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Plans, housing question and modernization of the country

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Plans, the housing question and modernization of the country

Pierluigi Proferzi

Town planners have abandoned the outdated 'separateness' of public measures in the sphere of social housing, fully aware of the need to integrate, not only 'functions', but also cultures, economies, fragments of society and relative lifestyles. But this seems a rather over-optimistic view of the 'housing problem'. In reality, our society is far less 'integratable' than one is prepared to admit. Nor does the State seem able to deal with the 'housing problem' economically, merely inventing a generalized increase in building volumes.

One wonders whether the only way to tackle this highly complex problem is to (re-)make plans. But which plans and with what resources? One line of action could perhaps be based on the experiences of the last few years. Above all on the positive results - but also on the mistakes - that have accompanied the first innovative experiences in this field. In particular the complex programmes of the past 'Dicoter' season and the services plans in the Lombard vernacular. Both of these typologies of instruments have been opposed, in one way or another, to the orthodox concept of the Master plan. But what concerns us is how these innovative instruments have interacted with the classical 'reformist' approach, referred in the same years to INU's proposal for Bologna (1995): articulating the three contents of the traditional plan (structural, operative and regulatory) and introducing equalization/compensation. In the course of time a convergence has developed between the two

approaches which, recognizing urban and territorial frameworks as the hinge element of public policies, has outlined on the one hand the 'structural' dimension, and on the other hand that of the urban (and territorial) project. The problem is in particular, the relation between modality of market policy (not dirigiste) and the unforeseeable diversions thereof, not always virtuous. In Italy there has been no such thing as a housing policy for more than twenty years, but instead the palliative of improbable restoration plans, and then of complex programmes, always vainly seeking integration, and of functional mixes. Today equally improbable 'new cities' are being proposed, without giving adequate thought to where, and above all to how, to build them: with what resources and what operators? It is not a question of plans, but of public policies, whose progressive segmentation can conversely be glimpsed. The housing question is connected, moreover, also with the ever pending question of the 'modernization of the country'. Attempts in this direction, albeit never concluded, have always coincided, in fact, with forms of centralism and of making quick decisions characterized by stability and by various forms of planning (the dirigiste nature of the plan), while the relative instability of the institutions makes progress in this direction more difficult, urging governments to resort to sporadic measures, even just for 'the sake of appearances'. There are two questions on which to reflect: how to bring about a dimension of stabilization that will guarantee the modernization processes, and how to construct the conditions of coherency and compatibility that have to accompany its actuation. Certainly a country does not

become modernized with incoherent measures incompatible with the territory, the landscape and the environment. And it cannot be said that plans are slow and complicated, whereas spot measures would be effective, because in that way measures are endorsed that are often at odds with each other, feeble, incoherent, at times harmful, and worst of all, not always agreed by the populations.

Stability has never been a guiding concept of town planning: urban (municipal) plans contain in general various modalities of transformation, opposed to safeguarding.

It is observed, regarding the (presumed) centrality of transformation in processes of development and, consequently, of planning, that it removes the territory from forecasts of developing its 'weaker' parts, and, vice versa, that it needs to attract economic processes based not so much on promises (or pipedreams) of transformation, as on a prudent 'stabilization' or rearrangement of what already exists.

In this sense, it is interesting to reflect on the relationship between the stabilization of uses and mechanisms of development, and also on the processes of demolition/substitution/upgrading, aimed always at the innovative features of the techniques of intervention.