

Pier Carlo Palermo

# Mutation. Metamorphosis or An Eclipse in Contemporary Urban Planning

Contributions by  
Patrizia Gabellini, Arturo Lanzani, and Gabriele Pasqui



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*To everyone who has had the patience to read my writing*

*To Nina and Tito, who may open these books one day*

*To Susanna, my partner every day for so many years (54 so far)*



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## **Mutation.**

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Translated by Michelle Ouellette

Cover image:

Work created by Cartastraccia Lab, Trieste (Alessandra Cuttone and Francesca Tonsi).

Here it represents the reflective planner grappling with an academia that is often made of papier-mâché.

The author is grateful to Chiara and Tommaso for suggesting the image.

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## Foreword

In recent years, I have dedicated a lot of time to the literature on planning. It is now ten years since I left the Politecnico due to my age. Over the previous 18 years, I played a continuous guiding role at the university as Director of the Department of Architecture and Planning and Dean of the School of Architecture and Society. Upon retiring, it seemed right to behave discreetly, avoiding important relations with the school for four or five years. In 2020, however, the pandemic occurred. During the long lockdown, I decided to open the books once again, discovering with surprise that I still had a poor understanding of the sense and future of urban planning, an area that I had chosen 50 years prior as a new systems engineer, a bit intolerant of the mother house and attracted instead by suggestions relating to the city, planning, and design. I re-examined a large variety of sources, without limiting myself to Italy, which, frankly, was marginal amid the international framework. The result of these reflections is a trilogy of books.

The first step was to reconstruct the broad evolutionary lines of disciplinary thought and action: the frameworks, dilemmas, emerging challenges, and guidelines that had been confirmed in a variety of contexts. The goal was to better understand the reasons behind two great crises: the evident decline in the ‘modern project’, which inspired the origins of the cultural and professional movement, but also the objective difficulties in the reform-oriented programmes attempted almost everywhere in the late 1900s. That reflection seemed necessary to clarify the possible fate of the discipline as it currently stands, and the lines of action that could be recommended (*Il futuro dell'urbanistica post-riformista*, Rome, 2022). The next step was to investigate the same topics through a more precise examination of two types of sources that are probably underestimated: eminent figures in Italian planning pertaining to the generation of the 1930s, who were supposed to represent the ‘new classics’ in the discipline; and an exhaustive study of the international literature on planning and design to find similarities

and differences in time and space and formulate an overall assessment of current trends and the perspectives to support (*Roots and Frontiers. Figures and Cultures in Contemporary Urban Planning*, Rome-Milan, 2025, published in Italian and English). The third step led me to this book, which discusses two questions resulting from previous analysis, questions that seem crucial.

Whatever the context, a general line emerges with common characteristics. The idea of urban planning and its practice have changed drastically over time, from the dream of the modern project to managing contingent events. It would be not only appropriate but also necessary to recognize that a significant change has occurred, try to justify it, and better understand and manage the technical and political/social consequences. In the resulting framework, the traditional functions of regulation and visioning are interpreted in an increasingly weak or vague manner. Can planners continue to aspire to a certain reputation and social importance only by performing such limited, uncertain tasks? Perhaps they should apply themselves to playing a more influential role with respect to the effective actions of urban transformation, i.e. the production of concrete policies and projects rather than (just) general plans, which no longer play a decisive function today. I believe that urban planning will face an inexorable decline, if the discipline does not have the courage or strength to undergo this metamorphosis. Its functions will basically become bureaucratic, a procedure accompanying desires and choices largely determined elsewhere, with the concrete possibility that it is increasingly subordinate to the more influential interests of neoliberal society and economy. Such a fate is feared and reported by many exponents in the discipline, although they do not seem capable of indicating an alternative path. Faced with this perspective, I am surprised by the lack of discussion and reaction by those in the field. This book investigates the situation, risks, and possibility for a change of course.

This is basically the essential vision that took shape and substance in the three books. Because I am tired of soliloquy, I have asked three leading figures from my old school — Patrizia Gabellini, Arturo Lanzani, and Gabriele Pasqui — to take a position on the topic with a critical comment. I am happy that the invitation was accepted; their contributions form an integral part of the reflection.

Milan, December 2024 – May 2025

## Part I. Viewpoint

### 1. Doubt

Urban planning has certainly changed in the last 30 years, with substantial changes in a variety of contexts, not only with respect to the dominant tradition of the ‘modern project’, but also the reform-oriented programmes of the late 1900s. Alluding to this phenomenon, Patrizia Gabellini (2018) adopted a strong and slightly unsettling term — *mutation* — although it has not aroused particular attention or discussion in the discipline. This is even true because to the letter, the term marks a radical transformation that is never free of consequences. I believe that the expression is appropriate in this context. Due to their implications and consequences, the changes we have observed show the hallmarks of a true ‘mutation in urban planning’ over the long term. The phenomenon regards not only urban conditions (the forward-looking intuition of Rem Koolhaas: *Mutations*, 2000), but directly affects attempts to govern such processes and the means of doing so (which Koolhaas’ planning vision, 1995, does not really seem able to address). The point to clarify is whether the current transformations are consistent with the essential identity of the discipline. The forms have changed, but has a distinctive core remained unchanged, as occurs in any actual metamorphosis? Or should we acknowledge the de facto negation of the original functions and principles, thereby recognizing an ‘eclipse in planning’ that is now complete and difficult to reverse? Metamorphosis or eclipse: the two images evoke incomparable scenarios. It would be useful to understand what was or could be the fate of the discipline. In my opinion, the fundamental point is that compared to the principal traditions that the discipline displays, any scenario of continuity would neither be justified or productive today.

The two notions — metamorphosis or eclipse — now pertain to the culture of the modern era. Albeit in different ways, they reflect the tragic vein that accompanies the proud claims of the modern project. In the 1940s, Max

Horkheimer proclaimed the ‘eclipse of reason’, conditioned by the dominant powers and reduced to a merely instrumental function (Horkheimer, 1947, 1974; Schecter, 2010). In certain situations, the same objections may legitimately refer to the planning technique aimed at regulating and controlling the uses and transformations of space. As an ideology, the modern project seemed to sanction the triumph of universal reason and the enlightened function of technique. Critical thought quickly revealed the limits of the partiality, factionalism, and instrumentality of that vision (from Held, 1980, to Shuster, 2024). Attempts to conceive an idea of revisited rationality capable of overcoming the limits denounced by Horkheimer also aroused plausible objections; for instance, the multiple efforts to apply Habermas’ ‘theory of communicative action’ in planning failed to achieve the expected results (Jay, 2016; Bronner, 2017). This led to an important consequence: if the modern idea of reason experiences a crisis, the traditional planning culture risks being left ‘without a foundation’ (Gargani, 1975, 1979). In reality, it would be wise to admit that the unease of the modern era is deeper and more insidious, even in this specific field.

A well-known symptom? In the 1910s, Kafka’s metamorphosis expressed more radical unease due to the constraints imposed by the existing order on individual propensities and choices and the lack of respect for differences. These are also requirements or collateral effects commonly associated with regulatory planning in its most rigid, prescriptive forms (‘la ville disciplinaire’ [the disciplinary city] was the unsettling image evoked by Jacques Dreyfus, 1976). The tendency raised widespread objections and resistance, and not only by market interests aimed at regaining greater freedom of action. In fact, a radically individualistic society such as in America immediately made room for the issues of the community’s formation of consent on territorial choices, i.e. the ways in which free subjective desires could be composed at least provisionally in the local context with respect to emerging problems of collective interest (Wates, 2000; Kelly, 2009; Heywood, 2024). With abundant evidence even in Europe, social movements arose that expressed an antagonistic vision or at least alternative action with respect to the institutional means of territorial governance. Such movements claimed the ‘right to the city’, i.e. the actual possibility for inhabitants to participate actively in choices on the organization, transformation, and use of the territory (the unrealized dream of Henri Lefebvre, 1968, reintroduced more recently by a few critical voices: Harvey, 2003, 2012; Peter Marcuse, 2009, Goonewardena, 2009; Adler, 2017). These trends led to consequences in the discipline, giving rise to various contributions of *community* or *radical planning* (Heywood, 2024, rather than Sandercock,

1998, or Friedmann, 2011). The planning culture has inexorably become multifaceted, justifying the appearance of incompatible visions in the same space-time, from the technocratic order to ‘rebellious’ aspirations. The scenario is very uncertain and confusing, yet legitimized by the teachings of John Friedmann (1987) and then widely confirmed by the evolution of disciplinary doctrine (Chapter 3).

For some time, however, various assessments have seemed well developed and empirically founded. The modern project expressed enormous ambitions regarding regulation and control (of the territory, but also, indirectly, of society). Reality has shown that the results may be unexpected and paradoxical. One doubt remains open and should not be avoided. Must we acknowledge a failure without remedy or hope, or is it possible to conceive a metamorphosis that — in contrast to the situation poetically narrated by Kafka — maintains a sense and function that are different from the original ones but consistent with their distinctive core? In his last book, published posthumously (2015), Ulrich Beck delineates an important shift in paradigm that questions the desire to design the future as a founding principle of the modern era: great ‘social change’ is not produced by design, but through metamorphosis. Maurizio Ferraris’ orientation was no different when he decided to dedicate a specific reflection on the topic of ‘emergencies’ (Ferraris, 2016). At the same time, there is growing interest in the effects of ‘serendipity’, which could justify the formation of a dedicated branch of studies (Copeland et al., 2023; Pievani, 2024). Are these still singular positions that remain at the margins of planning? In reality, there is a long-standing tradition of thought that expresses a similar vision and could draw on illustrious precedents, as shown by some ambitious contributions at the frontier between geography and planning, such as Batty (2005, 2013) or Portugali (ed., 2012, 2021). These authors introduced a line of studies on complex systems (not all equally fertile, in my opinion), which were taken up by prestigious figures in planning such as McKay, Abercrombie, Jane Jacobs, and Christopher Alexander (Batty and Marshall, 2009, 2016). Other references could be considered, such as the concept of complexity and its dynamics as developed by Gregory Bateson (Harries-Jones, 1995; De Biasi, 2007), a source that is surprisingly overlooked by the disciplinary culture, which is always in search of influential inspiration in any contiguous field of thought and action (among few exceptions, the contribution by Goodbun, 2012, stands out). Underlying this, however, we see a basic question: whether it is right and appropriate to hope for and support a return to the origins, i.e. return the attention to the idea of the city as a co-evolutionary process, a truly revolutionary intuition

by Patrick Geddes that found immediate, important developments in some lines of geographical thought rather than in planning theory and practice (as Batty and Portugali are willing to recognize). That vision, however, has long remained in the margins for a discipline that, in the 1900s, preferred primarily to adhere to a design culture that was still ‘intentional and rationalist’.

Could we assume that the phase has been definitively overcome and that a ‘neo-Geddesian’ vision is also destined to re-emerge in the controversial field of planning? The result is that the discipline — as an institution, know-how, and practice — would change its shape with respect to the glorious models of the modern tradition. The main innovation (in agreement with Beck) would be to assume the concept of metamorphosis as a key to change, so that the selection, care, and development of some (co)evolution of the territory and local society would become the guiding principle of the transformations, more important than the imposition of some rule or pre-conceived model. In this field and in this sense, we must acknowledge that an objective and apparently unavoidable change has been occurring for some time. Will it mark the end of planning (which has been proclaimed many times), or just the need to reinterpret its role and techniques in forms that are more suitable for a changing society? The statement of the end (the collapse, as Benevolo proclaimed, 2012) was rarely associated with any form of self-criticism. The reasons for the failure were generally ascribed to external factors: market interests, the weakness or connivance of politics, societal myopia. In contrast, the need for a change in the discipline at least tends to recognize that some revision or correction is indispensable, because it is necessary to bring the vision, tools, and practice of urban planning into play. What orientation is right and appropriate to adopt? I believe that the dilemma cannot be avoided; assuming responsibility is inevitable. Over time, an actual mutation has occurred under our eyes. It cannot be ignored or underestimated. It would, instead, be appropriate to clarify its meaning, implications, and possibilities.

After attempting to trace a new overall, long-term framework for urban planning as a culture and institution (not just in Italy: Palermo, 2022), after reopening a dialogue with eminent figures that should become ‘new classics in the discipline’ for Italian and perhaps international culture (Palermo, 2025), I would now like to provoke a small debate with the younger generation, whose task today is to orient the future of the discipline and its schools as institutions that, in this phase, should not shirk some responsibility. While in a somewhat updated form and situation, the strong call

always deemed necessary by figures such as Campos, Secchi, and Mazza with sometimes differing arguments and visions is still valid. The disciplinary culture must assume socially significant responsibilities; it must try to answer the problems and imminent difficulties that are reproduced and even aggravated over time.

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## 2. Forms and Perceptions of the Change

Wherever we look, the signs of change seem evident and are often the source of embarrassment. The *technique* has changed, from the ambitious and binding forms of regulation and ‘design control’ to contingent, adaptive, even informal practices designed to guide or accompany daily experiences in urban life. The *theory* has changed. With abundant evidence, the most influential visions at the threshold of the new century — neorationalist, communicative, collaborative, post-structuralist (the most arbitrary and superficial versions), but also radical (the option supported by rebellious movements) have lost their strength and interest. There is still a widespread tendency to survey all the positions that the discipline has explored in various times and contexts, even though some have proved to be incompatible or even immeasurable: the result is an eclectic framework that could raise new uncertainties and difficulties (Chapter 3). However, some lines of development seem to emerge and mark a clear discontinuity with respect to the main traditions: an idea of planning and design as contingent practices relating to the phase and context; an idea of the city and territory as the result of an *assemblage* of multiple interests, actions, and projects.

The most common *language* has also changed. The dominant form used to be public discourse, which could have different versions that were generally edifying and sometimes technocratic. Today, the newspeak of land and real-estate operators seems to prevail, whose unscrupulous or impudent, but nevertheless often irresponsible users talk of a fantastic and improbable future that seems to function only for some party interests and only in the short term. As a result, the *collective perception* of urban problems and planning has changed. Or better yet, the most plausible condition seems to be a diffuse state of confusion, where traditional images (continuing to exert a pervasive influence) are ambiguously interwoven with the extemporaneous but increasingly unbearable and instrumental impulses of contemporary communication. As an effect, common places and fashionable trends seem to multiply while the ambiguities, uncertainties or anxiety accumulated over the long term remain unresolved. The situation lies at the antipode of achieving a diffuse ‘planning awareness’ so longed for by the illuminists.

In the resulting framework, even the disciplinary *roles* have changed. Multiplication is inevitable. The modernist figure of the expert and the desirable image of the *starurbanist* cannot combine only with the ordinary profile of the administrative official, but a variety of figures with different signifi-

cance according to the institutional and cultural context: manager, mediator, advocacy or equity planner, activist, urban and social communication therapist, policy maker, facilitator of insurgent processes or experiences in local self-government; along with the challenging and contentious territory of *place-making* and *urban design*. The variety of possible responsibilities and competencies — unlimited and unresolved — has become, in my opinion, one of the main causes of the weakness of the discipline. Amid the confusion, a long-term trend seems to emerge, leading to further embarrassment, a trend that I have called *post-planning* (Palermo, 2022). As an institution, planning has never formally been questioned, but it rarely becomes the decisive creator of actual processes to govern and transform the city. More often, it has represented only a set of forms and procedures that accompany the bureaucratic development of events that find more important resolutions in other situations (I have suggested an analogy with the concept of *post-democracy* introduced by Colin Crouch, 2004). While this consideration has a basis, we are quite far from the heroic or tragic concept that animated the formation of modern planning, but also from the desire to reform the sector that was seen practically everywhere in the late 1900s.

I believe that the assertions I briefly referenced in the introduction to this chapter have been widely documented. However, we briefly touch on some fundamental passages, which will be developed in the following two chapters through targeted investigations and reflections. To shape the discussion, I have adopted the common model of the spiral. The main references are presented immediately, alluding to ongoing phenomena (second part of Chapter 2). This is followed by an analytical discussion of some salient elements in those lines of experience and development that the planning literature highlights (Chapter 3). The next step is to present the vision of the problems and perspectives I feel it necessary to suggest for the future evolution of such a controversial and complicated field of practices (Chapter 4; Chapter 5).

## 2.1 Technique

*Urbanistica* (1966) is an encyclopaedic essay of which Giovanni Astengo could be proud, perhaps the first exhaustive Italian reflection on the large tendencies and perspectives of the international planning culture. In that framework, there is a notable emphasis on a few exemplary experiences, such as the plan for Amsterdam in the 1930s or the plan for ‘Greater London’ about 10 years later (great ‘lessons in planning’ announced by Astengo in 1949). In general, the planning orientations in the Netherlands

and Britain were then considered as sources worthy of absolute interest and trust. What might Astengo's assessment — and reaction — have been to the developments of the discipline and practice in those contexts after the 1990s? In effect, an impartial observer could easily recognize the syndrome of 'paradise lost', i.e. nostalgia and regret for a glorious period of exemplary experiences that now seem to have been inescapably lost. As a clear example, the conclusion seems to be valid for a topic in clear decline, such as the public planning of 'new cities' (Fée et al., 2021), but the self-critical reflection is certainly much broader.

