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Plans, housing question and modernization of the country

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Problems, policies, and research

Atlases of the landscape in Europe

Atlases and landscapes

Methodological proposals for the management and promotion of Piedmont landscapes

Social perception of the landscape and the Atlases

The Atlas as a metaphor for the history of territory and landscape

The European context

Experiences on the landscape catalogues for Catalonia

Tuscany landscapes Atlas and spatial planning

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Projects and implementation

The Ptcp of Naples: the land and its fertile resources

Presentation

Dilemmas and obstacles in the management of objectives

A heritage to defend and exploit

The Ptcp of Naples: from the plan of 2003 to the new proposal of 2008

The landscape in the plan

Naples Ptcp directions

Settlements system

The assessment of territorial contexts and the landscape analysis

Agricultural landscapes in the Naples province: a heritage to be protected

A soil science to urban landscape planning: the case study of Naples and its surroundings

Cultural heritage, landscape and metropolitan system: is planning possible?

Sustainable mobility for Naples' metropolitan area

Statistical analysis in support of territorial planning

Gis for spatial co-ordination planning

Knowledge and action in the 'structural' interpretation and representation of territory

edited by Paolo Pileri

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Profiles and practices

Consuming land, consuming the future

Four countries, six experiences, for a single issue: limiting urbanisation

Towards sustainable land use in Germany: reviewing the German experience

with antisprawl policies and tools

Urban containment strategies in the Netherlands

From an economical use of land to land use management strategies, tasks and

challenges in Switzerland

Land use and consumption in England: how is land use controlled and monitored?

How has land use changed?

Assessment of sustainable land use in Germany: the project Fin.30

Integrated European research on sustainable urban development and periurban

land use relationships

Interpretational figures and methods for knowledge and evaluation of land consumption:

the transition matrix

Rosario Pavia

Methods and tools

Zoning, zooning

Michele Talia

Reform of territorial governance and the new urban order

Clovis Ultramari

By the way, what urbanism really is?

Zoning, zooning

Rosario Pavia

The term zoning is derived from the Greek word *zone* which refers to a belt, a strip or a fence. The etymological roots of the term reveal its deeper meaning: to delimit, to define a perimeter, to mark a boundary. Urban planning, notwithstanding the developments of this discipline, cannot seem to do without this original function, so passionately recalled by Ildefonso Cerdà, the first modern planner, when he wrote his *General theory of urbanisation*, in 1867. In this text he investigated the name to be given to the discipline that would define the theoretical and operative system of town planning. Cerdà derived the term urbanisation more or less directly from *urbs*, the physical city, and *urbum*, the handle of the plough. In fact, it was this tool, the plough, that the Etruscans and Romans used to found their cities by defining their boundaries.

Acts of delimitation, circumscribing, the setting out borders and zoning remain the focus of urban planning, notwithstanding the critical opposition and requests to overcome zoning.

Setting out borders means representing them on a two-dimensional surface, on a map of spatial organisation, representing a functional division and proof of possession. The division of land, the recognition of property rights and the protection of one's personal property are the technical aspects at the base of the practice of zoning. This was true in antiquity, and we need only recall the Roman division of the *ager publicus* and the measurement of the *forma regionis*. The division of land, based on a square grid (the *centuria* measuring approximately 710 m per side), maintained the

authority of a founding and sacred act.

By studying the initial phases of zoning we can easily understand the symbolic power of this act of division and measurement. The intersection of two orthogonal axes, the *cardus* and the *decumanus*, a centre and crossing defined the starting point for the construction of space and its representation.

The orthogonal intersection as the founding principle of Western space was fully recognized by Le Corbusier, who saw it as the measure of all things. However, this symbolic and founding dimension has been lost over time; zoning is now little more than a banal technique, an instrument for regulating the uses and programmes of urban and built space. It is a tool that is useful for classifying land and real estate values and the different categories of the city. Even at present, a large city such as Bogotá divides land based on the earnings of its residents. Zoning has now lost much of its spatial value, becoming, on the contrary, a formidable instrument of political power and the regulation of revenues. If we look closely at the situation in Italy zoning has been reinforced by a national urban planning law, assuming a greater level of articulation and more defined operative environments (law n.1444/68 introduced the so-called homogeneous zones). Only recently, with the emanation of new regional laws that institute the articulation of the plan in structural and operative terms, together with the application of equalizing procedures, it would appear that a possible cultural and operative transformation of zoning is beginning to define itself.

