitigating its atavistic rigidities in favour of more adaptive, flexible and procedural solutions to accompany change.

All this would seem to be far removed from what the public administration is really doing, and equally far from any issues on the agendas in today's bitter political and social debates in which urban and architectonic culture appear increasingly less influential. In this situation we are acutely aware of the need for a new transversal urban culture able to overcome traditional disciplinary partitions, to move

toward “policies that are more *integrated* capable of interweaving scales and materials, more *strategic* as regards the medium term, more *mobilizing* of all available cognitive and operative resources, and more *intrinsically sustainable* and focused on producing social cohesion” (Donolo, 2016).

In particular as regards the most appropriate form of government, *new urban policies will of necessity become multilevel and partnerships, with an approach based on pacts between central and local governments* (Urbani, 2017). The current pacts for development signed from time to time between the central government and regional or municipal administrations are not suitable examples. They are simple containers of a set of works to be financed with public moneys coming from central and regional funds. They will be rather the *outcome of a bargaining process*, built on a common understanding of the issues to be treated as priorities and of the future scenario that they intend to pursue, deferring to a set of partial agreements in the implementation phase of the individual programs.

An in-depth dialogical dispute can help construct a sufficiently shared vision of the area of future intervention and must be accompanied with the main objectives to be reached through the joint action of the various players. The vision must be open and fluid, though well outlined, so that it can function as a coherent framework for the interventions under discussion. Finally the specific strategically important action programs must be selected to resolve the identified critical issues. Vision and action programs make up the heart of the local Pact, which should include intermediate medium-term deadlines, so there is an opportunity to respond to the most relevant issues and take note of the first effects of the interventions.

As regards program implementation, it should become possible reconsider the instrument urban projects in a more mature way, though these need to be profoundly reformed. As we have maintained on other occasions, the perspective has now become that of incremental projects declined to miniscule, with a disjointed but convergent set of private and public interventions of heterogeneous dimensions and differing in scale, constructed above all from the base, rather than megaprojects for large scale works and pieces of the city decided from the centre with an agreement of the most influential actors of the development or large private investors (Clementi, 2017).

So urban projects with their undoubted added value have not lost their role to other conjunctural and extemporaneous solutions, though these appear less challenging as regards consensus building and perhaps even present fewer problems in gathering private and public funding and the implementing of their construction will be quicker and more feasible.

Certainly it is preferable to limit the complexity of a project when it appears excessive as respects the weak capacity to build political agreement in today’s world, so urban projects must undergo a diet to lose weight, sliming down to those few interventions that are really essential, interdependent and able to encourage a heterogeneous mass of possible collateral actions, expressions of the limits reached by the current level of the process of social mobilization. Transparent discussion within the local pact must treat key interventions to legitimise the enhancing of the urban instruments, in particular as regards infrastructure that must be considered generators of rents to be partially reinvested in the production of services and collective local equipment. In the end the approach to adopt will be mostly possibilist and the urban project’s success will be judged by the improvements it brings to the local population.

One of the key procedural steps for this approach is the choice and the delimitation of the area of the intervention, which is to be considered not so much a point of departure but rather a construct, that requires taking responsibility for shared decisions within the terms of the local pact. When the contents of the urban project – even more than the physical conditions and context – depend on an effective combination of the logics followed by the multiple local and supralocal actors who have declared an interest in promoting the joint action, based on the objectives they hope to reach with their shared vision of the objectives to be reached.

To consider recurring questions of innovation in the urban project, EWT number 16 is hosting a second set of reflections and contributions that articulate and deepen issues that came up in our previous number.

The need of having to look at ongoing urban processes to understand possible reforms is at the centre of Gaetano Fontana’s contribution. He is known in Italy as the main inspirer of the season of

Complex Programs inaugurated in the mid-1990s. The cultural tension that saw the then current political push for the direct election of our mayors, the promising role of the city as a driver of development and the expectation of city planning reforms has unfortunately been swept away by the crisis of the last decade. A disturbing void has opened since then, in which government action appears suspended and by in large absent. To the worrying decay of the entire administrative system, further burdening our country's endemic problems, has been added a growing distrust of the abilities of markets to correct themselves, and now neither the State nor the markets seem able to control the situation any longer. It is certainly not enough to fix the suburbs as advocated by candid souls such as Renzo Piano, because what is at stake now is a real "orthopedic reset" of the city, we have not identified who might be a credible promotor. As Fontana observes, in the current aphasic involution of city planning, architecture and our system of municipal government, it is the cinema which is speaking to us most meaningfully about life in the suburbs of our cities. In effect a new type of cinema is emerging from the reality taking root in this decay, fatigue to survive and interpersonal aggressiveness. This cinema is willing to abandon the codes with which we are familiar and feel more reassured and pursue new alternative languages and cultures. So these outskirts seem to have become a laboratory of experimental creativity, in search of new esthetics to set against the myth of Sorrentino's "La Grande Bellezza (The Great Beauty)" (Coen, 2017).