The late-century balance in the Netherlands is surprisingly disappointing. The prescriptive function of binding standards and the capacity to guide territorial programming frameworks have appeared to be largely inferior to expectations. A few doubts had already emerged in the early 1990s (Needham, 1988; Levine and van Weesep, 1988); Andreas Faludi (in Briesen and Strubelt, 2022), even maintained that similar objections had been justified since the 1970s. In 2000, the critical reflection grew into the will for reform. Important innovations on the existing model became necessary, even boasting good international fame (according to Faludi and van der Valk, in 1994 this was still a frame of reference of potential interest for experiences in other countries). The push for change (Hajer and Zonneveld, 2000; de Roo, 2004; Needham, 2005) questioned crucial choices: the concept of large-scale planning objectives and tools, in line with new orientations in Europe (Spaans, 2007; Waterhout, 2007), but also the specific rules for land use (Buitelaar and Needham, 2007) and the difficult balance between demands to control or develop urban transformations (Janssen-Jansen and Woltjer, 2010; Buitelaar and Sorel, 2010). Legislative revisions, however, were not decisive. Instead of determinedly choosing a guiding path, assuming the consequent risks, the new planning law of 2000 aimed primarily at mediation between different, and unfortunately divergent objectives: making the rules certain once again, but also strengthening the strategic capacity to support development (Boelens, 2006). Interference between the two spheres has not always been positive. That ambiguity very quickly required further legislative revisions (starting with the new law in 2008). At any rate, Dutch planning seems to have lost the guiding function that it exerted on the international scene at other times (Faludi, 1996), while the disciplinary culture risks remaining in a state of continuous transition with no glimpse of clear, close-range outlets (Gerrits et al., 2012; Needham, 2014).

Growing instability and dissatisfaction were also common sentiments in

British experiences with planning, increasingly distant from the glorious tradition immediately after the Second World War. The crisis of the foundations was only partly determined by the long period of the Thatcher government (Thornley, 1991; Hague, 1991a). A decisive turn was imprinted by the new Labour government guided by Tony Blair at the end of the century. Doubts and objections not unlike those seen in the Netherlands inspired the legislative reform of 2004 (Tewdwr-Jones, 1996; Allmendinger and Twedwr-Jones, 1997; Allmendinger and Thomas, 1998). The central aspect was always the same: Is planning capable of making an important contribution to effective territorial development? Its current functions do not seem capable of responding to this need. In play was the shift from the primary responsibilities of regulation and preliminary design of a programmatic vision to decisive support for growth consistent with virtuous requirements, as a process capable of ensuring smart, equitable, sustainable, etc., results. This was the ideology underlying the ‘new planning’ desired by the Blair government (Allmendinger and Twedwr-Jones, 2000, 2006; Haughton et al., 2010; Twedwr-Jones, 2012). In reality, the entire construct proved to be fragile and risky for more than one reason. Today it is easy to see that the Conservatives’ return to power from 2010 to 2024 highlighted a few lines of change already inscribed in the new paradigm: leaving aside any application for reform (despite the desolation and protests by many urban planners in the country: Inch et al., 2020) to enter an openly neoliberal path certified by a few political choices in clear contrast with the planning ambitions of the early 2000s (see the white paper *Planning for the Future*, by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2020). Two issues gained emblematic value: the (desired) collapse of the main forms of ‘spatial planning’ on a supralocal scale; and the centrality of ‘new localism’, which could ideologically be justified as a more advanced tool of participation and empowerment for local society (Gallent and Robinson, 2013; Parker et al., 2019). In practice, however, this often represented just the liberation and confirmation of more active and influential party interests (Haughton and Allmendinger, 2014; Brownill and Bradley, 2017).

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to attribute the objective decline in the operational functions and influential capacity of the disciplinary culture to the political will of the Conservatives (Sykes and Sturzaker, 2024). While aware of the virtues of the reformist programme, various observers promptly noted a few elements of weakness or risk of innovation adopted by the Labour government in the early 2000s, which according to Philip Allmendinger, had already anticipated a form of *neoliberal spatial governance* (Allmendinger, 2011, 2016). ‘What is this thing called spatial plan-

ning?’ It is curious that in 2010, Nigel Taylor still expressed doubts and uncertainty about the substance and possibilities of an approach and set of tools that had, for some time, represented a pillar of the new European policies (OECD, 2001; Waterhout, 2008; Faludi, 2010; for a long-term view, see Teixeira, 2020). It is not enough to recognize that this was one of the emerging challenges (Nadin, 2007). We now have a large body of documentation and reflection in which a series of limits or errors that conditioned that family of practices can be seen (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009).

*Urban regeneration* is another crucial topic that lends itself to ambiguous or contrasting interpretations. Is it still reasonable to evoke suggestive scenarios of the ‘urban renaissance’ (The Urban Task Force, 1999; Punter, 2010, 2012) or at least expect adequate protection and care of the local social conditions (Imrie and Raco, 2003; Porter and Shaw, 2009, Lehmann, 2019)? Or should we admit that the field of experience has become one of the most advanced laboratories for the ‘neoliberal city’ (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2013; Haughton et al., 2013; Allmendinger, 2016)? In addition, how can we understand the growing attention to the scale and phenomena of *localism*? Have the tools resulting from ‘neighbourhood planning’ actually given a voice to local communities on territorial choices related to the scale of proximity (Matthews and O’Brien, 2016; Brownill and Bradley, 2017; Yuille, 2023)? Or do they represent leverage that allows proactive private interests to circumvent the organizational schemes marked out by reform-oriented ‘local plans’ (Healey, 1983; Punter and Carmona, 1997; Davoudi and Madanipour, 2013)?

Relevant doubts also relate to an essential question such as *planning regulation*. In the long term, the tendency towards increasingly flexible and discretionary rules seem to be a fact (Booth, 1996, 1997; Tewdwr-Jones, 1999; Booth et al., 2007). And yet the consequences continue to arouse fear, not just for the risk of choices inconsistent with an idea of public interest, but also due to the negative impact on the efficiency of the entire process (which becomes more complicated and tortuous) and the responsibilities of officials (who would probably in many cases prefer to play a bureaucratic role, purely conforming to given rules). As it so happens, the Labour government also examined the idea of adopting more rigid rules (Allmendinger, 2006; Dembski and O’Brien, 2020), although that hypothesis generally proved to be illusory. Rather, it seemed to function when the fixed rules were compatible with the dominant interests. In every other case, the attempt seemed destined to create new difficulties, which could

lead to a revision in weaker and more sustainable forms. The conclusion is that some assumed guiding lines in the disciplinary system — such as regulation, regeneration, ‘spatial planning’ — all proved to be notably uncertain or at risk.

Similar problems and trends were also seen in other European countries. In fact, numerous sector reforms were undertaken in the early 2000s. The extensive revision or transformation of techniques was an inevitable consequence of that long and influential process. The change affected both the concept of planning rules and the design of territorial programming frameworks, i.e. the two main fields of development and experimentation in traditional urban planning. The vision assumed a systematic body of knowledge as the basis (as Amsterdam and London taught us, but important previews were already found in the regional plan for New York in 1929: Johnson, 2005). The scope was to give the space and its transformations an adequate structure and form again, distinguishing territorial invariants, areas of strategic transformation, and lines of action with potential effects for organizing future assets. A strategic concept prevails today (Healey et al., 1999; Albrechts, 2006), one that is generally vaguer and sometimes clearly ephemeral, although compatible with the culture and politics of neoliberalism (Olesen, 2014). In the best cases, some latent physical or social potential in the territory in question may be highlighted. Or it may be reduced to a now ritual list of objectives that can seem unrelated to the spatial context. These are not based on a critical interpretation of the place but in fact are so generic and simply edifying that they could hold value in a great variety of situations.

The change in rules is even more radical. Urban planners traced borders and applied regulations that acted as standards for the delimited areas. Significant rhetoric arose regarding the meaning and implications of these choices. There was no lack of hope or any attempt to base that simple practice on more mature technical knowledge or better-argued social justification. However, the efforts were largely in vain (as evidenced by Gigi Mazza’s research and experience: Palermo, 2025, Chapter 5). Zoning works in its most elementary forms; we could say it only tends to rely on rough schemes. Nevertheless, it is increasingly rare today to see territory outlined with a precisely regulatory goal. ‘Zones’ make way for ‘areoles’, i.e. a form of dividing the space that, by its nature, is fuzzy and soft (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2007, 2009a; Roo and Porter, 2007). The design of binding prescriptions gives way to the open suggestion of ideograms, which ought to allude to the possibilities of the transformation, with a vari-

ability that may be very wide. We should acknowledge a revolution in the technique that raises original problems regarding interpretation, meaning, effectiveness. The tendency has long remained hidden in Italy, despite the reform-oriented wave that arose in the 1990s and 2000s. This became clear and unavoidable, however, after the reform in Emilia-Romagna in 2017, which acknowledged the reality that had already been recognized for some time in other national settings. The dilemma is clear: Can substance and influential capacity be given to new forms of disciplinary tools, or are we seeing the development of an idea of ‘weak planning’ (Manouchehrifar, 2024; Ilmavirta, 2025) that risks negating its original values and ambitions? To discuss the issue, a brief digression into the field of ‘theories’ may be useful.

## 2.2 Theory

In the late 1990s, Lloyd Rodwin organized an interesting encounter at MIT between scholars and professionals to define the state of the art (material from the conference was later published in Rodwin and Sanyal, 2000). One fact is striking: the ‘communicative planning theory’, which at the time represented the emerging attraction from specialized literature, did not arouse any interest at the event (save the talk by Judith Innes, the primary exponent of that line of thought in the USA: Innes, 1995, 1999). Could this be the most common fate of the theory, as a niche exercise destined to remain in the margins of actual interests and practice? The impression is rather widespread, even in several disciplinary circles. Those working in planning in Italy, for example, are often tempted by the idea to consider the international world of *urban planning* as a separate body, perhaps extraneous to their real field of interest and responsibility. I believe the vision is short-sighted and illusory. Such a vast and diversified domain of discourse on *planning* and *design* should not be considered a strange distraction that could easily be overlooked or bypassed by those involved in the real profession and need to operate in a regional setting that has different and peculiar characteristics compared to a large part of that world. Instead, I maintain that this strand of interest — while at times disordered or confused, impracticable and inconclusive — should be understood as a warning for real problems: dilemmas, contradictions, hopes, and attempts that may arise in an experience that is objectively complicated and perhaps destined for perpetual failure with respect to the best intentions. In this sense, those strands could represent an interesting laboratory for better understanding and renewing ordinary practice. The theory should not be

required to serve as a secure, immediately effective guide for everyday action, but rather an important contribution to understanding the problems in question and the discovery of possible perspectives. The evolution of theoretical visions over time confirms that this is an open field with its risks, as with any historical process of some importance. I draw on references from the related literature, including journals as an agile tool that allows the signs of change to be perceived more quickly.

A few preliminary distinctions are necessary. The theory may concern an ‘object’, such as an evolving territory or the plan or project aimed at guiding such a change. In this case, the simplest solution takes the form of a *model* to fine tune and apply to the context. Or the topic may be the ‘process’ of transformation and the theory coincides with the *method* according to which the experience is organized and managed. In the two situations, simplicity is desirable for the proposed solution: we need models and methods that lend themselves to understanding, justification, and use that is as easy and reassuring as possible. This is one of the reasons that may explain the surprising success of a *rational/comprehensive* vision, which incredibly still seems topical in some disciplinary areas, despite the intellectual discredit that has accompanied it for some time. This is a model of a system and process that assumes unrealistic requirements and yet continues to exert an extended and important influence. Reasoned, authoritative doubts on the issue were clearly formulated at least 50 years ago (starting with Altshuler, 1965; Petersen, 1966; Friedmann, 1971); yet the most current lines of *environmental planning*, certainly innovative with respect to ‘urban ecology’, still tend to adopt an obsolete idea of planning as a rational/comprehensive method (Palazzo and Steiner, 2011; Steiner, 2018). The explanation is simple: the conceptual model seems to be intuitively attractive, a reasonable and apparently effective way of setting up a concrete decision-making problem, an approach that proves to be reassuring, easy to understand, and rich with promise (Dalton, 1986; Baum, 1996). In truth, it is pure illusion. A similar scheme may eventually be valid as a framework — the principle of assessment or limit scenario — that admits only partial applications and certainly more moderate ambitions in the variegated world of ‘bounded rationality’ (Viale, 2021; Dhimi and Sunstein, 2022).

A true alternative cannot help but require a change in paradigm, not conceiving the object as a current state but as a system of interactions, with the possibility that technicians are not just impartial experts but rather take an active part in the interactive game. After the initial period of comprehensive rationality (nothing more than ideology), the concrete development

of the theories in this field led to the emergence of two large strands: the various forms of *revisited* systemic rationality (contingent, adaptive, but nevertheless limited) in the sense well illustrated in contributions by Ernst Alexander, 1992, 1996, 2000); and an *interactive* vision that, in different respects, recognized that the territory, plan, and project are not ‘objects’, but rather the provisional result of composing multiple forces and actions in the field (as Pier Luigi Crosta, 1984, clearly anticipated). The second line of interpretation gradually gained credibility and an influential capacity superior to any alternative (Farias and Bender, 2010; DeLanda, 2016; Stevens and Dovey, 2023), although it deals with a perspective distant from the original disciplinary orthodoxy.

Would this be the more mature result of a long evolutionary process? Some caution seems appropriate today. On the one hand, it is true that it seems difficult to ‘make a city’ — and practice planning — while ignoring or underestimating the variety of figures, interests, and emerging strategies, the resulting interactions, and the need to sustainably recompose strengths and tendencies in the field (Palermo, 2010). However, a similar vision cannot be anonymous or merely technical; it implies assuming responsibility and clear standpoints. One can see how some officials are reassured by a concept of a more bureaucratic role guided by rules and techniques that are as objective as possible. This human tendency may help to explain the great success in recent years of notions such as the ‘digital city’ or ‘smart growth’ that, surprisingly, seem capable of reintroducing a *neosystemic* vision of the city and planning that holds much more technological power compared to previous visions that arose 50 years ago (Picon and Ratti, 2023; Batty, 2024). Would the laborious achievement of an *interactive* concept of disciplinary problems therefore already be under discussion? I think this is a crucial dilemma in this period, which I leave to the end of this section. At any rate, one point seems out of question: the function of theory was about to change. It was once understood as a device capable of prescribing the most suitable action given the conditions. Today, it has become the basis that allows the problems to be imagined and discussed to orient (only orient) a family of practices that always claim a wide margin of independence.

The time of the process is clearly marked by the evolutionary lines of the discipline in the English-speaking world. In 1956, the training programme at Chicago in ‘rational planning’ created by Tugwell and Perloff ended. It had been developed in an innovative setting, the School of Political Science founded by Charles Merriam (Simon, 1985) and its end was a sym-

bolic event providing evidence of the imminent crisis (even then) of that paradigm (Sarbib, 1983). For a few years, however, that vision continued to exert a certain influence (for evidence of this, see Davidoff and Reiner, 1962; Dyckman, 1962, 1969). In Italy, the ‘manifesto di Bellagio’ was signed by the most authoritative voices in international ‘rational thinking’ (then little known in the country: Jantsch, 1969). The most exemplary document of the trend, although belated, remains *Planning Theory* by Andreas Faludi (1973) as a celebration — entirely ideological and exhortative (but improbable) — of a discipline to re-establish on a scientific, rationalist basis. It was a belated move, because in the meantime, criticism and dilemmas relating to the topic had already arisen and multiplied thanks to authoritative voices. For example, Ritter and Webber (1973) had already highlighted the impossibility of addressing many ‘wicked problems’ of real interest with the very simplified strategies of linear and comprehensive rationality. Scott and Rowe (1977), as did Paris (1982), confirmed the need for a more critical orientation compared to the pure rationalist method, if the necessary attention was conceded to the real interests and powers that could condition the decision-making process.

