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edited by Alessandro Balducci
Alessandro Balducci
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Collective spaces: shape and practices

Fausto Curti

The pages of *Urbanistica* 123 explore many dimensions of communal spaces in urban environments plotting the progress towards a more livable city. It might seem strange that in our opulent society design and care of domestic space enjoy so much social currency, while there is so little consciousness that the quality of the built environment and of civic spaces are a preeminent factor for the collective well-being as much as for the lasting value of those very same private spaces. And yet, the idea of the city as a public and indivisible good, which was one of the founding ideas behind modern town planning, has for some time now relinquished the field to the rhetoric of the *ville à la carte* for those clients who are able to pay. There is one obvious indicator of the public sector's retreat before the "minimal state" ideology and the restrictions on local finances, which is the asset stripping of public real estate merely to repay short term liabilities. The negligence in which State and Civic property in our cities find themselves seems to justify their dismissal. Nevertheless, just the conflicts which arise out of the need of the State Agency to cash in on public real estate and the local town planning regulations are a burden that may urge municipalities to redefine their own land policies, by discriminating the inalienable properties essential to the city's balanced growth from the properties that can be sold in order to obtain funds for selective re-investment in the municipal real estate portfolio.

In the present uncertain climate, civic property is a basic source of *stabilitas loci*, both for social safety and collective identity. So, the idea of networking the multiplicity of neighbourhood initiatives, carried out in the first part of the magazine, is a fascinating utopia put into effect for a fragmented urban society. However, the differing grassroots movements thriving in Milan, as in Florence, in Newcastle as in Trieste, may remain precarious experiments if they cannot metabolise resources from outside and influence the local institutions so as to enrich their ability to respond to new social emergencies. Just those needs of local welfare which are suffering from declining resources impose a radical renewal of the stereotypical administration of service delivery, above all reinventing their spatial system so as to host self-help activities, and private welfare services. In any case, a common requirement of the more mature and enduring experiences is the free availability of space for collective use that can be provided by the town council. The following contribution investigates metamorphoses and discontinuity in the overall structure of the city of Rome. If the slow stratification and mixing of the uses attributed to the historic city the "concave" and hospitable form of the urban fabric, then in the contemporary city is the juxtaposition of specialised functions separating the urban scene into a mass of convex and introverted figures. If the civic space in collage city is the remains of disjointed developments, first and foremost its production depends on the administration's ability to

negotiate a congruous provision of services and environmental amenities during the review process of major operations. With this in mind, research on the urban morphology can provide the interpretative setting in which the strategic projects can be evaluated, and improve the packaging of the call for bids, which drive the principal urban transformations. The system of project contests may not only animate competition among designers, but also among promoters, above all assuming that major urban projects will be implemented with the new negotiating tool of Development Agreements. This change to our traditional planning system requires that, together with the principle of horizontal subsidiarity, which sees the private act economically in the traditional public domain, actual competition will be reinforced in real estate development. For this purpose the reform of the national planning law, now under discussion, may help. The present comprehensive plan will be divided into two distinct tools, the Structural Plan setting a vision, and the Action Plan, setting public and private projects in the short run, and then allocating development rights and urban costs. From this perspective, in evaluating the possible alternative actions which could be taken, compatibility with the state of fact is no less important than conforming to the state of law. In this sense, the "survey of the city" is a useful means of understanding how town planning innovation matures by starting from the resources, opportunities and values of the context in which the action is taken. The service on Trieste documents the effective combination of flexible piloting instruments used in

the major operations and "light" plans" which regulate the small scale modifications to the consolidated city. The succession of contributions shows the roles played by the various instruments and the various actors, whose hierarchical order is not constituted in advance but adheres to specific conditions and local opportunities, which testifies to the fact that town planning is not (only) a general blueprint but a vital experimental discipline.