This cinema, in a way neo-realist, seeks reality "where it manifests itself most blatantly, in the wounds left by conflict and need" (De Paolis, 2017). It invests above all the social space on the streets, rather than the closed spaces of dwellings within whose walls the individual dramas of the bourgeoisie are more likely to erupt. A solarized narration placing Suburra in opposition to The Great Beauty is however reductive. One might rather say that cinema these years seems able to construct a variety of existential circumstances that unhinges our clichés and forces us to critically rethink the mental landscapes we have of contemporary cities, in Rome and in many other large and small metropolises in Italy.

On the other hand we will not find the answers in cinema, and art is not able to try them out. Its inventions seek to mend the cultural tear between the periphery and the official city, protecting in its way those who are excluded and suffering. As one tries to do for example with the "Museo dell'altro e dell'altrove (loose translation: Museum of Others and Elsewhere) at Metropolitza on via Prenestina in Rome, an initiative born in the fight for housing as a super-place in which art seeks to protect life and about which Marc Augè has expressed his appreciation.

Fontana himself in the proposal he offers in the conclusion of his complex reasoning on the current phase of urban politics can do little but invoke a possible scenario of change over the medium to long-term in which metropolitan cities will hopefully acquire increased autonomy in making decisions and finally place themselves at the centre of national development policies becoming, for various reasons, political subjects alongside other central institutional bodies. He foresees one very interesting scenario, in which the pervasive entwining between flows and places could finally induce a diluting of the excessive localism which is the original-sin policy of our cities and move toward new multiscale urban platforms that insert themselves in the global economy, a little like Milan is trying to do, though with some ups and downs.

So the urban project will be the offspring of this strategy of profound reorganisation of the vertical and horizontal multilevel governance structures, with a mainly pactorial approach which should help in freeing projects from the excessive traps and snares that coop up and distort their transformative potential. The new urban project is destined to become a strategy which is vigorously and transparently verifiable as regards its effects on improving the quality of the city, measured in a costs-to-efficiency-of-investment ratio that will finally remove it from the reductive logic of financial speculation and restore it to an evaluation by democratic process in which the local population will be invited to participate actively.

The dossier detailing experiences from Rotterdam shows that the problem Italy has with projects blocked by the intervention of the "children of a minor god", episodic and extemporaneous as long as their construction can be started immediately, has few comparable experiences in Europe. Rotterdam, notwithstanding the crises that have hit it has produced numerous important urban projects, that – as Ms. Castigliano, editor of the dossier in this number, observes – when they are erected give rise to disruptive contrasts among enormous constructions, pervasive flows of traffic of freight and people and public spaces embellished with extraordinary care. The result is an urban

form of heterogeneous and fragmentary sets, pointing to a future of a metropolis in rapid change whose fundamental structures are well planned though still open to the randomness of projects and their expressive forms. In Rotterdam the projects, though very different from each other, are by in large focused on valorising water, architecture and culture as strategic resources for the city's future and of equal value with the enormous and complex machine that is the harbour, Europe's largest and until the beginning of this century the busiest in the world, now bypassed only by Singapore and Shanghai.

The unconventional eclecticism of its urban forms corresponds to the variegated mixture of ethnicities and cultures of the many peoples that live in Rotterdam, with its heterogeneous population and intercultural atmosphere, a city like few others in the Netherlands. Here a project also takes on social importance. In fact it becomes the most effective and participated way to provoke comparisons and identify sustainable compromises among the values sought by groups of completely different inhabitants and often incapable of even expressing their needs and what they are seeking in life.

As a group the most important of the significant urban projects in Rotterdam evoke a tangible *valorisation of the infra-nature* composed of the system of the bodies of water, of the green and of public spaces with an approach that stimulates participated planning programmatically and that even tends to become a sort of participative framework as the presupposition for any regenerative urban action. The projects Ms. Castigliano has chosen to present in EWT are a good exemplification of this particularity of Rotterdam, a real experimental laboratory of the project culture as this seeks the most socially cohesive, culturally creative and environmentally sustainable city.

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