There was thus no shortage of good reasons to fear a gap between theory and effective practice, but doubts and arguments did not lead to a unique, immediate change. For some time, the disciplinary reflection preferred to acknowledge the multiple available positions (Hudson et al., 1974, 1979; Galloway and Mahayni, 1977; Healey et al., 1982). Faced with the variety of possible perspectives, some of which were objectively opposed, a period of uncertainty and discussion began. Is a procedural and rationalist idea of planning truly sustainable? In the United States, critical voices multiplied in the early 1980s. Inspired by emerging contributions from Richard Bolan and John Forester, George Hemmens (1980) contrasted the rational/comprehensive model with a multifaceted and interactive vision that aimed at the necessary synthesis due to the principles and communicative experiences of ‘practical reason’. Robert Beauregard (1984, 1987) warned politicians and technicians of the trap of a merely procedural concept of planning that risked eluding the most important problems. According to Oren Yiftachel (Israel, 1989), theories of the ‘planning process’ represented just one component of the discipline, which could not avoid concrete investigations or operational programmes relating to the context (economic, social, territorial) or urban form. Despite Faludi’s more recent influence, voices were raised in the same period in Great Britain as well in favour of the operational capacity of disciplinary action (Cliff Hague, 1987, 1991). It is true that, precisely in those years, a well-known book by John Friedmann

(*Planning in the Public Domain*, 1987) aimed to certify the eclecticism of planning theories in the late 1900s, while also legitimizing technocratic, communitarian or rebellious visions. However, that ecumenical representation could not hold for long. Over time in fact, Friedmann himself confirmed the need for some reconsideration, first relating to doubts on the possibility of teaching planning as a method (Friedmann, 1995). Following this came the urgent need for a ‘revisited theory’ that could overcome a certain indeterminacy of the object and discourse to more successfully face the critical problems of living quality, civic development, and the influence of real power (Friedmann, 1998). Lastly, there was his strong reference to observing effective practice (Friedmann, 2003) and theories used in contingent situations (Friedmann, 2008). One might conclude that planning scholars needed a lot of words and went through a lot of trouble to free themselves from a narrative that was clearly out of place!

In effect, at the turn of the new century, the most evident fact was still ‘deconstructed’ pluralism. In Great Britain, Nigel Taylor (1998) acknowledged the uneasy coexistence of diverging approaches, at least three large families of theories that traced a clear evolutionary process over time. The first was the tradition of *physical planning*, which was still influential in the mid-1900s; then came the great systemic and *process-oriented* change attempted in the 1960s and 1970s; and finally, attention grew in the following period regarding the key topics of plan implementation and effectiveness. The author, however, did not perceive the need to reconstruct a new paradigmatic order with respect to the variety of incompatible positions (Taylor, 1999). He limited himself to hoping for greater clarity and precision in the use of fundamental concepts (Taylor, 2003). Allmendinger and Haughton (2002) also acknowledged the growing pluralism of the planning culture at the time, but looked for an ‘order in the discourse’, assuming one of the then-emerging topics — the communicative/collaborative theory of planning — as a pretext to subject it to unusually rigorous critical inspection with respect to a few key concepts (‘power, rationality, ethics, professionalism, practice, participation’) and comparison with other theoretical visions (‘pragmatism, the post-modern turn, neoliberalism’). The reflection should have led to a certain caution with respect to the imprudent enthusiasm that the communicative approach aroused in some disciplinary circles. Few contributions proved to be so demanding and innovative, however. For example, Huw Thomas (2004) limited himself to reiterating the desire and hope of re-establishing planning as an independent discipline compared to the original architectural or engineering tradition, without offering new perspectives or tools for a programme that

had been underway for several decades in Britain, although planners there still had not learned how to achieve well-developed or convincing results. Along the same lines, various authors continued to testify to their general adherence to the desired theoretical change, although it did not manage to become reality. In the United States, some conclusions were more radical. Howell Baum (1988) recognized the influence of ‘political and practical’ implications on theoretical work, but he also later acknowledged the difficulty of governing the irrationality of real processes (Baum, 2015). Susan Fainstein (2000, 2005) highlighted the contradictions within a discipline and profession that still seemed to oscillate between technocratic temptations and antagonistic forces. Some years earlier, Ernst Alexander (1998) had not hesitated to denounce any project in ‘general theory’ as an impossible and anyway illusory pretension. Michael Neuman (2005), tracing a broad range of discussions on the topic, had to acknowledge that the most developed functions of the theory were certainly preparatory (‘explanation, prediction, justification, normative guidance’), but still did not seem capable of influencing urban and social practices as desired.

Observing later events, we can distinguish four main tendencies. First, institutional depictions of the discipline generally preferred to confirm a pluralist vision that eluded the responsibility of criticism, even with respect to the most unlikely hypotheses and experiments and even though they were resoundingly falsified in the course of experience (see Chapter 3, which presents documentation and analysis of the most important manuals or disciplinary *Readings* published in that period). The second line consists in a unique but influential trend that aimed for legitimacy as a new ‘dominant paradigm’, the worthy heir of the rational/comprehensive model, finally capable of achieving the unfulfilled ambitions of that project (Innes, 1999). I am alluding to the so-called ‘communicative planning theory’, which proclaimed the possibility of a shared understanding (not merely instrumental nor just opportunistic) among actors in the process, who could even test multiple, sometimes diverging interests and strategies. With the decisive technical contribution of urban planners, the key would have been to create a system of undistorted communication that could convince every party that ‘it is convenient to cooperate’, as taught by the principles of ‘communicative rationality’ (revisited with a certain simplicity in the thoughts of Jürgen Habermas: Mattila, 2020; Westin, 2022). The scenario proved to be edifying and exhortative in the versions destined for the greatest media success (in addition to the works by Judith Innes cited above, see Healey, 1992, 1996, 1997, 1999; Innes and Booher, 1999). Less commonly, that perspective was accompanied and certified by a critical orien-

tation (Forester, 1993; Sager, 1994), which nevertheless lost its vigour and influential capacity over time. At the very least, it entailed a revision of technical roles: planners were no longer understood as the interpreters and guarantors of an ideal model of communication, but rather as professionals capable of managing concrete mediation or negotiation among rival interests (Forester, 2006, 2009, 2015, 2017). In truth, objections to the pure theory were immediate (Twedwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998; Woogd and Woltjer, 1999; Yiftachel and Huxley, 2000; Lauria, 2000; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2002a), tending towards an ideological construct that overestimated the communicative dimension of the processes and the technician's maieutic role, while overlooking the weight and potential conflict of interests in play. Patsy Healey's call to the values of interinstitutional cooperation were too simplistic (2003, 2007, 2010), seeming to underestimate the actual effort involved in governing many socio-economic interests and administrative levels. Entirely unjustified was Judith Innes' claim to adopt the same approach, with honestly disheartening results, even for the problems of large-scale planning (Innes and Booher, 2010), while it would be reasonable to confide in some positive result only in spatial contexts that are delimited well and not overly complex. I have shared and investigated such criticism (Palermo, 2009; Palermo and Ponzini, 2010). Later developments confirmed the groundlessness of certain aspirations. That paradigm continued to lose credit and its influential capacity (Devenney, 2004; Clifford and Twedwr-Jones, 2013; Goodspeed, 2016; van Dijk, 2021). Innes, however, has still reiterated her faith in the approach in recent years (Innes and Booher, 2014; Innes, 2016), while Töre Sager (2013) seems to believe in the possibility of a relaunch capable of overcoming criticism and Bish Sanyal (et al., 2012) is at least ready to recognize evidence of the reflective capacity of the profession in the 'communicative theory' (compared to its technocratic set-up at the beginning). I believe, however, that the approach should be considered a lost opportunity. The intuition was interesting and justified: planning cannot ignore social action and interaction (ideas that Friedmann anticipated long ago: 1969, 1973). The error lay in refining that perspective according to a model that was still directive and formally pre-defined, as a new potential version of the 'modern project', although unfortunately not destined for a better fate.

The most current trends signal another two perspectives, both of which are clearly post-modern and nevertheless different (even incompatible). On the one hand, it is clear that the concept of disciplinary practice has grown to be more open. Flexibility with rules, discretion in public choices, the informal nature of actual processes: in orthodoxy, those principles repre-

sented the negation of planning, but they have now become common and tolerated. The influence of post-structuralist thought on planning culture (through renowned authors such as Foucault, Deleuze, Lacan and others) was not always fruitful (Palermo, 2025, Chapter 10). However, it is right to recognize an important trail leading from Deleuze to Latour, which adopted the ‘actor-network theory’ as its emblem (Latour, 2005; Michael, 2017; Blok et al., 2019). The decisive point is not to understand the territory or plan as finished objects, but rather as the transitory result of a system of interactions among multiple interests and projects, always in search of a sustainable *assemblage* for the parties and the whole. In the best cases, this is the theoretical vision underlying the success of *tactical urbanism*, notable for its intensity and spread in the last decade (following the inaugural contribution by Lydon and Garcia, 2015). Otherwise, there would be nothing left but to acknowledge the triumph of the contingency in a context that is increasingly configured as an anti-planning model (Cowley and Caprotti, 2018). At any rate, this seems to be the most up-to-date version of the *interactive* concept of the discipline, dropping the latest founding claims of ‘communicative reason’.

More or less at the same time, however, a fourth line opened, gathering increasing importance and surprisingly capable of indicating a return to the origins of ‘instrumental reason’, which seemed to disregard the struggle for social interaction. Today, *smart city* and *smart urbanism* represent a post-political perspective in a *high-tech* version (a scenario supported by the growing power of a few leading figures in the sector on the world stage: Karp and Zamiska, 2025). The powerful development of *smart* technologies and increasingly easy access to *big data* have restored the vigour of a systemic concept of the city as a ‘senseable city’ (Picon and Ratti, 2023) or ‘computable city’ (Batty, 2024). It seems possible to circumvent the complications associated with any interactive vision: the leading figure would always be the individual to whom technology (technocracy behind the curtains) would offer new, enormous potential (including technologically mediated social and economic relationships), while the city and society would be understood only as a mere secondary effect. In fact, the investigation takes on an entirely inductive form, as pure processing of the available data, which do not seem to require much mediation or interpretation. The nexus between urban knowledge and decision-making would be immediate and linear, according to a simplistic interpretation of the ‘survey before plan’ sequence (a trace — perhaps overestimated or misunderstood — in the thoughts of Patrick Geddes). In my opinion, it would be a regressive and illusory step backwards because it would represent (paradoxically for

a condition declaring itself to be post-modern) the resuscitation of a theoretical mould that is still neopositivist 50 years after *Planning Theory* by Andreas Faludi. That idea of theory promotes not only cognitive certainties, but a definitive guide for the problems of action. However, such an assumption has found no confirmation in the long-term evolution of disciplinary experience. A few circles, such as AESOP, continue to express a memory and respect towards such reckless developments (see Faludi, 2015; but similar orientations in the same settings are also valid for another great illusion such as the ‘communicative theory’: Innes, 2016). It is as if the discipline struggled to free itself of its failures.

I believe that this scenario, so tortuous and controversial, may constitute a useful background for the experiences in Italy. It has not been the subject of true internal reflection. By tradition, the theory seems to interest few Italian planners. It may take the form of an authoritative vision or become the programmatic manifesto of a movement that aims to orient action, but it is never a development in and of itself. By luck, the figure of the pure ‘planning theorist’, which is often elusive and infertile, is absolutely marginal in the context. There is practically not even any trace of tedious manuals — all the same, all superficial — which should teach the method of good practice (such as the text by John Levy, which went through 11 editions from 1988 to 2017, or Brooks’ most recent contribution, published for the first time in 2002). However, it would be wrong to underestimate some consequences of the theoretical reflection developed elsewhere. Today, it would be improper to reiterate some traditional formulations of the problems or ignore the failure of the main theoretical projects. The approach to informality is the mark of a crisis and profound regression in planning which cannot be underestimated. Pierluigi Crosta and Gigi Mazza were right when, in the late 1980s, they called into doubt the basis underlying official versions of the discipline (Palermo, 2025). A different concept of the territory, society, politics, and planning seems absolutely necessary. The return of the actor and composition of multiple interests and actions become two essential assumptions for generating visions that are more pertinent and fertile (Latour, 2005; DeLanda, 2016). Even though that would be a radical change with respect to traditional forms of knowledge and disciplinary practice, it now seems to be up for discussion again, or at least nudged into the shadows by the latest high-tech suggestions. Social interaction or ‘smartmentality’ (to use a neologism coined by Alberto Vanolo, 2014): which is the key-principle? In Italy as well, the dilemma is being outlined, yet with less evidence compared to other contexts, but the scenarios do not seem more promising. The way in which one tends to speak about planning today in

Italy does not seem to allow for great illusions.

### 2.3 Language

‘L’attualità dell’urbanistica’ (1949) [Planning Today]. ‘Urbanistica mancante’ (1950) [A Lack of Planning]. ‘Città senza piani’ (1951) [Cities without a Plan]. If I think about the *public discourse* emerging in Italy around the topics and opportunities for action in the discipline, it is hard to forget the editorials that Giovanni Astengo wrote regularly in *Urbanistica* for nearly 20 years after the Second World War. They are vibrant texts that expressed an enlightened reasoning, a design-oriented hope, and a persistent will for action. We need to recognize, however, that over time, bitterness or discomfort also arose: ‘a danger and an illusion’ (1957); ‘the cost of waiting’ (1964); ‘going adrift’ (1965); ‘in the dark’ (1970). That vision assumes two fundamental principles: a responsible, efficient, and forward-looking political power and a widespread ‘planning awareness’ in civil society, but also between market operators. These would follow an idea of ‘republican citizenship’ that extols not only individual rights associated with citizens’ status, but also the responsibilities to share in the context (Pettit, 1997, 2012), a call that seems to be indispensable with respect to the fate of the environment and territory. The two hypotheses have rarely been confirmed; only a few weak traces remain of that public discourse.

The environmental question has certainly exploded, although it risks getting caught in the confrontation between incompatible ideological visions (among those who denounce or deny the imminent catastrophe: Veltz, 2022; Sénéchal, 2024), while politics does not take responsibility for transparently and sustainably redistributing the economic and social costs of the necessary transition. A similar tendency is also seen with respect to using and transforming the territory if we observe the periodic reports of unsustainable land consumption (Pileri, 2024) that seem to garner widespread consensus but quickly fall into oblivion when strong party interests press for less binding development. In this case as well, two ideologies contrast with often useless results. There is, on the one hand, an appeal to forms of absolute control over future transformations (‘zero consumption’!) and, on the other, the rhetoric of *real estate* and *urban development* as possible drivers of general growth. In this framework, two forms of discourse seem to become increasingly common.

Public discourse is often reduced to a banal, substantially irrelevant version of the managerial culture, whose formalistic revisiting in contexts that

are not strictly pertinent may lead to negative effects, as has been noted (*'la société malade de la gestion'* [society sick with management]: Le Goff, 1996; de Gaulejac, 2005). In the latest plans, the opening is now commonly dedicated to the *'vision'* inspiring the planning project. Unfortunately, this is almost always reduced to a scholastic task: pronouncing some general objective that is mostly obvious and vague, i.e. expected as a good intention, but not very rooted in the context. We can read some current plan objectives: *'a city that is increasingly sustainable and inclusive, capable of attracting business, work, young people, and families'*. (To this end, it would be necessary to pursue strategic objectives of *'adaptability and inclusion, resilience and environment, attractiveness and work'*.) Or *'a connected, metropolitan, and global city; a city of opportunities that is attractive and inclusive; a green, liveable, and resilient city; a city of proximity (on the neighbourhood scale); a city capable of regenerating itself'*. Would anyone be able to distinguish and recognize the context? These are from the plans for Bologna (2021) and Milan (2019), respectively. This is an idea of the vision that seems truly reductive, I would say even useless (Chapter 3). The perspectives do not seem more promising. Announcing the development of a new plan (a few years after the previous one), the Planning Councillor of Milan anticipated the objectives in 2024: *'placing people and the quality of city life at the centre ... designing the city of proximity'*. One struggles to grasp the novelty of the approach, while the real processes of urban regeneration remain largely out of control. Perhaps the desire to renew the plan stems — also or especially — from the need to overcome a few ongoing legal controversies (which in the meantime also inspired the so-called *'Salva-Milano'* parliamentary decree). The intention would be to reduce the margins of discretion in the choices, a chronic problem for the discipline that cannot be resolved simply by reinstating more traditional prescriptive models which have generally not had much success in a variety of periods and contexts. The delicate balance between principles of certainty and flexibility, which is essential for any real scenario of urban development, cannot be faced only in terms of intentions and objectives. *'The devil is in the definitions'*, as they say in some planning circles (Hirt, 2007). The current framework in Milan, and in Italy in general, is still too vague or ambiguous to enable an assessment.

Discussing Mayor Moratti's previous plan (Palermo, 2011), I recommended a nonlinear reading. It is useless to follow the canonical path to the letter, as it assumes the dominance of the declared goal and then addresses the method and rules, and only lastly does it touch on actual projects and the consequent facts. I deemed it wiser and more effective to overturn the

order of discourse, following a sage principle of ‘critical realism’: immediately concentrating on effective measures, then verifying the normative framework, and only at that point discussing the vision in the future and design-oriented intentions. Comparing these with the declared objectives could be the last step. In that case, a similar path was essential for concretely assessing the vision that inspired the plan. This was configured in my mind as a ‘small delirium’, ironically reintroducing the formula adopted by Koolhaas for New York (1978), because the guiding idea was that the city should have been able to find the desired development without limits or measure: ‘Milan can grow as much as it wants to’, as if the supply logic were autonomous and decisive. In the best cases, a given wilful pragmatism might be appreciated (‘where there is a will, there is a way’, as William James said: Sini, 1972). If the sense of limits is missing, however, the attitude risks being imprudent or too unscrupulous. Some doubt seems reasonable if it is true that the set of urban projects considered worthy of attention was an infinite and arbitrary list of countless operations brought together without any test of feasibility, consistency, or impact on urban problems and imbalances that are, unfortunately, evident. At the same time, the plan for urban services was reduced to a purely methodological machine that did not establish clear, meaningful commitments, but was limited to teaching ways to confront the problem. The result was a redundant, confused, unprofessional framework that proclaimed edifying objectives but were basically limited to creating a simple model of a growth machine (however, I recall little radical criticism: the collective contribution edited by Arcidiacono and Pogliani, 2011, was an exception). Unfortunately, it has remained an essential mark of planning in Milan in the last twenty years. Successive mayors introduced some partial measures for moderation and compensation, but the orientation and mechanisms of the ‘great transformations’ (which really are not great due to the objective limits in vision and quality) were not questioned. Conducting public discourse does not mean repeating the litany of good intentions, but re-establishing the minimum conditions of truth in the ongoing processes and their consequences. If this is the sense, it becomes difficult to deny the current decline in the public sphere.

