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The image of the urban planning
Paolo Avarello

In Italy, especially among urban planners, the impression is widely held that the profile and status of urban planning has declined not only for the public at large, but also within universities, and among administrators, professionals and practitioners which do urban planning, though sometimes they are not aware they are doing this. Actually, they think they are doing something different from urban planning when they do things they believe useful, interesting, and even enrapturing.

The loss of public profile of urban planning is perhaps due to its competition with the 'noisy' visible marketing of buildings by the recognised, brand-name, archistars, which everybody admires, but nobody would like to have in his backyard; may-be it is related to the loss of tension between competing ideologies in urban planning, which has grown old-fashioned just like many other ideologies. Everybody seems to be nostalgic for the old urban planning; very few miss the ideologies that supported it and the methods and the practices that made it.

The bad press from which Italian urban planning suffers probably comes from two decades during which it has made a hash of its goals and ideals in the mincing machine of 'standards'. It relates de facto to those bureaucratic procedures, complications and delays that characterize Italy in general, and that are the second reason why Italy is at a disadvantage in attracting foreign investment (this being listed just before the weaknesses of infrastructures and just after the unreliability of our judiciary system) despite the growth of real estate prices.

True, Italian urban planning commanded greater respect when cities were rapidly growing, and people were scared a bit, but also excited a bit, since most citizens were moving from the country to the city. Then, urban planners would show up with their multicoloured maps to 'foresee' what was already happening, while designing the 'orderly growth of settlements' and promising a home and green areas and public services for all. From the seventies this happened by law: against the intentions and the actual possibilities of local administrations, that is.

Anyway, the plan was a manifesto of good intentions, released from time constraints, from economic conditions, from the special interests of operators and of local administrations themselves. These were considered negligible details in comparison with the rhetoric of statements of principle, which all the critics still overlook.

Nostalgia and grief for the profile of urban planning have emerged during recent years, when urban planners have actually done a great deal; not when urban planning has slowly begun to get rid of rooted, banal and stifling practices. One could say that the image of urban planning has endured well while rare and 'standardized' urban planning was being done, whereas it has gotten worse now when it is practised much more frequently.

A long way has been travelled since then: through the difficulties of redefining the very terms of planning, its goals and its operational means, and of including subjects to which scant attention had been paid hitherto such as administrative and cultural resistance to change. A difficult path, while regional and local institutions have grown in power and responsibilities, while the main producers of infrastructures and related services have been privatized and the allowances for infrastructures, social housing, etc. have drastically shrunk.

Urban planning is changing as well, since it necessarily relies on the administrative system, on the power of local institutions, on their jurisdiction and functions, on the welfare they should offer to their citizens, on levies and fiscal mechanisms that should provide the necessary resources. From civil society, through political mediation, one can spot and select social needs, and related priorities and, therefore, the choice of objectives. It is on the land, on its use and, on consumption that sooner or later the administrative choices, and the consequential transformation practices but also the 'non choices' which determine the situation of abandonment and decay, are placed.

Urban planners worry about the bad image of urban planning, but neither recalling the past nor the creative marketing initiatives often hoped for will save us. We have the opportunity, instead, to work for the construction of a new urban planning, which will not need any publicity to spread and be effective, from an image point of view, too, if it will be truly attainable and useful.