Within this context, zoning does not disappear, but is transformed. Equalisation, while on the one hand

defining a sort of relative isotropy of the ground plane, on the other promotes the continuous use of perimeterization. In fact, there are zones inside and outside inhabited areas, a complex classification of internal zones, zones that 'give up' quotas of buildable area to other zones that 'receive' them. Within these latter, the allowable volumes must then be located in particular compartments, or concentrated in defined implementation projects. Equalisation, by equally attributing each property with an identical building index (acquired rights and the potential of forecast construction), appears to eliminate any possible disparity of treatment at the theoretical and operative level. Urban zoning may thus free itself of the restriction of revenue, of its power and ability to condition. Zoning can thus return to being the design and planning of the development of the city. This scenario is capable of promoting a new urban quality, a new method of planning that, while regulating the development of the city, does not renounce the interpretation of its identity, the value of its processes of construction and the spatial quality of its transformations.

Zoning does not disappear, but is articulated in other terms: in municipal structural plans it must be given a more flexible role, defined to handle environmental, landscape and archaeological invariants, acting more as a guideline and tool of orientation for the location of strategic centralities, large public and infrastructural works and functional and programmatic sectors.

True prescriptive zoning is rendered precise in the operative plan, in new articulations focused on implementation. Sector-based and mono-functional zoning

disappeared some time ago, negated by the very complexity of the city. Zoning can allow for mixité and hybridisation, and many plans place a significant amount of attention on the typological and morphological aspects of urban fabrics. In many cases zoning has assumed a layered representation: uses, typologies of intervention, the use of the ground plane and the treatment of open spaces. The structural plan may be capable of indicating marginal areas, filters between different zones, between different regimes of land ownership, between the space of infrastructure and urban space, open or built as the case may be. Limits and perimeterization may be interpreted and rendered flexible through design. The line of separation between the historical city of Naples and the state-owned port area has become a filtering line, the space of a complex project that mediates and interprets the passage from one zone to another in the city.

We must return to investigating the cultural, spatial and social meaning of the act of perimeterization. Zoning cannot be transformed into a banal exercise, into a form of zooning, populated by a plurality of new plans and new programmes that, each in its own way, lead to a reorganisation of the zones already incorporated in the territory.

We need only briefly mention the acronyms of these plans to understand how urban planning is wasting its resources on the search for a progressively more imaginative formulation. In only a few short years we have been witness to the development of a multitude of plans, whose sense and effectiveness often escape us. A renewed legislative and operative approach have brought us: Prusst, Pit,

Put, Pum, Drag, Putt, Piu, Stu, Pru ... I could continue with this list, but the impression that emerges is that we are moving towards an ever greater separation between the tools of urban planning and the complexity of urban transformations.

The names of these new plans lead us to imagine a parallel and imaginary reality, similar to an urban zoo filled with animals as fantastic as they are useless.

Urban planning must return to reflecting on its structural roots and the founding acts related to the functional, social and symbolic organisation of the territory. Territoriality is the result of an inevitable act of separation and exclusion, as much at the geographical scale as at the scale of local interventions and urban planning. Power, in its institutionalised forms, is expressed through the definition of borders.

The territory is an interweaving of visible and invisible networks, nets and borders. It defines zones of settlement and clandestine zones of inhabitation, located on the margins and devoid of borders, inserted in interstitial spaces or invasively overlapping other zones.

Contemporary space is progressively more dominated by mobility, logistics, nodes and infrastructural networks, and by material and immaterial networks. The underground is crossed and marked by a vast quantity of conduits, cavities and voids.

The territory is widely urbanised, the city spreads everywhere and seems to overtake any form of boundary. In reality, the infinite city conserves its limits, its borders, its demarcations and its walls. Zoning must be inserted within this mesh. As a result it cannot be reduced to a banal technique, or a reductive practice of simplification. Instead, it must reacquire a sense of

responsibility, using the boundary to rediscover the purpose of the sign.