In the meantime, the echo and perhaps the influential capacity of discourse on the topic by important private actors has grown profusely. I have already observed (Palermo, 2025) that a sort of urban newspeak is being configured, although it unfortunately takes a form oscillating between mystification and ridicule (but the tendency does not seem to arouse unease or reactions). The case of Milan offers exemplary confirmation. Ten or fifteen

years ago, ambitious projects such as City Life or Porta Nuova promised ‘a new way of experiencing the city’. Today, I would like to ask those living in or using those urban areas what change was actually attempted and how it is assessed. Current communication does not seem to fret over the resulting difficulties. For example, a project called *Up Town* proposes an idea of quality and innovation, as a ‘paradigm that should resolve the most serious and widespread urban problems’. This basically relates to ‘luxury living, sustainability, services, and connection in a place where everything is at hand: schools, shopping areas, healthcare centres, universities, playgrounds, and dog areas, immersed in a great 30-hectare park with more than 10 km of cycling and walking paths’ (as the official publicity for the project is expressed). *Up Town* is located in Cascina Merlata, an area slated for regeneration, where thousands of families live like pioneers for several years now, in the absence of any urban neighbourhood service; where the ‘park’ is a surface destined for greenery, a conspicuous part of which has remained incomplete. The celebrated relationship with MIND (another unfinished project) seems to ignore the motorway that rises in the middle; the call for a commercial megacentre (Merlata Bloom) — as a possible enhancement factor — seems to ignore that it relates to an oversized intervention, which produces negative externalities in the place and probably some difficulty for entrepreneurial initiatives. In my opinion, the most critical problem lies not in the investors’ gamble or private citizens’ imprudent assessment, but the weakness or inadequacy of public programming. Can we accept the idea that these are the surrogates of public discourse, both today and in the future? Planning tradition has tried to interpret some emerging values of the modern era as a ‘utopia and disenchantment’ (Magris, 1999), i.e. an idea of societal progress and individual emancipation. Now that vision has given way to pure market logic where the expected utility becomes the guiding principle, which can only be worthwhile in the short term and for some particular interest, but is presented as a potential matrix of benefits for everyone. Meanwhile, emancipation remains an objective at risk, even with respect to false promises or illusions regarding the possibility of a positive, quick, and total change in urban conditions.

## 2.4 Perception

With respect to these situations, the most common feelings seem to be dissonant in Italy. On the one hand, the suggestion of new facts that have most recently taken shape is clear. After a long period of immobility, the possibility of concluding important urban transformations seems more sol-

id, albeit through processes that are still slow and tortuous. The media orientation is overwhelmingly positive. In Milan, for example, there is a widespread conviction that building and urban development in the city is a consistent, functional part of the city's growing international success. The multiplying towers — called skyscrapers in the context — become a symbol of innovation and quality. Critical voices remain marginal and irrelevant, although they relate to technically questionable projects — frankly mediocre in many respects — which are destined to create further problems and difficulties for an urban market that is already suffering sizeable, underestimated imbalances. Yet the stories that are told imitate the new-speak of urban developers.

Some incident may occasionally arise along the path, usually relating to legal/formal questions, with doubts as to the coherence between a specific event and current regulations. The reasons for a critical reflection could be substantial. In Milan, for example, there are chronic traffic and environmental problems that the administration does not even seem willing to consider, as if they were intractable. The stories mainly allude to a suggestive 'city of the rich', an image that clashes with the tradition long given by Milan as a 'welcoming city' and the social problems that have been visible for some time. These are potential contradictions destined to emerge and create difficulties, as history teaches (and apocalyptic narratives have always anticipated). For the moment, the apprehension seems circumscribed and reparable, although a critical point can be seen. The most common discourse in these cases reduces to an appeal to more rigid regulations and strict respect for them. It thus happens that the clear attraction for everything 'new-being-born' is accompanied by the apparent (temporary) nostalgia for a rigid and prescriptive concept of urban planning that risks being outdated. Unfortunately, the two sentiments are incompatible. It is not enough to appeal to rules to create equitable, sustainable, innovative development. On the other hand, it is clear that not all current forms of urban development actually respect these requirements (even when they are formally recited). Thus one goes from enthusiasm for growth, whatever the urban form created by the process, to nostalgia for stringent public control according to an ideology that has rarely become reality. What is missing is consideration for the sense of 'rigid, outdated' rules for a society that is changing quickly, and the necessary integration between rules, visions, policies, and projects — all notions that require an interpretation consistent with the idea of governing contemporary society. Instead, a simplistic and illusory fluctuation develops between two summary and not even consistent visions (because they are oriented at development or control,

respectively), which cannot stand up or function. We cannot, of course, scold public opinion if these are the most common sentiments. Some responsibility should fall on the media, which seem to face the issue with a light-mindedness or sometimes even embarrassing opportunism. What is more serious seems to be the fact that politics generally prefers to avoid these types of problems. I believe likewise serious responsibility falls on the disciplinary culture, which has evidently not learned how to adequately perform its functions.

## 2.5 Roles

This problem does not exist only in Italy. Everywhere, the most reflexive components of the discipline should admit that uncomfortable conditions persist or are aggravated over time, justifying new demands for change that seem destined to remaining unresolved for a long while. In Great Britain, the evolutionary process in the 1900s was complex (Davoudi and Pendlebury, 2010). We can recognize at least three important lines of influence that originated in other contexts, which is surprising for a country that has always expressed a strong sense of national identity. At the turn of the century, the initial phase marked an active confrontation with the main planning trends on the continent, particularly in Germany (Phillips, 1996; Ward, 2010). For at least two decades following the Second World War, the pressure to substantially rejuvenate the disciplinary culture was clear and continuous, inspired by managerial or participatory (in any case *process-oriented*) tendencies that had already been widely tested in American society. Paradoxically, the relevant British institutions (professional associations and training institutions) decided to officially recognize this desire for renewal only in the 1970s, when the same trend seemed destined for a clear resizing in the original context (Palermo, 2022, Section 2.2). The third strong innovative push dates to the 1990s, when projects and experiences in ‘spatial planning’ became a key topic in European policies, with important effects on the debate and orientation of British planning (Hague, 1996; Tewdwr-Jones et al., 2010). At the same time, the only emerging trend with a truly national mark took shape: the strand of ‘urban renaissance’ aimed at returning a lost centrality to the topics of design and urban quality in planning processes (Hall, 2000; Carmona, 2014).

The tendencies were evidently not equivalent or destined for very different developments. The international discussion in the early 1900s laid the foundations for the technical know-how most commonly used over the long term. The managerial turn following the Second World War, which

favoured the systems view and decision-making/intervention processes, proved to be tardy and ineffective. The lack of considerable results with respect to the promises and expectations have caused a quick drop in interest and experiences since the 1980s. Following this, the strand called *spatial planning* played a leading role for more than a decade (Morphet, 2011) due to the contingent convergence of two influential ideological and programmatic pressures: the design and experimentation of new policies by the European Union, which then relied on a degree of authority and trust that seems to be gone today; and Labour's desire to renew planning styles, tools, and techniques. Starting in the 2010s, both forms of support were lost, following both Brexit (after the referendum in 2016) and the long period of Conservative government (from 2010 to 2024).

The 'urban renaissance' ideology and programmes took shape and grew in importance at the same time. This initiative was well rooted in the English-speaking world; the British version, we could say, of the strong uptick in interest in the topics of 'urban design', which was displayed in a variety of contexts in the 1990s. The original orientation was obviously reform-oriented (Imrie and Raco, 2003). The technical promoters tried to maintain the trend even after the introduction of the conservative government; nevertheless, they tended to consider the score to be positive in the medium to long term (Punter, 2012; Carmona, 2020). There is no doubt, however, that the new directions of British town planning also downsized that strand of experiences. The margins of responsibility and influence have grown more modest. In fact, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) was suppressed in 2011. For about a decade, this national organism had served as an important institutional design review in Great Britain (Carmona et al., 2017). The contribution of urban design was in many cases reduced to measures to embellish and enhance normal market operations. The reform-oriented spirit of the 'urban renaissance' programmes was overcome or destined for rhetorical commemoration. That programme envisaged three main lines of development: reconsidering planning rules according to more stringent requirements of urban and morphological quality (the path opened by Matthew Carmona, 1996, 1996a and explored actively for about 10 years: Carmona et al., 2006; 2011); ideating and testing 'new forms of the plan' that were more sensitive to problems of form and the quality of the physical city — the tendency followed by Carmona and Punter (1994, with A. Platts; 1996; 1997), which presented important similarities with experiences by Gregotti and Secchi in Italy at the same time; and finally, the attempt to institutionalize the principle of design review, i.e. the idea of supporting emerging

projects with an independent assessment to highlight possible limits and risks, and therefore suggest the necessary corrections or rejection (John Punter was the primary figure of this line of action: Punter, 1996, 2007; Carmona, 2019).

Yet twenty or thirty years later, the situation seems clear and unexciting. The first two lines have long been in evident decline, without having achieved decisive results. There remains some trace of the method of project assessment as support for market operations rather than an expression of public reason (Carmona, 2019a). The same trend is being seen in the United States, in increasingly expansive and influential forms (Scheer and Preiser, 1994; Kim, 2019). We must conclude that the tentative principles of disciplinary innovation in the late 1900s have not produced the desired results. The traditional role was questioned, but the search for alternatives was not very successful. As I have already observed regarding the United States (Section 2.2), the academic contribution was of little importance. It is difficult to maintain that despite their academic success, the (divergent) theories developed by Andreas Faludi (1986, 1987) or Patsy Healey (1997) exerted a solid influence on ordinary practice (a study by Mark Clapson, 2013, on the main ‘Anglo-American crossroads’ in concrete planning experiences ignores these references).

The conclusion of these brief references is that the professional interpretation of the role was entirely multifaceted and took many forms in Great Britain. Over time, at least four different profiles — not without their ambiguities or confusion — have alternated, or better yet, overlapped. These are: the original figure of the town planning specialist; the decision-making/urban transformation process expert with analytical, geographical, and managerial skills; the policy analyst/policy-maker, capable of developing and completing operational interventions; and the urban design specialist or at least the design reviewer, which aimed to improve the quality of concrete projects and actions. Nevertheless, the variety of responsibilities and skills called into action was notable. One can understand the difficulty of professional and academic institutions to find a common consistent and functional order to apply and disseminate continuously and effectively. The adopted solutions — not without uncertainty or reconsideration — generally appeared to be experimental and provisional (Healey, 1985, 1991; Harris, 1997; but similar problems also arose in the United States: Hemmens, 1988; Klosterman, 2011). The current score is not positive: ‘the profession in the UK is often undervalued with persistent public distrust in planners’ (Parker, 2020); ‘planners have to contend with a continuing

misperception of what planning is and what planners do' (Taylor and Close, 2022).

In comparison, experiences in France undoubtedly seem more linear and introverted. Opportunities for reflection compared to some international tendencies have remained limited, occasional events (generally promoted from abroad) — for example, issues of large-scale planning with respect to Dutch planning (Spaans, 2007), or the requirements for flexible/discretionary rules, key issues for British planning (Booth et al., 2007). Some critical voices have also reported the need for a substantial renewal of the disciplinary culture and the profession to face a profound change in the conditions or demands arising from society and politics. At the turn of the new century, the most important case was the appeal by François Ascher (actually an economist by training with extensive interest in the social sciences) to favour a 'nouvel urbanisme' [renewed urbanism] that was more agile, active and capable of assuming important functions aimed at territorial transformation and development with respect to the traditional responsibilities of regulation and control (Ascher, 2001). However, the perspective echoed faintly in the discipline (one exception was Alain Bourdin, 2010, not coincidentally a sociologist and urban planner). A critical orientation was instead seen in French architecture/planning, where a few figures who were authoritative and capable of leaving a significant mark (Bernard Huet, Christian Devillers, Philippe Panerai, and a few others) highlighted the limits of a more traditional approach with respect to two major problems: the necessary rediscovery of the physical city (compared to more common representations that were too schematic and often only functional); and the direct responsibility for producing and realizing concrete urban projects in strategic areas compared to emerging interests (see Devillers, 1994; Mangin and Panerai, 1999, for exemplary contributions). In contrast to the situation in Britain, the main objective was not to produce a new or more advanced form of planning tools that better integrated the logic of the plan and urban project. According to Devillers (1994), the *projet urbain* [urban project] was intended as a substantial, more convincing alternative to the traditional plan. This was probably the reason it carved out a deep rift with official planning, while an original, nearly unexpected set of interactions formed with coeval lines of studies in public policies, grasping the centrality of the urban project with respect to the growing need to reconsider city and territorial governance and development. In France, an innovative line of urban policy therefore developed (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2004; Pinson, 2009) finding original room for interaction and partial convergence with some areas of architecture/planning. Thus, social sci-

ence and architecture tried to interact without the insignificant mediation of orthodox planning (I illustrated this tendency in Palermo, 2025, Chapter 13). As original and enterprising as they were, those experiences nevertheless remained on the margins of the discipline, which did not to question its traditional view in the long term. The area was therefore organized into two well-separated segments: tendencies on the frontier side of the urban project and related policies; and the main strand, faithful to tradition and unoriginal.

The contributions by Pierre Merlin are important. *L'urbanisme*, published in 1991 and edited 13 times until 2022, is an exemplary document of the French disciplinary culture after the Second World War. As often happens, the solidest parts involve references to the most famous profiles and experiences of the great precursors (the topic, which is certainly not original, was addressed by faithfully following the framework used by Françoise Choay, 1965). The careful presentation of the evolution of the institutional and legislative framework of current tools is also worth noting. The masters, a few great historical events, laws, the main techniques: these are the (presumed) bases for identifying a discipline in search of legitimacy and success. A convincing discussion of the professional and cultural figure of the urban planner is missing, however. Merlin (1991, Introduction) limits himself to suggesting that responsibility and skills concern the organization of space according to general goals (harmony, wellbeing, development), a track that is frankly weak and vague. True reflection on the historical evolution of urban problems is missing and, as a result, so is the necessary innovation in planning paradigms and techniques. In particular, any reference to the questions of the urban project and policies that, as I have noted, have held a certain importance in French experience since the 1990s, are missing (those topics were not even addressed in critical terms, as Thierry Paquot, an urban philosopher, deemed necessary, 2015). In contrast, dated positions pertaining to a distant period (situated between the 1950s and 1970s) are reiterated, such as the idea of *aménagement du territoire* [spatial planning] which still evokes regional imbalances, development hubs, large public investment in networks, and the centrality of economic/territorial programming (see also Merlin, 2002). What is missing above all is hope for the future. In fact, the balance of completed experiences cannot ignore a series of limits and delusions that are now evident and widespread. However, there will always be a need for urban planners — Merlin observes (1991, Conclusions) — because new urban problems will continue to arise. The fact that the profile of this professional figure remains unspecified, and therefore free of legitimacy and certainty, does

not seem important. A call to principle seems sufficient, creating an embarrassing and substantially unfounded scenario.

