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The challenges of urban planning in the urban countryside

Maria Valeria Mininni

Throughout the second half of the last century, the spaces around the city acted as the ground reservoir on which to build new urban expansion. The pictures of the Ina Casa settlements are emblematic of this tendency; they stood out against a rural countryside in the prevalently rural society that was Italy immediately after the II World War, beacons of the rapid modernization process that was to ensue. Today, in those spaces, we can read the shorter term movements of the new internal migration phenomena, exoduses against a background of huddles of resistance and immobility of the countryside. At this moment in time, these spaces offer great chances for the city, depending in particular on their ability to compete by proposing new sustainability solutions, featuring a parsimonious use of resources but not excluding even being able to reproduce resources. Urban planning is facing the challenge of blazing a trail in unknown territory, with no recognizable landmarks, at this present time when the possibility of operating social mediation in the urban spaces has declined, people are less and less informed about what is happening around them and few strategies have been identified for collecting and orienting common knowledge. It seemed useful to start from some concrete cases of Italian experiences that have endeavoured to build a city plan involving the periurban agricultural spaces, as a basis on which to draw a preliminary atlas of the state of the art in Italy deriving from these experiences. Some recurrent themes

seem to be apparent in this *besoin de campagne*, where the demographic population reserves of the rural world on which the city relied in cases of need in the past are now being transformed into social groups that are somewhat hard to define, but that show signs of communities.

The issues raised up to now can be classified under some general headings: the ability of agricultural functions and farmers to survive in the proximity of the city and to offer an innovative cultural and economic project; the sustainability of the city and the prudent, parsimonious use of its resources in order to guarantee the quality of life and health of its inhabitants; the ability of the landscape concept to act as a heuristic category promoting community projects and territories seen from an agriurban perspective.

The last issue is that of determining whether, within the landscape field, more strongly oriented than the urban planning field but still currently suffering from the same disciplinary weaknesses, an extension of the field of action is occurring, exploiting different spheres of knowledge, remodelling the profession and culture into that of the landscape designer, and grounding this professional figure in a specific field of competence.

Proximity and periurbanity

Geographers and sociologists have reported that as cities continue to sprawl, the relations between near and far become blurred, making the spatial and social borders of a city ever less conventional and more variable. The residents are no longer representative of the urban population, and people entering or leaving the city no longer have the feeling that they are moving out of one environment, city or

countryside, and entering the other.

After the suburbanization phenomena of the 1970s, there now seems to be a growing tendency to lighten the settlement burden in the central areas of the city (core), progressively redistributing the population inside the metropolitan space more evenly around the city and surrounding areas (ring) but also in the agricultural matrix that contains them.

In the economic and social set-up, spatial proximity is losing its importance and cities are taking on the role of devices that can foster the organization of multiple indirect interactions among people.

Instead, the proximity between the city and the countryside could constitute one of the forms of that multiple spatiality in which the relations between near and far are blurred but the community living there once more expects to forge neighbourly, or more correctly speaking, good neighbourly relations. This community is considered to be based on the familiarity characterizing face-to-face communication, going back to the line of interpretation of the City beautiful movement that attributed socializing and positive outcomes to meetings in parks, squares and gardens, as well as those on the occasion of local festivals.

Can it therefore be presumed that this idea of community could be identified with the landscape society, in the sense of a social group that shares an idea of well-being based on the creation of a better living context? What reflections are stimulated by the urban plan inside the periurban spaces?

The activities of direct picking promoted by periurban farms, allowing people to pick ripe fruits of various different plants in season, repropose a face-to-face communication that

reinstates a physical presence as the mediator of the senses of touch and smell in a real, non virtual system of relations.

A proximity plan requires the urban planner to draw up policies regulating public spaces and creating an intercommunity culture, this being the only solution that can view interwoven agricultural spaces as autonomous spaces. The ability to plot the periurban agricultural space is the first step toward its management and design, but to do this, forms of direct negotiation need to be successfully carried out.

The municipal scale will also need to assess the true efficacy of the norms and regulations established, but it must be noted that recent plans pay much more attention to rural space than was previously accorded, and now introduce precise, detailed clauses. How many farmers, when reading that their fields need to be delimited by hedges, and that slopes and terracing must be restored, will conclude that their job as food producers has been exchanged for that of landscape gardeners?

Conditionality and good practices

In the near future, the fate of peri-urban spaces will depend more and more on the results of the new EU agricultural policies and the evolution of urban norms accordingly adopted by the various member States. These new European union policies have introduced three new principles that will undoubtedly condition the fate of periurban agricultural spaces: the principle of 'uncoupling', that of 'compulsory modulation' and that of 'conditionality'. The impact of the combination of these three principles on the periurban territory is not really predictable, but some scenarios can nevertheless be hypothesized. Farmers and agricultural activities are sure to take on

a new importance in the management of extra urban territory, as rural development policies continue to attribute them a more strategic role.

Those establishments that succeed in proposing creative circuits, combining innovative productions with multifunctionalities, will be off to a head start.

The impact of the Pac reform on the processes of territorial governance and planning is less easy to foresee, because there is no rooted tradition of integration of sectorial policies, nor of the activation of multilevel co-planning processes and European union, state and municipal policies, especially at intermediate levels like the intermunicipality scale.

A few final remarks

Landscape design is a spatial composition project and, in some contexts that have already experimented with forms of concerted agreement, promotes a more lively local development. In the long history of the city, it has always given rise to projects and utopias in the everlasting search for an ideal human habitat. In each age, definite forms have been identified but we know less about the societies that inhabited and produced these spaces. This is one of the challenges of 'describing a society without describing its spaces, as well as of the problem and need to conceive a society that is not always coherent with its spaces and itself'. It is an important challenge and research line that can link sociological abstractions to space and offer some new tools to those concerned with designing and building urban landscape.