Similar orientations and limits are largely salient characteristics of the specialized literature. There is still seemingly modest interest in international events in the sector, as if the institutional and social specifics of the situation in France justified the lack of attention (the argument was evoked by Xavier Desjardins, 2020). The continuity and tenacity with which the traditional and frankly outdated idea of *aménagement du territoire* was taken up is surprising. Desjardins' recent contribution (2017) is exemplary, but an orthodox imprint is also evident in French-speaking Canada, which might also be more sensitive to the American planning culture (Gauthier et al., 2008). The alternative to outdated scholasticism is just a patchwork of infinite fragments that the disciplinary history has left us: not an organized framework — interpretational, critical, perspectival — but just a family album where individual, noncommunicating references are casually found side by side. The observation is also valid for the history of the disciplinary evolution that Gilles Novarina (2023) constructed from the Renaissance to today. This is just a sequence — and not even a well-ordered one — of independent descriptive sheets ranging from the precursors to 'new urbanism'. The observation is also valid for some more up-to-date disciplinary reviews, such as those from the Urbanisme schools in Paris (Bognon et al., 2020) or Montréal (Beaudet, 2007; et al., 2017), which offer only a fragmentary framework of topics and approaches that seem to confirm a recurring fear: perhaps planning can be none other than a variety of practices. There are problems, experiences, actions, facts. One glimpses an industrious crafting that assumes various shapes and methods. It is more difficult to recognize and share a single professional and disciplinary profile. This seems to be the conclusion of one of the most recent and complete reflections on French urban planning (Desjardins, 2020). Any rambling on the nature of the discipline as a science, technique, or art seems not only in vain. According to the author, it is also necessary to admit that there is not even a clear or distinct professional profile, but if anything, a trade to ply under contingent conditions (ibid.: Chapter 6). The embarrassing point is that after having ascertained those weaknesses, Desjardins does not hesitate to appoint the planner to play a decisive role for the future of the city. We do not understand the underlying basis if we cannot imagine some radical change. Inertia and conformism seem well rooted in French experiences, despite individual examples of some movements on the frontiers of design and policy-making that pertain to a different world. On middle ground, it is now possible to hear some voice calling for a 'new humanism'

in planning (Trapitzine, 2018), because it would be right and necessary to consider ‘le projet humain avant le projet urbain’ [the human project before the urban project] (Jean-Yves Chapuis, urban planner and elected politician, 2014, 2017, 2022). These exhortations do not seem capable of actually questioning real techniques and practices.

My conclusion is that ‘planification urbaine’ [urban planning] and ‘gouverner par projets’ [governing through projects] remain two parallel lines in France, incapable of finding meaningful relationships, much less convergence. More problematic and dynamic seems to be the political/design-oriented variation, although it has remained minor, as an exception that does not manage to become a shared vision. A large part of the discipline appears in absolutely traditional forms that are more solid and recognized, but nearly immobile, as if they were immune to the difficulties that continue to emerge from practice. The impression is that dualism is not very fertile: on one hand, the reiteration of dated positions, which still express the culture of the glorious years, in times and under conditions that are now different; and on the other hand, a concrete newness that is more open and innovative, although it lacks a clear social and disciplinary legitimacy. The consequence is a gap between institutional models and actual practice, which certainly does not improve the reputation of French planning, even if the leading figures do not seem to be bothered by the situation. The framework of resulting roles is simpler than in other contexts. It highlights two main profiles, the *orthodox* and the *outsider*, without other intermediate or collateral figures of some importance (which exist in fact, but remain on the margins of disciplinary considerations).

The situation in North America, where the variety of profiles and experience has been evident for some time, is incomparable. The rules, functions, and forms of action vary noticeably according to traditions and local contexts. There is no ideal model, nor a dominant solution. The orientation is pragmatic: devices are adopted after successful testing in the field, chosen in best cases with Dewey’s method of ‘democratic experimentalism’ (Butler, 2012; Forstenzer, 2019), but sometimes also only for reasons of convenience or opportunities with respect to some influential desire. The idea of public interest may remain in vogue as rhetoric, but it rarely represents an effective guide for the process. The culture of applied Taylorism (Akin, 1977; Noble, 1977; Nelson, 1980) and the method resulting from comprehensive rationality quickly exited the stage after a short interlude of ideological suggestions. The managerial culture is placed at the service of party interests, as usually happens. In fact, urban planning in the United States

has in many cases become a tool to protect established land and real-estate interests or effective leverage for making the city a growth-machine (Jonas and Wilson, 1999). More rarely (but those cases have often become emblematic and were widely popularized), planning has aligned with minority interests in the name of the principles of social and urban equity (giving rise to *advocacy* or *equity planning*: Davidoff, 1965; Krumholz, 1982; recently reconsidered by Checkoway, 1994; Krumholz and Wertheim Hexter, 2018). The result is that planning cannot be understood only as a legal or design-oriented operational technique, but as a social practice that should lead to choices in the collective interest, building the necessary consensus by confronting party visions. In this sense, the figure of the technician cannot coincide with the continental profile of the town planner, but must interpret a variety of roles emerging in social interactions: not only experts that support particular interests, but also actors technically capable of facilitating the synthesis of the decision-making processes, acting on communications or through mediation or negotiation among the positions in play. The profile is not unique, but rather admits a variety of ideological and technical modifications. In an initial phase, the most ambitious model was ‘communicative rationality’, as the ideal scenario in which a system of undistorted communications — under the planner’s care and responsibility — would have guided subjects towards shared, just, and well-considered choices. Over time, a more realistic and pragmatic revision was inevitable. The ideal vision of Judith Innes made way for the professional practice of Lawrence Susskind in the field of ‘public dispute resolution’ through negotiations and mediation among competing interests (Susskind and Cruikshank, 1987; Susskind et al., 1999). In an initial phase, the planner’s vision tended to question the constituted order according to the goals of emancipation and progress, identifying a potential matrix of inspiration in the ‘critical theory’ of the Frankfurt school of sociology (Forester, 1993). Following this, the criticism became increasingly weak and marginal; Forester himself wanted to assume the questionable guise of a therapist of social interaction (Kim and Forester, 2012). The specific issue of building consensus may be addressed with unequal options: if there is some trace of the technocratic route (due especially to the smart promises of technological innovation), the community vision still seems to be the most widespread, promising perspective. Less common but active in the media was a still more radical strand, which intended to reintroduce the function of urban conflict. More recent events, however, show the dominance of increasingly flexible, adaptive practices with a growing degree of informality, which would seem to be incompatible with the disciplinary

orthodoxy of the glorious era (McFarlane and Waibel, 2012; Deuskar, 2022). Every option evidently opens the way to a different disciplinary trend, contributing to the ‘heterotopia’ of the overall framework. The roles and profiles become increasingly diversified, and the traditional functions of plan-making become secondary to the priority responsibilities of regulation, action/interaction, and consensus-building. It would be naive to assume that similar questions are irrelevant, or much less relevant, in the Old World. The point is that there, they remain hidden or in the margins of dominant representations. In America, on the other hand, centre stage was clearly ceded to the pragmatic revision of the first ideal models. The variety of roles with direct disciplinary interest have therefore grown. In fact, one might fear excessive fragmentation of the framework: from the sole, original figure of the town planner to the unlimited multiplication of procedural players, who may question the identity and specifics of the area, as well as raise uncommon dilemmas as to the interpretation of the roles and ethical choices of each individual subject. In truth, these doubts in American society were at the centre of broad academic discussions, but they seem more marginal in the actual world of the profession. Where a code of ethics is signed (as with the APA, American Planning Association), one is always ready to reiterate the goodness of the values inspiring the action, but there is often a preference to overlook the most critical points that the practices themselves introduce (Lo Piccolo and Thomas, 2009; Wachs, 2013; McClymont, 2018). Between ambiguity and opportunism, however, the North American image of planning was and will probably continue to be a preview of the possible future of the area, a framework that is still far from the main European traditions, but probably destined to be confirmed everywhere.

In Italy, for the moment, only a faint echo of these problems seems to resonate. A half century has passed since the sound manifestation of some critical orientation in the field (such as the ‘economic and social analysis of the territory’ in Venice or the ‘territorialist movement’ in Milan and Florence), but also since the naivety of self-proclaimed ‘democratic planning’. The idea of re-examining the discipline as a possible branch of public policy (which has found important developments in the English-speaking world) has remained at the margins in Italy, despite contributions from notable figures such as Bruno Dente. The lack of a clear institutional legitimacy has probably been influential on a legislative and cultural framework that has continued to reiterate the primacy of the plan, even if this tool is destined to assume increasingly changeable and unstable forms. Attempts to re-establish fertile relationships between the plan and urban project now seem

to be exhausted, after the experimental period of the 1990s, which did not leave comforting results. The fact that technicians can play an important role in maieutic or mediatory social interaction does not seem very plausible in the context (the same disenchantment may also be appropriate in other national settings, where the idea has been developed in ways that are more academic than actually operational). The problem exists and is objectively relevant, but the prevailing cultural orientation tends to leave those points in the wings and manage them in the shadows. Naturally, the figure of the technician is always current, although they need to face the challenges and unknowns in that change that I mentioned in the Introduction: the desire, the capacity to assume that responsibility should not be taken for granted. The risk is that the interpretation of the technical/administrative role tends to be increasingly bureaucratic. In Italy today, urban planners are officials that must ensure the application of a set of current rules and procedures that guarantee the formal legitimacy of the process, but are often complicated and controversial, incoherent, and perhaps obsolete. Non-trivial problems related to sense and quality may be raised, although they are rarely the object of critical reflection. Over time, Italian planning has relied on a certain number of clearly important emerging figures, but the disciplinary/cultural background has generally remained anonymous and grey. The most common cultural orientation is still the orthodoxy of the 1960s (as in France, but without drawing on the unsettling contribution of the 'political/design-oriented' strand that formed there). In Italy as well, there seems to be little interest in what is happening in planning around the world, as if it were some extraneous situation. Openness to reflection and self-criticism generally appears to be limited. For some time, the trend that Campos called 'maximalist' did not seem to play a leading role. It remains, however, the interpreter of widespread feelings that seem to re-emerge with each new urban and planning crisis, when it seems natural to hope, as a remedy, for the introduction of a 'public and prescriptive' concept of the discipline, although it seems simplistic, outdated, and not really functional for the actual condition. Italian reform-oriented planning as inspired by Campos knew how to express a more pragmatic and evolved culture. However, we cannot ignore the fact that the programme for renewal at the end of the century (already late, moreover), did not pass all the tests of experience: the organization between structure and operations met with setbacks and had to be reconsidered; substantial doubts also concern the issue of implementation. Today the reform-oriented goal seems to be incomplete and weakened. The future is an unknown for those who are not ready to accept just a bureaucratic or instrumental role, a trend that I have

called *post-planning*. The situation in Italy, unfortunately, seems less complex and less innovative than others. If it does not learn to question itself, if it does not open itself to interaction, it will be difficult to confide in any significant change.

If this is the general framework, it seems clear how and why the *role* is a problem today. The pure interpretation — as a technical planner — requires a deep change with respect to established traditions on the (paradoxically) underexplored aspects of urban design and policy-making. The desire to play an influential role in social interaction may represent an alternative that is not plausible in any context (in fact, it remains rather marginal in Italy). The emphasis on technological innovation seems to open new perspectives, but the reintroduction of a technocratic role is no longer a sustainable hypothesis. In fact, the growing and irresistible fascination with what is *informal* risks negating the identity and historical function of the discipline, while the capacity to ‘improvise’ is becoming a strategic requirement, even for public players (Kloeckl, 2020). The most plausible, although not inspiring scenario sees the bureaucratic function growing, even in the more instrumental and limiting sense of the term. These are not comforting perspectives compared to the ‘heroic’ aspirations of the past or the more recent temptation to act as *starurbanists*. However, acknowledging reality should be the first responsibility of this professional and social figure.

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### 3. How Urban Planning Imagines Its Future

The framework I quickly reconstructed in the previous chapter has several shortcomings: incomplete projects, inconsistent developments, latent contradictions, and criticalities that are now clear. These elements should be a reason for concern and arouse some reaction, also because the situation does not seem destined to improve spontaneously. A look at the tendencies that can be predicted in the near future shows that current problems are destined to reproduce or even take on more serious forms for the fate of the discipline as an institution and tool, its theories, rules, strategies, the vision, and the urban projects. From every point of view, the complications are significant and probably destined to grow. Here we try to better understand the forms and reasons for these tendencies, discussing more analytically the main phenomena that I have already outlined.

#### 3.1 The Future of Planning

Urban planning developed to design the future, but over time, the horizon has become ever shorter, the scenarios uncertain, the prescriptions weak. The tendency draws the attention if we compare the evidence with a few thresholds in time — for example, the forms the discipline aimed to assume a half century ago, or at the turn of this century, or today. What is at stake is not only that ‘compression of time’ that David Harvey incisively anticipated as an emerging characteristic of modern life (Harvey, 1989; Warf, 2008). We observe substantial discontinuity with respect to the ambitions and experiments of the ‘modern project’. The dimensions of what is ‘transitory, fleeting, contingent’ were never extraneous to the experiences of the modern era (Berman, 1982; Frisby, 1985), but they found a decisive counterweight in the public desire for a shared project, order, stability. That balance was lacking. The irrevocable distance from some glorious models of the past is now evident; less clear are the perspectives, and the state of uncertainty does not seem to have a solution.

In Italy in 1966, Astengo anticipated the ‘plans for the future’: not mere tools to rationalize what exists, but rather models of total (physical and social) and organic (unitary, structured, continuous) creative development of the city and its territory (Astengo, 1966, Conclusion). In Bellagio in 1969, a symposium on the future of ‘systems analysis’ promoted by the OECD with the participation of famous experts in the sector (Russell Ackoff, Stafford Beer, Eric Jantsch, and others), proclaimed the need for a ‘systemic’ concept and practice of planning capable of structurally facing

all the important factors and relationships, not only to solve problems, but to ‘invent the future’ in the long term. (The participants at the symposium hoped for the creation of an international research organization such as the ‘Advanced Institute for the Planning Sciences’.) Those positions (Jantsch, 1969) were entirely original in Italy, but they attracted the attention of disciplinary circles more aware of innovation (see Paolo Ceccarelli, 1973; that same year, the author oversaw the Italian edition of Brian McLoughlin’s ‘systems approach’, published in Great Britain in 1969). At the same time in Europe but with some delay, Andreas Faludi (1973, 1973a) reintroduced the rationalist, scientific, and managerial vision of planning, which had already been explored (but largely surpassed) in North America. A virtuous regulatory vision and the creative commitment to urban design were not sufficient, nor was the search for models and orientations pertaining to social geography (the traditions then most influential in the Old World). Planning had to be understood as ‘the application of scientific method – however crude – to policy-making’ (Faludi, 1973a: 1), because the discipline needed to rigorously explain its theories and programmes (i.e. scientifically deduce them from clear, shared premises). Even before this, it needed to develop a science for its method of action, i.e. reconsidering the procedures (the ‘planning process’) in analogy with the scientific method and individual rationality, where the function of theory coincided with methodology in the pure sciences. Little did it matter at that point that everything was reckless hypothesis (Palermo, 1981, 1983), destined for quick failure. Faludi himself had to question it just 10 years later (Faludi, 1986, 1987). It is worth noting that in thinking about the future at that time, the most dynamic sectors of the discipline had to restore a neo- (or late) enlightened vision that anticipated an improbable ‘planning society’ (Faludi, 1973, Chapter 16) that was not totalitarian, but capable of perfectly reconciling individual reason and collective interest. In reality, a strong *technocratic* mark in that vision cannot be denied, as it seemed to revisit a few original demands of the ‘modern project’ in technically more advanced forms, but it was destined for the same failure.

In fact, thirty years later, at the start of the new century, the scenario had changed significantly. An emblematic reference is the text *Planning in Postmodern Times*, published by Philip Allmendinger in 2001. The traces of the science-based approach were now modest, like one of many branches that the discipline had aimed to explore over time in its incomplete search for legitimacy and success; a line that had not produced the expected results, but the hypothesis of cancelling every reference did not seem to be a mature choice. The salient point, however, was the explosion

of the discipline according to a variety of divergent tracks. Some lines of development involved radical criticism of every technocratic assumption, such as the planning visions inspired by the Marxist orientation of political economy, or the trend that was more sensitive to emerging ecological demands. Other references — such as the old or new culture of pragmatism — could be understood as a reinterpretation of the pure technocratic model according to principles of bounded rationality and satisfactory behaviour. The price to pay was the rejection of building an innovative, long-term future. Theoretical dissertations led to an influential line put forward as a *neomodernist* project: the ‘communicative planning theory’ that, according to Judith Innes (1999) was able to give a complete form to the old rational/comprehensive aspirations by activating virtuous communication among all parties under the guidance and with the mediation of the urban planner. Allmendinger acknowledged the ambitions of that programme and the interest — academic if nothing else — that the proposal aroused at the time; however, he did not conceal some perplexity (which found support in the widespread criticism that I referenced in Section 2.2). Room for alternatives that were still weak or just embryonic could be identified by observing the reflections in the *postmodern* culture of planning, which had exerted growing influence in various social or political fields (Susen, 2015). Pluralities, differences, conflicts, emerging effects (versus models of order and structure) became topics and principles that were difficult to avoid. The discipline found itself at a crossroads between the modernist roots and suggestions of a spirit of the time that was now widely post-modern, which seemed to open a range of possibilities that were difficult to choose from; well-developed experimentation in the emerging opportunities was certainly not available. Nevertheless, the horizon became ever shorter and unstable (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2002).

More than twenty years have passed and the scenario shows two prevailing trends. The first is that the aspect of what is ‘transitory, fleeting, contingent’ seems to have become prominent. Planning addresses the problems of daily life (*everyday urbanism*); it deals with the steps to take in the short term, aiming in the best cases to frame it in a broader vision (*tactical urbanism*); it cannot rely on certain standpoints or preconceived models, but must know how to adapt to the context and events that occur (*contingency planning*); it must renounce the ambition of designing the long-term future and be content with provisional solutions, while achieving partial progress (*temporary urbanism*). These are the traces of the great mutation that I documented in Palermo (2025). The problem is that this relates to an upside-down world compared to the so-called ‘modern project’. It would

be reasonable for the discipline to expect recognition and the justification necessary for a similar change, as well as some reflection on the technical and social implications, yet these topics continue to be avoided by the planning literature (van Assche et al., 2017). Instead, it tends to mark a second perspective incomparable to the previous one: the possible launch of the (disastrous) systemic ambitions of fifty years ago, due to the powerful development of the new technologies of information, knowledge, and decision-making. I am alluding to the thread known as *smart urbanism*, which now has more than 20 years of experience (Palermo, 2022, Section 4.4; I address this topic again in Section 4.1). Today, however, it is also necessary to note the first evidence of a very new *artificial intelligence urbanism* (Kahyaoglu and Tecim, 2023; Cugurullo et al., 2024), which promises exceptional results based only on the progress of techniques. The two lines of development seem to lead to a common conclusion: building the future would not be a particular disciplinary responsibility, because the action is concentrated in the short term (*tactical urbanism*), or techniques (*smart urbanism* and similar variants) are tasked with conceiving and realizing the change. In this sense, planning seems ready to negate its *raison d'être* and traditional goals. In the near future, the continuity or further growth of these lines of development are plausible. As a result, the discipline should face substantial problems concerning identity, legitimacy, social importance, or operational functionality.

### 3.2 Theory as Epiphenomenon of Current Changes

If the discipline struggles today to imagine its future, observers can try to find some trace in the secondary branch called 'planning theory': a store of reflections and self-representations that the planning culture aimed to develop in the long term to conceptually redefine, justify, and guide the practice of its functions. The evolutionary tendencies over time become a clue to the necessary changes that have arisen; they may be understood as anticipating a possible future, even if it is right to recognize that this is a controversial field. This has notoriously raised the diffidence of professionals, who perceive many theoretical developments as a form of 'idle chattering' (Campbell and Fainstein, 1996: 2), up to the point that they reject theory, even in actual practice, as a task as ritual as it is vain: 'esoteric word games played by planning educators who have little knowledge of what practicing planners really do' (Brooks, 2002: 21). Meanwhile, operators in the field claim the capacity to '[even] produce theory' (Whittemore, 2015), due to the direct relationship with the concrete phenomenology of

the problems (Bolan, 1980; Whittemore, 2014). The awareness of limits and contradictions is not even lacking among the most shrewd and responsible interpreters of theoretical reflection. The distance between academia and profession is still embarrassing (Goodman, Freestone, and Burton, 2017). At the start of the new century, Philip Allmendinger admitted that the discipline had entered ‘a state of confusion’ as an institution that had grown out of the modern era, but had to survive in a post-modern phase (Allmendinger, 2009: 177; previously published in 2002). Susan Fainstein (with Scott Campbell, 1996) recognizes that planning is always a ‘slippery subject’ (ibid.: 2), a ‘messy, contentious field’ (ibid.: 4). Unfortunately, the author had to reiterate opinions that were no less severe in a later reissue of the *Reading* (edited with James Defilippis, 2016, Chapter 1), which means that twenty years had passed in vain regarding those problems. Robert Beauregard (2020) confirmed the difficulty: the field of theory is an ‘unruly terrain’, where the most diverse positions accumulate in the absence of a common framework (ibid.: 2). Other authors, however, such as Jean Hillier and Patsy Healey (2008), Ali Madanipour (2015; et al., 2018) did not hesitate to propose a more pretentious and reassuring, and therefore less ironic and critical image of the ‘planning theory’. The scenario therefore seems uncertain and divisive.

My impression is that the weakness of this disciplinary branch is a concerning symptom because it highlights a variety of important problems that evidently remain unresolved in the long term because the discipline does not seem able to overcome the difficulties. It continues to avoid them, or is limited to acknowledging them as ‘wicked problems’ that are essentially impossible to deal with. I maintain that overall, the contribution continues to be inadequate. With rare exceptions (noted in this section), the texts primarily take the form of ‘disciplinary chronicles’; the temporal sequence of publications becomes the main criterion for organizing the material. Hypotheses for interpreting the forms, reasons, and implications of the changes that must inevitably be answered are weak or absent. The organization of the material, i.e. the division of the evolutionary framework according to phases and thematic areas that should be distinct, is questionable and sometimes disconcerting; the choices are often controversial, ambiguous, and inconsistent. What stands out is a lack of clear opinions on the impressive plurality of positions in play. These are profoundly different, sometimes immeasurable visions. What are the tracks that would be worth following, and for what reasons? The authors generally avoid this responsibility, even if a subjective preference always seeps through in allusive forms. The result is that this family of contributions represents useful doc-

umentation on the state of confusion in the discipline, but any other claim seems unjustified.

If we focus on the trends that have been seen in the new century, the vast *Reading* (three volumes) published by Jean Hillier and Patsy Healey in 2008 offers an ideal representation of the objections that I have just formulated. The framework is entirely heterogeneous, but this is not concerning; in fact, it is understood as an objective sign of the cultural richness and intellectual initiative of the area (vol. 1, Introduction). The distinction of thematic areas (nine) is debatable (summary, opaque, not unequivocal), especially when it relates to distinguishing and interpreting the most recent trends. I am referring to the section 'The Turn to Diversity' (vol. 2, Part Two), which should represent the post-modern explosion of the discipline, but is limited to vaguely joining independent or divergent positions (by Dear, Beauregard, Sandercock, Yiftachel, Hajer, and others). I am also alluding to the conclusion, 'The Complexity Turn' (Volume 3, Part 3), which covers 20 years, reconsidering the new roads explored by post-modern planning (by Sandercock, Roy, Holston, Christensen, Chettiparamb, Hillier and Gunder, among others). The selection of references relating to the different sections is disconcerting (even the most traditional ones dedicated to the idea of 'planning theory', the precursors, the science of planning, political economics, pragmatism, the communicative theory, and institutional networks). The time criterion, i.e. the mere publication date, generally continues to prevail over the substance of the contributions. Without critical exegesis, contributions that are antithetical in their vision and consequences are often brought together. The introduction, 'The Project of Planning Theory' includes foundational contributions by Friedmann and Faludi, but also heretical theses by Wildavsky (1973) or Rittel and Webber (1973), ending with considerations by Robert Beauregard (1989), hanging in the 'post-modern abyss' (see also Beauregard, 1991). What project is presented to the reader? The list of precursors is faithful to tradition (Howard, Geddes, Unwin, Mumford, up to Le Corbusier and the CIAM), but this surprisingly extends to extraneous, inconsistent figures such as Hayek and Mannheim. The rationalist, scientific illusion of planning is documented by the well-known positions of Dyckman, Faludi, and McLoughlin, but the same section includes Lindblom's sacrilegious vision, Davidoff's *advocacy planning*, and Barrett and Fudge's *policy action*! The haphazard variety of the theses is not accompanied by any critical judgement. Only the authors' empathy for the rationalist orientation (as a 'Promethean' project: Volume 1, Part 3) filters through, a certain coldness towards the pragmatic trend (not very ambitious or innovative in its objectives and tools: Volume

2, Part 3); and as could easily be expected, profound harmony (Volume 3) with the ‘communicative’ paradigm of the late 1900s (Part 1) and the newest (but uncertain) challenges of complexity, which were the main topics of the authors’ own work in the last 20 years (Part 3). The *Reading* therefore offers an exhaustive contribution of documentation on the various disciplinary positions and trends over the long term. Contributions relating to interpretation or critical assessments are marginal or lacking in transparency. Expectations for the future seem to be associated with a hypothesis of extrapolating current trends. The ‘modern project’, whose values are never negated, certainly seems incomplete in its original form. However, the ‘communicative paradigm’ and emerging theories on complexity (as anticipating the most innovative developments of ‘smart/AI urbanism’ in recent years) are considered two promising lines for reintroducing and realizing the most traditional values and objectives. This, without excluding the possibility of some unexpected effect, in a field so complicated and open to innovation that it winds up being unpredictable (Volume 3: 410). In 2010, Hillier and Healey published a new *Reading* on similar topics, which relies on other sources, but confirms an eclectic vision that acknowledges the multiple positions without making a critical comparative analysis or choosing any orientation (see Section 4.3).

Almost simultaneously, in 2009, Allmendinger published the second edition of *Planning Theory* (first published in 2002). The elements of the framework are evidently the same. The main difference is that in this case, the interpretive line is clearer and, in my opinion, more convincing. The ‘modern project’ has worn out its rational/comprehensive and scientific functions. Criticism of the political economy also pertains to the past. The pragmatic response does not seem capable of supporting a disciplinary re-launch on its own. The disorientation that accompanies the post-modern spirit is clear. The strongest proposal at the dawn of the new century is undoubtedly the communicative theory, although the author feels the need to express doubts and objections about it (which I mentioned in Section 2.2). The situation therefore seems uncertain and incomplete, as if the path had disappeared in an unending transition. In the third edition of the same work (2017, significantly revised), the scenario becomes more detailed, but the elements of uncertainty are more serious. The structure of the 2009 version has been widely confirmed. The organization and essential content do not change, with one important exception: the chapter dedicated to ‘neoliberal planning’, which now reflects the multiplication of contributions in the last decade (with ample reference to ‘critical geography’: Harvey, Swynedouw, or to a lesser extent, Jessop, Brenner, Peck). Three new chapters

were also inserted at the end of the book, dedicated to as many topics of emerging interest, such as relationships between the planning world and a few social and political trends that influence the new urban conditions. Each chapter describes the phenomenology of a particular trend: respectively, the *post-political*, as the evolution of the political forms of the planning process (according to disciplinary reflections — Metzger, Swynedouw — on a vast sociological and political debate: Crouch, Žižek, Mouffe, Rancière); *post-structuralism*, intended as destructuring/reorganization of the spaces, scales, and territorial networks in increasingly ‘soft, fuzzy’ forms (Latour, McCann and Ward, Amin and Thrift, Allmendinger and Haughton); and finally, *post-colonialism*, a movement that affects the Global South, with the addition of informal or rebellious practices (explored by Sandercock, Roy, Holston, and Swynedouw). The result is a complete, faithful (literal) representation of the main trends seen in the literature. The interpretative contribution seems weaker. This is because those phenomena are surveyed and dealt with independently, while there is deep intertwining among neoliberal, post-political, post-structuralist, rebellious, and informal trends such as multiple manifestations of a common movement. These are not exactly new, distinct branches of the discipline, but the (nonmarginal) effect of some current social and urban conditions that pose original challenges to the concept and practice of planning that should probably be addressed with a single vision. The tension caused by the neoliberal economy and society should push planning to reinvent its forms and tools, as Allmendinger observes (2017: 125). The post-political concept of territorial governance is a collateral effect of these dynamics, but also the reason for a possible ‘return of the political’ as a call to the ideals of justice and progress that cannot be entrusted only to a collaborative vision of the world. In this sense, the development of informal and rebellious practices would not be something that regards only the Global South according to a post-colonial perspective, but a challenge of general interest in any context. The impression in Allmendinger’s text is that critical judgements do not lack respect for any specific topic or thread, but are still elusive with respect to the resulting overall framework. There are two clues to this: the conclusions of the 2017 book are still limited to reproducing the vision from 2009, balanced between a post-modern future or the (neomodern) triumph of the communicative paradigm, with the possibility of some concrete mediation between the two extremes. It is as if the important events of the decade between the publication of the two editions were not able to change the scenarios. Instead, there is no trace of the strong idea of *disciplinary mutation* that is the *raison d’être* of my reflection. In fact, the

phenomenology of informal and rebellious planning is not understood to be the latest stage of a long evolutionary process that has affected planning in every area of the world, while with different degrees of influence (my interpretation). The idea that this family of phenomena is mainly limited to post-colonial situations still prevails. My conclusion is that this work, with its refinements over time, serves as excellent documentation of the main disciplinary trends that have been confirmed in the long term. The order of the discourse and the capacity for critical reflection on the individual topics seems superior to the alternative views available today. The interpretative synthesis (which the author entrusted to other contributions: Allmendinger, 2016, 2023) and the capacity to predict or orient the future remain weaker. This is a paradoxical limit, but one that is rather widespread in the planning literature today.

Other recent contributions on the topic, all of which are authoritative, do not offer convincing answers to the two demands. The *Reading* edited by Susan Fainstein and James Defilippis in 2016 is interesting for the desire to anchor the disciplinary reflection on a solid, concrete base of material conditions: urban, economic, and political. The commonly held scope is to help professionals to better understand and orient effective practices. To this end, the collection of texts selected and republished is undoubtedly significant and potentially useful. I see three limitations in the work, which are unoriginal after the references to the previous sources. In this case as well, it relates to a largely renewed edition of a text published years prior (first in 1996 by Scott Campbell and Susan Fainstein). As I have anticipated, however, opinion on the disciplinary crisis — worrying and largely helpless — has not changed in the long term. Must we conclude that from that point of view twenty years have passed in vain? In addition, the organization of the material remains fluid and a bit incidental, as shown by the variability of the thematic areas adopted in the two editions, which does not seem to answer to clear, solid reasoning (roots, justifications, values, political conditions, and planning styles were distinguished in 1996; in 2016 the framework became less systematic). Finally, this case also lacks a summary opinion capable of orienting expectations for the future.

Similar considerations also seem justified for the *Reading* edited by Gunder, Watson, and Madanipour, published in 2018. There is common concern for the state of the discipline, which for at least thirty years has continued to lose technical certainty and social relevance, not coincidentally while Keynesian public policies were growing weaker and more marginal. Once again, the organization of the material seems improvised, and the

contents are limited to distinguishing the field of practice, fundamental concepts, and institutional framework. The editors' opinions continue to be feeble, even while each section contains contributions that support contrasting theses (the responsibility of an orientation falls entirely on the reader). The introductions to the different parts of the volume are sparse, limited to anticipating a summary of the related content. Only one clear position emerges: the evident and now irreversible criticism towards any technocratic or scientific vision, a choice that would be taken for granted today, but which was not so clear in the other texts considered here (in fact, it was even refuted by Hillier and Healey, 2008, Volume 1, Part 3). However, there is no summary assessment of the varied framework of theories on the agenda, which represent such an open range of opportunities that they are indeterminate after the post-modern explosion.

A trend scenario on the possible future of the discipline also continues to be missing. In truth, another *Reading* published a few years prior by Ali Madanipour (2015) seemed to offer an interesting trace. The work consists of four volumes, each of which is dedicated to a key topic, in order: 'creativity, efficiency, flexibility, contingency'. The sequence highlights four successive phases in the late 1900s that mark the direction and sense of the change that has occurred, but also a plausible trend for the near future. There was once planning for urban design and for the 'creative leap'. Following this (as Faludi testified in exemplary ways), some branches of the discipline tried to develop a more rigorous and exhaustive 'science of planning'. However, the claim of transforming well-founded analysis and deduction into rigid, uniquely defined prescriptions did not lead to good results. The discipline had to coexist with a certain degree of flexibility, accepting principles and procedures to adapt to the phase and context. This step as well, however was insufficient. In fact, it was inevitable that a regime of certainty (an essential requirement of urban planning that regulates and controls) was abandoned to recognize an insuperable state of contingency (which Ernst Alexander had announced long before: 1996, 1998, 2000). This is the reading that seems the most suggestive for the sequence proposed by Madanipour, which would be valid as a plausible track for the future. In effect, the author's interpretation is less clear: based on the contents of each part, the sense of each phase — and the change underway — does not seem so clear or distinct. The first section, 'creativity', recalls the great precursors and introduces a few later authoritative visions (these are, moreover, unequal positions: Harvey Perloff, John Friedmann, Christine Boyer). The second section, 'efficiency', represents the main positions that emerged between the 1950s and 1970s, which were, unfortunately, partly

antithetical: rational/comprehensive, systemic, incremental, and advocacy-related. The third section, ‘flexibility’, takes the 1980s and 1990s as a horizon. It introduces the criticism of the previous period, with an economic/political or ecological approach, but also opens up to topics of diversity and the vast influence of the ‘communicative planning theory’ at the end of the 1900s (a multifaceted framework that would require some orientation). Even more fragmented is the image of the fourth section, ‘contingency’, which surveys all the trends in the new century: a disordered and incoherent variety including some disciplinary trends (pragmatic, strategic, environmental); neoliberal influences but also the rediscovery of what is ‘political’, suggestions of post-structuralism and the theories of complexity. Contingency is not just a condition imposed by the context, but probably a consequence of the experts’ confusion.

These limitations were partly overcome by *Advanced Introduction to Planning Theory*, published by Robert Beauregard in 2020. The scope is not to teach the trade to professionals, but to offer a set of theoretical principles that can be valid as a guide for action and a solid contribution to a better understanding and justification of ordinary practice. The quick reconstruction of the great evolutionary lines of the discipline do not show any particular originality or interest (ibid.: Chapter 1). The organization of the material seems to be more effective (even compared to the texts cited above): four sections dedicated to urban knowledge, the technical and professional roles, regulation, and disciplinary action. In this case as well, each section evokes contrasting positions that can lead to uncertainty or disorientation for the reader: between expert knowledge and functions of common sense; interpretations of the directive or adaptive role; certainty or discretion with the rules; executive implementation or assemblages and emergencies. Here, the author does not intend to express judgements or personal preferences; the goal is to offer a synthetic but complete summary of the main positions in play (ibid.: 19). The desire to offer exhaustive documentation once again risks weakening the interpretation and the possibilities for orientation. How can we imagine the future? According to Beauregard (ibid.: Chapter 6), we must acknowledge that planning is currently and will continue to be under attack by part of the interests and ideologies of rampant neoliberalism. The discipline has the responsibility to react to difficult, even hostile circumstances. Unfortunately, the author does not offer any indication of the strategic choices or most appropriate tools and processes, which would allow the planning culture to play a more significant civil and social role. On the other hand, the author expresses at least a need in another setting; a better capacity for *critical realism* would

be an indispensable resource (Beauregard, 2015).

I believe I can conclude that the framework of theories does not represent one of the most interesting strands in the discipline. The variety remains the source of confusion and, at the extremes, seems insurmountable. The capacity to anticipate problems and events is generally modest. Most of the contributions are configured as the mere epiphenomenon of ongoing processes, from which the author draws generalizations or possible models that are almost always oriented ‘back to the future’, incapable of filling the permanent gap between theory and practice. The sequence of contributions identifies a fundamental trend, which I could represent with Ali Madanipour’s formula (2015): ‘creativity, efficiency, flexibility, contingency’, if understood radically (going beyond the author’s intentions, as I have observed). It is plausible that this line could also continue to direct the near future. It is a pity that in their theoretical studies, planners forget to explore and justify such a radical transformation.

### **3.3 The Mission of the Plan**

The phenomenological framework that I outlined in Chapter 2 clearly indicates the increasingly evident temporal diversification of disciplinary visions, tools, and roles that have been widely confirmed in the diverging lines of the theoretical reflection, which seems incapable of finding a shared synthesis (Section 3.2). Yet the self-representation of the profession continues to be traditional and conservative in many authoritative settings. The *American Planning Association* (APA) promotes a series of publications with clear pedagogical purposes (the APA Planning Essential Books series). In 2022, Rouse and Piro dedicated a new contribution to an outdated topic, the ‘comprehensive plan’. In a cultural and social context where the planning practice has long taken on pragmatic, diversified, contingent, even informal forms, the representation of the ‘general and comprehensive’ plan as a presumed cornerstone of the territorial governance system is striking. The account is entirely conventional; it is limited to reproducing the formal schemes of systems thinking, without making room for critical problems and emerging dilemmas: the form of the plan, most suitable techniques, expected consequences, risks, and probably necessary corrections during the work in progress. The authors content themselves with stating orthodox topics and virtuous intentions according to a diligent but simply repetitive format, which excludes any innovative contribution. In the conclusions, a window opens on the ‘future of the comprehensive plan’, although it is reduced to a series of exhortations worthy of the code of

ethics which the profession loves to flaunt (Lucy, 1988). The plan would be able to meet increasingly demanding requirements of equity, sustainability, inclusion, technological innovation, implementation efficiency, and interinstitutional cooperation in favour of general well-being. I do not understand the usefulness of the contribution, except as an elementary form of self-celebration for the discipline and profession. Is so little needed to reassure practitioners and public opinion?

As a means of comparison, another text from the same series written by Michael Brooks in 2002 may be worthwhile (*Planning Theory for Practitioners*, re-edited several times). The work expresses at least a certain disenchantment (in line with the historical diffidence of professionals towards the word of theories) and a bit of irony (for scholars' claims for having invented the theory capable of solving every problem: such would be the case of the 'communicative turn' according to Judith Innes, 1995). In addition, it does not hesitate to evoke alternative visions conceived in theoretical studies (rationalist, incremental, advocacy, communicative), even if the language remains simplifying and sometimes singular compared to disciplinary canons. However, the substance of the proposal remains methodological, according to the ritual style of systems analysis, an indulgent pedagogy that does not qualify actors to face actual difficulties. Not only is the idea of the 'comprehensive plan' represented today without any critical caution, but the form of the discourse is reduced to the methodical formulation of 50 years ago. Once again we must conclude that time has passed in vain in this field. The observation is not valid only for the professional world. Precisely in North America, where the planning practice is often contingent academic contributions continue to reiterate the 'general and comprehensive' mission of the plan and the choice of the 'systemic method' as a key to solving problems. Exemplary documents include texts by Levy (2017, in the 11<sup>th</sup> edition since 1988), Steiner (2018), Jepson and Weitz (2021), and Dalheim (2023). Perhaps the urban planner's mission is deemed to be exhausted once the master plan has been designed (Firley and Groen, 2013). It is difficult to explain this orientation, which seems to reflect a curious intertwining of hypocrisy and opportunism, while any attention towards crucial nodes continues to be lacking, such as inevitable transformations of the form of the plan over time, the consequent need to revisit techniques, and care for the social and political implications/consequences (always partly unexpected) of constructing and applying the tool. In contrast to Hillier and Healey (2008, Volume 1, Part 3), in the case of APA, I see no trace of a 'heroic commitment' to support the values of a rational/comprehensive vision. On the contrary, I do not believe that it is le-

gitimate or useful to speak of the plan today without addressing the related problems. In effect, these find more meaningful references in old Europe: in Italy, due to a few great authors (Palermo, 2025), but also in Belgium (Dutt and Costa, 1992), the Netherlands (Needham, 2014), Great Britain (Sheppard et al., 2019), and even France, where a rather orthodox planning tradition is influential (Desjardins, 2020). Interest in the general idea of the plan seems to be dropping everywhere, but at least the most critical questions are not avoided when the issue is addressed.

### 3.4 Planning in Action

The relationship between urban plan and policy implementation is a crucial question that has been impossible to ignore for at least 50 years. The step would be linear and almost taken for granted according to the official narrative of the ‘systems view’. However, professionals and many scholars know well that the situation is more complicated. Emily Talen (1996) admitted that after designing the plan, an independent problem is introduced: How can the actual degree of implementation be verified and assessed? Ernst Alexander and Andreas Faludi (1989) had already highlighted the dilemma. Is it necessary to expect a rigorous application (as an irrevocable condition of validity) or is it reasonable to accept some adaptive deviation from the design of the plan over time according to evolutionary processes of learning from experience? John Friedmann’s position (1969) was already original and forward-looking in the 1960s. He conceived the formation and implementation of the plan as two tasks that could not be distinguished. The main assumption is that the plan counts to the degree that it is applied, either faithfully or with adaptations. One notes that in this phase, the author was still convinced that planning was the rational product of collective intelligence; the times of its ‘transactive’ (Friedmann, 1973), emancipatory (1992), or rebellious (2011) vision were still not mature. However, there was already a clear intuition that the design or procedure was not enough and that *social action* was decisive. Planning is not reduced to rules or a vision and one cannot ignore effective action, which is always the result of a collective process. This perspective was a breakthrough compared to tradition (but broadly developed in Italy by Pierluigi Crosta starting in the 1980s).

A framework of essential problems was already available thanks to Hill and Hupe (2002). To follow the traces of ‘implementation studies’ and discuss the fate of an eventual ‘policy implementation paradigm’, the authors wanted to explore a vast field of research in political science. For urban

planners, the current state and future of those particular lines of political studies were frankly a secondary question. The important point is that evolution in the way of thinking about implementation, which is very clear if we examine two texts that are rather familiar to urban planning considerations (published, respectively, in the US and Great Britain: *Implementation* by Pressman and Wildavsky (1973, or the third edition in 1984, edited by Wildavsky with Domenico Majone, after Pressman had died); and *Policy and Action* by Barrett and Fudge (1981). The indisputable fact is that the vision had already changed radically by the 1980s. Initially, effective action was understood as an executive act to complete in compliance with the established previews in the preceding phases of the political process, i.e. the formulation and decision regarding a policy. Following this, the perspective changed. It seemed more plausible and useful to explain operations in the field as an effect of interactions between the most influential interests in that stage and context, a process that develops continuously along the entire political cycle (Barrett and Fudge, 1981). This means that the formulation and formal legitimacy of a plan or public decision cannot be understood as the end stage of the process being investigated. As Gigi Mazza argued in the 1980s (Mazza, 1987), those stages represent only a provisional point of balance between party visions and competing strategies. This balance can be questioned again in the period of transition that opens between decision-making and implementation ('the implementation game': Bardach, 1977), so the results can be somewhat different from initial expectations. There are two consequences for the conceptual frame of reference. Producing actions must be conceived as the result of a co-evolutionary process involving multiple actors and interactions (it is not just a public act, but a social process: Majone, in Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984; Crosta, 1984). That process develops without clear breaks over time (as Friedman, 1969, had understood), so the distinction itself between decision-making and implementation must not be exasperated, because the elements of continuity are probably more interesting and fertile than any methodological schematization (Mazmanian and Sabatier, 1983; Sabatier, 1986). The consequence is that Andreas Faludi's emphasis (1987) on the problem of decision-making as a crucial step in planning is a mere illusion.

Those important revisions were already well developed 40 years ago. What were the main developments following the reflection on the topic and what scenarios can be imagined in the near future? It seems to me that two tendencies come to the attention. The first is the concept that we could call 'planning by doing'. In Italy, Campos Venuti did not hesitate to adopt that formula when he designed the last plan for Rome (Campos, 2001), raising

the indignation of exponents most tied to tradition in the discipline. This was because planning should have guaranteed certainties consistent with an idea of public interest and it did not seem permissible that the choices were considered flexible within a field of nonmarginal variability, and that they could be specified and modified according to the course of events. In reality, Campos wanted to reiterate three reasonable principles. If a plan is complex and marks a scenario of substantial change whose implementation requires long timeframes, it becomes a wise, necessary move to configure suitable feedback mechanisms and possible changes in direction over time. This means that the capacity for adaptation should not be negatively understood as an attempt to disregard the straight path, but as a more advanced form of rationality that the systemic culture itself had long legitimized. Controlling the evolutionary dynamics of a complex system may require refinements, perhaps even the revision of rules and guidelines. The third and last consideration does not regard the (inevitable) evolution of standards, but rather the limits of technical knowledge. As Donald Schön masterfully showed (1983, 1987), when faced with a complex problem, the reflective practitioner should not rely only on 'expert knowledge' acquired through technical training and experimentation in the field. Rather, the capacity for reflection-on-action becomes important, i.e. indications that arise throughout the experience based on comparison with points of view and the behaviour of other important players in the context. Even 'interactive knowledge' proves to be influential, as Lindblom already explained (1990). This relates to know-how that can develop only through interaction in the field. All these are good reasons to accept the principle of 'planning by doing', as a step forward with respect to the dogmatic, rigid concepts of the 'modern project', confirming that flexibility has become a necessary requirement of planning today (as announced by Ali Madanipour, 2015: Section 3.2). A warning, however: the material is slippery. The confines between reflective and responsible adaptation of a strategy and practice based on experience, and the opportunistic behaviour that abandons the guiding principles and good intentions due to irresponsibility or convenience are always weak and uncertain. The difference falls between weak but responsible planning that adapts to the post-modern spirit but continues to respect traditional values and an institutional and professional practice that is objectively subordinate to party interests. The dilemma can only be resolved by studying the evolution of effective practice.

A certain degree of flexibility has long been common in planning. However, there has also been a more radical tendency that I could represent with the (ambiguous) formula 'planning without a plan'. This does not

necessarily mean that shaping a plan is not the key issue. The point is that recent plans in many settings (including the Emilia-Romagna Region in Italy after the reform in 2017) seriously weakened the regulatory and even visionary content of the tool. The principle of savings in useless binding regulations is valid, since these are generally not anticipated until choices on the transformation of an urban area are considered well developed and commonly held. The risk of an oversized expansion may be partially contained if a limit to land consumption is adopted, but the regeneration programmes remain at risk, possibly becoming leverage for unscrupulous densification. In addition, the development strategy, which remains a fundamental objective of the plan, does not assume a rich image of the territory in the future; the representation may be limited to outlining areoles with soft edges, while the programmatic directions do not exceed the threshold of the ideogram. This means that the new form of the plan is configured as an institutionally incomplete tool and it is often necessary to wait for action to be able to formulate a well-considered judgement of the sense and quality of the project. This framework seems to support Friedman's intuition (1969): *social action*, not just regulation or vision, is the fundamental content and challenge of planning. The evolution of events seems to confirm the drift. The main problem no longer lies in implementing a well-formed tool, but rather in the concrete capacity to act in a given context where there is probably not a hierarchical power capable of exerting an independent function of 'command and control', but a complex governance regime is valid; where practice is not merely executive, but requires interpretation and assessment in the context and over time (Mazmanian and Sabatier, 1983; Hill and Hupe, 2002).

Another substantial change is delineated in the background. As per tradition, the urban plan was the particular tool used in the discipline; if anything, it was assumed that the urban planner's task could be reduced to designing the plan. This hypothesis can no longer be sustained, because the tool is incomplete by definition, while the functions that urban planners are called to perform have multiplied (communication, analysis, management, but also policy formulation and design). We could conclude that the plan has become just one of the policy tools provided by the discipline for society. The topic arose in political research in the late 1900s (Hood, 1983; Salamon, 2002), recognizing the need to shift attention from the realm of values, objectives, and programmes — which should have oriented practice — towards the repertoire of operational tools actually available to the public administration when this involved acting in the field (Schneider and Ingram, 1990; Howlett, 1991). As Dahl and Lindblom (1953) anticipated,

this is because the ideologies cannot solve problems if the capacity for effective action is lacking. The development of concrete policy depends on the selection, combination, and application of a package of specific tools that can be assessed naturally with respect to the phases and contexts. In Great Britain, Christopher Hood (1983) made an important inaugural contribution to that line of study, introducing an initial taxonomy of policy tools, destined respectively to dealing with information, resource management, the exercise of public authority, and administrative reorganization aimed at political action. Lester Salamon (2002) developed the topic in the United States, expanding the range of tools, but especially demonstrating the need for a similar approach if and when a political and social system relies on a governance regime. The notion should not be misunderstood (Peters, 2011; Capano et al., 2015). It does not generically allude to the functions of governing, i.e. the set of concrete actions that the government should nevertheless undertake, but rather to a specific evolutionary mode of doing so (Kooiman, 2003; Beunen et al., 2014) that is proving to be increasingly influential and widespread in the post-modern era (we could also add neoliberalism and the post-political era). The public function tends to abandon or resize traditional models of hierarchical regulation and control, but also the direct production of goods and services of public interest. They rely in growing measure on partnerships (which may take the form of contracts) with private citizens or the third sector and guidelines and incentives aimed at orienting the behaviour of parties in favour of (presumed) collective interest. The innovative concept of governance alludes to the complex system of institutional and interactive relationships that are created in the context (Pierre and Peters, 2000; Bevir, 2012, 2013). In this framework, the public administration does not rely only on authoritative tools or those to distribute economic resources. The function of communication, persuasion, nudging, or enactment regarding a variety of economic and social players is growing. There is also a growing importance of means of interaction and cooperation among the parties (Torfing et al., 2012) and the problem arises of building and applying the most appropriate combination of tools under the given conditions. The topicality of these issues is clear, raising as they do important and somewhat original problems related to organization, legitimacy, management, and assessment for the 'weak' planning of today (there is no lack of doubts or radical criticism: Deneault, 2013).

The most recent developments in political research show two unequal trends that bring into play, respectively, the social sphere and public design. The first line is well represented by the interpretation of policy tools

in France (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2004). This relates to more than just selecting the techniques that are most functional for developing a policy in the specific situation. Each family of tools — as Hood’s taxonomy (1983) shows, still the basic framework of the main disciplinary developments today — introduces a different idea of public policy and relationships between politics and society. It tends to structure the social process of forming public choices in different ways and seems destined to confirming the evolution of forms of governance towards the most up-to-date models. These are the phenomena that must be investigated, without limiting the interest to questions regarding only the technique or methodology. The implications of this orientation for planning studies are well documented in the research conducted by Gilles Pinson (2004, 2009) on the ‘urban project’. The author introduced original horizons with respect to the most common forms of discourse, reflecting the dominance of the physical and regulatory aspects. This is also true if the social concept of the tool and related experiences may seem marked by ideology, because Pinson exalted the *projet urbain* as an opportunity for bottom-up social mobilization, generation of ‘interactive knowledge’, and creating ‘collective players’ — edifying hopes and perhaps possibilities, although they are rarely confirmed in actual urban transformations. Some 20 years later, Le Galès (2022) reiterated the good reasons for the research programme, but the capacity to refine the physical and social dimensions of the problems together has not shown significant progress, while Pinson’s vision seems more disenchant-ed and critical regarding the contradictions and real processes of the *ville néolibérale* [neoliberal town] (Pinson, 2020; Lefèvre and Pinson, 2020).

The second strand explores the possibility for a design-oriented interpretation of policy-making topics. How should the notion of ‘policy design’ be understood? Can it play an important role in renewing political studies? Does it represent a fertile perspective for the future of the discipline? From the most interesting perspective here, what are the relationships between that tendency and the reflections, the practice of urban planning? There are many unknowns. There is no doubt that the suggestion of policy design in political science was originally inspired generically by a few practices typical of architecture and planning (Linder and Peters, 1984). However, the developments were independent in the two fields. In fact, important differences in the phases quickly emerged. In the early 1970s, the original vision was certainly technocratic. Yehezkel Dror (1967, 1971) invented the figure of the ‘policy analyst’ to overcome the traditional weaknesses of the discipline. The turning point was based on adopting the scientific method, with recourse to systematic knowledge, intentional projects,

and rational decisions. We can see that at the same time, Andreas Faludi suggested re-establishing planning on a scientific basis, which quickly proved to be inconsistent. The scenario in policy studies long remained more uncertain. In the 1980s, Dryzek (1983; 1988, with Ripley) reiterated the need to overcome the incrementalist logic (the still most common practice), but aimed to exercise practical reason more than science. Linder and Peters (1984, 1989, 1991) instead seemed more sensitive to some form of ‘applied enlightenment’ with all the necessary caution. Following this (with a certain delay with respect to the trends emerging in planning), the alternative between art or science in decision-making seemed to be a false dilemma (Weimer, 1992, reiterated the form of ‘art and craft’). It was understood that policies take shape and become reality due to ‘strategic interaction’ (May, 1991) and they are always ‘social constructs’ (Schneider and Ingram, 1997; Schneider and Sidney, 2009). At the same time, the planning discipline, after already testing a critical orientation, seemed to look for a new irenic vision in ‘communicative theory’. The salient event in the last 10–15 years is the multiplication of political science studies on policy design under the impulse of leading figures such as Michael Howlett and Guy Peters. Works such as Howlett (2011, 2019), Howlett and Mukherjee (2017, 2018), Peters et al. (2018), Peters and Fontaine (2022), van Buuren, Lewis and Howlett (2023), are exemplary documents investigating the trend. At the same time, the topic aroused little interest in schools of planning, which were more concentrated on smart or tactical concepts of urbanism. The question therefore seem to be surprisingly open in a twofold sense. In the specific arena of policy studies, is the issue of policy design truly relevant today or in the future? Howlett and Peters have no doubts, but there are also more cautious voices (Colebatch, 2018) or clearly critical takes (Le Galès, 2022). Nevertheless, the prevailing interpretation is no longer technocratic, but rather interactive and strategic (as Lanzara anticipated in Italy: 1985, 1993). The possible impact of that emerging strand on the planning discipline remains uncertain. Can it offer new contributions to the capacity to design policies and programmes in the specific field, or be limited to reproducing — with some delay — well-known applications and tested hypotheses? In sum, is it reasonable to rely on fertile interaction between the two fields of experience or is this an unoriginal path that has no meaningful outlets? The interest of planning in policy tools now seems to be a fundamental point (after the issue was reintroduced by Howlett, 2023). Can the same conclusion be valid for the rediscovery of policy design? This is a dilemma of perspective, which I will address again in the next chapter, where I express my view of the future (Section 4.5).

### 3.5 Regulation Hanging in the Balance

An exhaustive framework of experiences in planning regulation conducted in the United States over the long term (edited by Emily Talen, 2012) leads to doubts and concerns for more than one reason. The basic technique is zoning, as an essential tool that can be applied with the same simplicity to establish the setbacks and measures of a skyscraper as well as the arrangement of a multitude of single-family homes. The logic is usually empirical: criteria and methods already tested in other contexts and on other occasions are adopted locally. The references are mostly faithful to tradition: renewing the techniques does not seem to be a priority on the agenda. The proposed solutions are valid for fragments of the urban settlement, and there is rarely an effort to conceive a unitary vision. There is little attention to the impact of regulation on structures, forms, and uses of the built environment. In fact, experience teaches us that the effects are often unexpected or undesired, as they jeopardize the quality of the settlement forms (a serious problem already anticipated by Eran Ben-Joseph, 2005; reiterated firmly by Talen, 2012). They introduce the conspicuous phenomenon of suburban sprawl (Beauregard, 2006; Talen, 2015), leading to inefficiency and waste with respect to resources (the land above all), public policies, and behaviours, and can cause ‘adverse’ social effects that are not always intentional, but are nevertheless unfair (Hirt, in Lehavi, 2018). This is the reality, quite far from the edifying concepts of urban planning that, in words, are still celebrated in some disciplinary settings (Section 3.3). The fears anticipated by Haar and Kayden (1989) — ‘zoning, promises still to keep’ — are confirmed. This is because it is difficult to control the distribution of density in space, between the risk of settlement congestion or dispersion and excessive land consumption, but also without excluding any segregation, improving the quality of urban conditions, and ensuring the right balance between private desires and collective interest. On the other hand, from the beginning, the basic movement in favour of zoning did not hide substantial ambiguities. Power (1989) documented how constitutional judges that legitimated the tool in the 1920s were inspired by different principles and reasons: protecting land and housing ownership, controlling spatial segregation, giving the market and professions a stronger role in city governance, and the technocratic desire to strengthen planning tools. Similar considerations also explain the great and immediate social success of zoning in America (in forms and for reasons rather different from the German prototype: Hirt, 2007). Two essential functions emerge from the context (Lehavi, 2018): control of market externalities that could affect the value of real-estate development (the main idea that inspired *Guide for*

*Zoning* for professionals, published by Dwight Merriam, 2005); and the tendency for the space to become specialized, which led to the separation of land uses, building types, and also ethnic settlements (the distinction of the parts was a widespread need that prevailed over the search for an overall vision, the traditional objective of planning: Moga, 2017). That type of intervention intercepted a vast range of material interests, but also a concept of urban life that represented a deeply rooted cultural model (Whitnow, 2013; Hirt, 2014) based on simple yet solid and shared economic reasons (home ownership, affordable transportation costs, stability of property values: Fischel, 2015). In fact, politics and techniques still hesitate to question that model, as shown by the inconclusive debate on ‘single-family exclusionary zoning’ (Palermo, 2025, Chapter 10). Technical and social criticism, justified and well known, has multiplied, but zoning seems destined to survive (Kayden, in Sclar et al., 2020), also because it lends itself easily to opportunistic variations. It should not respond to the programmatic vision of the plan; in many cases it becomes a surrogate. The plan does not exist and is not an objective; if anything, the possibility of rezoning is interesting (Beauregard in Rydin et al., 2022) as a ductile tool that can be easily adapted to special needs in the place or context. In fact, it creates an ad hoc family of derivative tools: ‘multiple overlay districts, preservation ordinances, planned unit development, neighbourhood conservation districts, unified development ordinances, traditional neighbourhood development codes’ (Ben-Joseph, 2004; Fahraht, 2012). The ‘incentive zoning’ variant can create legal opportunities to grant building rights to private parties in exchange for concession fees to benefit the city (‘zoning for sale’, as Kayden comments with some embarrassment in Sclar et al., 2020). Jonathan Barnett (in Marshall, 2011) probably voiced the most common sentiment: this is not a tool that should be abandoned, but rather adapted to the times, which today demand more quality in the environment, settlement forms, and urban conditions. In a framework that remains ambiguous and largely inert, there seems to be two possible lines of future development according to Emily Talen (2012). On the one hand, it seems reasonable to reiterate the certainty of the rules, so that an additional condition is actually respected, in contrast to the past: the requirement that the formal quality of the results is better guaranteed. This has led to the generation of new ‘form-based codes’, operationally conceived as technical aspects of a renewed plan (according to Carmona and Punter in Great Britain, Gregotti and Secchi in Italy: Palermo, 2025), or — independent of the plan — as a system of suitable rules for governing an operational urban development or redevelopment project (the primary hypothesis of

‘new urbanism’, which in this sense is proposed to replace or reinvent zoning: Talen, 2009, 2011). The innovation seemed promising on many fronts (Geller, 2010), not only for the quality of the urban structure and form (Talen, 2013), but also ecological and environmental care (Barnett and Blaesser, 2017) and the respect for physical and social diversity (Talen, 2005a). The main alternative relates to acknowledging the ‘negative effects’ of regulatory rigidity (Ben-Joseph, 2005) and exploring a different outlet: trying to limit prescriptions, imposing only the necessary rules, and accepting the principle of flexibility because any later modification in the space or over time may be a reasonable and inevitable need. Hence new certainties (of quality) or greater flexibility present two diverging visions that require one to take a stand. Both are destined to raise notable, albeit different difficulties.

Designing a regulatory code is not just a technical problem. From this point of view, there are several well-developed contributions (such as Parolek et al., 2008, if we look at ‘new urbanism’) that consistently echo the best traditions of town planning or urban design. The area of influence is not strictly disciplinary. In Europe and around the world, independent contributions on urban morphology have emerged (Kropf in Marshall, 2011; Kropf, 2017; Gu, 2014; et al., 2019). In general, they relate to the landscape culture. In the complicated case of Asian ‘megacities’, for example, the historical landscape calls to overcome the limits of traditional recipes for zoning or greenbelts, which were imported from Europe in vain (Yokohari et al., 2000; Hu, 2023). The decisive point, however, is the specific idea of policy tool that is adopted, choosing from among possible options: new rules in a designed plan; operational rules of a completed project; *design codes* as a potential guide for future action; or *design review* as the last possible assessment strategy (after the urban transformation has been designed). The first line objectively appears to be receding after the experiences in the 1990s (in Spain, Italy, Great Britain: Palermo, 2025, Chapter 11) as a perspective that is too laborious and complicated for the demands of the time and available alternatives, and especially as a weak form of strategic planning as an overall guide for action by parts.

The idea of form-based codes seems more concrete and sustainable for specific well-developed projects of urban (re)development, becoming the emerging model for new disciplinary certainties. In this context, the code represents a factor for enhancing the urban project. It does not just prescribe future outcomes, but is rather immediately operational. The certainty of feasibility becomes one of the main prerequisites for success. The de-

tails of the rules are justified by the executive nature of the project. Private interests become the prerequisite for significantly improving urban quality, at least in local areas. The hypothesis seemed to be supported by the professionals of 'new urbanism', but was also shared by scholars such as Ben Joseph (2004a), who did not deem it possible to overcome the existing limits of settlement quality without the contribution of private initiatives to form residential communities, which one American out of six already used to solve the housing problem (Ben-Joseph, 2009). However, the author admitted that it would also be necessary to renew the culture of urban places and place-making overall. This gives rise to a sort of 'planning in the present', where regulation was not assigned a visionary function of anticipation and guide for the future.

This would have been the task of 'design codes' according to interpretations by Eran Ben-Joseph in the United States (2004, 2005, 2009) and Matthew Carmona in Great Britain (et al., 2006; 2011; 2011a). Together with Southworth (2003) and Szold (2005), Ben Joseph demonstrated the solid possibility of reconsidering the rules that govern the project for roads or public spaces (see also Ben-Joseph, 2012). More conceptually sophisticated was Carmona's contribution. He re-examined the theoretical roots of design coding, identifying three influential frames of reference in European traditions of typo/morphological studies, in Christopher Alexander's 'pattern language' (Alexander et al., 1977) and in the 'new urbanism' movement (which is overestimated in that framework, in my opinion). The conceptual methods were widely tested in urban regeneration programmes (Punter, 2010), but they also inspired the tentative revision of the plan according to more advanced criteria and objectives of physical and formal quality (Carmona and Punter, 1997). The code tends to open room for possibilities and is destined for creative and responsibly discretionary use by technicians and administrators. A degree of certainty equal to the preceding models can therefore not be ensured. In fact, it negates the idea of 'urban code' maintained by Stefano Moroni and other neoliberal-leaning scholars (Moroni, 2010, 2019; et al., 2018) who hoped for a system of general, invariant rules applied automatically as the normative background for individual choices and (decisive) processes of self-organization by the parties (a vision that I find difficult to share). The codes by Carmona and Ben-Joseph do not evade the responsibility of interpretation and decision-making, or the possible contradictions in the use. Such reflections and experiments probably reached a maximum in the last decade of the 1900s. Should the perspective still be considered up to date and potentially influential for future developments? Let us not forget the doubts already raised

regarding the actual need and effective fate of policy design (Section 3.4). In this case as well, there are many objections: the tool can be intended as an abstract construct that is not always appropriate for the specific context; hindering the creativity of architects and the market; a procedural complication that is not very productive (Carmona, 2011a, does not agree, but he should acknowledge the criticism). It is therefore legitimate to reintroduce the question: Is this family of exercises actually useful and necessary? Or is it more reasonable to concentrate on specific projects underway (as ‘new urbanism’ teaches us)? The doubt seems well founded, although the planning literature shows a drop in interest in the last ten years.

The risk is that the most plausible variant remains intervention after the fact as in the design review (Punter, 2007; White, 2015; Carmona, 2019). In this case, the good principles of coding are called in to assess the consistency and overall quality when the urban project is already complete. It is a pragmatic strategy that could be functional. It is certainly simpler and more targeted than the general design of a preventive, wide-ranging technical framework. In many cases, however, the solution risks weakness and uncertainty when faced with the interests supporting the operation in progress, while there are many doubts as to the authority or independence of technical opinions and the legitimacy of entrusting experts with notable responsibility for decisions with significant economic, political, and social content. This situation reveals a few common characteristics with the alternative strategy noted by Emily Talen: simplification and flexibility of the rules.

In practice, the latter is generally the more common practice. For a long time, it remained as an inevitable, albeit unrecommended background. The new fact in the last two decades is that the trends of everyday, tactical urbanism now recognize the formal legitimacy of a similar orientation (despite some criticism: Imrie and Street, 2009, 2011; McClymont and Shepard, 2019, 2021; Inch et al., 2020). In the past, a few sectors of the discipline were at least disposed to admit that excess rigidity could create problems. In the 1970s and 1980s, when the Netherlands and Great Britain were still considered (despite all their differences) two potential ‘planning paradises’, some scholars hoped that the respective models would blend together, because mediation between certainty (rigidity) of one system and the flexibility (discretion) of the other seemed desirable (Thomas et al., 1983; Janssen-Jansen and Woltjer, 2010). Following this, the reasons for the flexibility seemed to have taken flight everywhere. However, the tendency should be welcomed with some caution, precisely due to the ex-

perience in Britain. This is evidently an anomaly with respect to the most common model of planning around the world, which could be explained by pragmatic factors, but its roots run deeper (well documented by Philip Booth's excellent studies). Observing the evolution in British legislation from 1909 to 1947 (with intermediate steps in 1919 and 1932), Booth highlighted the importance of several material conditions. In 1909, the need for a new sector law was necessary, but there was still concern regarding the insufficient production of residential construction. It therefore became necessary to reconcile the design of a new regulatory and pragmatic framework that was valid in the mid-to-long term and on various scales, with a focus on guaranteeing an adequate building capacity where necessary in the short term (Booth, 1996, 1999). The solution to the dilemma was found by giving significant discretionary power to local public authorities, which had to consider the prescriptions in the development plan, but could also examine (if and when it was necessary) 'other material considerations'. The opportunity remained in effect in the long term (Booth, 1999), even in the law of 1947, when public power to control territorial transformations reached its highest level (unequaled elsewhere) in Great Britain. At the same time, there was a growing importance of interaction and agreement between the public administration and social players most involved in the process (Booth, 2003).

We cannot forget, however, that the practice could be justified and find a specific sense in a few particular legal and cultural premises: the British tradition of 'common law' (Edlin, 2007; Costa and Zolo, 2007; Booth, 2016). Paradoxically, this was an imported institution (from Normandy: Booth, 2007) that became a fundamental aspect of the country in conceiving politics, democracy, and civil and social life. The decisive requirement was discretion, but responsible and transparent (accountable) practice of public functions. The use of simplified, flexible rules, the margins of discretion in political choices found a counterweight in the long tradition of 'common law', which documents the possibility of wise, responsible use of legal autonomy that could give rise to arbitrary acts or abuse. Risk cannot be excluded, but it remains worrying in contexts where a similar tradition does not exist, or where the public administration is weaker and civil culture is lacking (as the controversial results of the 'weak' idea of planning proposed by Gigi Mazza in Milan in the late 1900s confirmed: Mazza, 1998, 2001, 2002). Therefore, the hypothesis of transferring or blending different models of governance cannot be indifferent to the context. Local cultures are an influential factor that can condition any prediction or development. The search for a reasonable balance between certainty and flexibility is

a constant need for planning, at any time or place (Faludi, 1986b; Booth et al., 2007). The solution cannot be found in a laboratory; the prevailing culture of the territory becomes a discriminating factor. A dilemma follows that risks remaining unsolved, i.e. tending towards an objectively ‘tragic’ end. The image of the future of planning remains in balance between two scenarios. On the one hand, it seems natural to recognize — and accept without too many problems — the increasingly contingent, adaptive, incremental, tactical dimensions of ordinary urban practices (overlooking weak points and the related risks). On the other hand, nostalgia still remains for the certainties that have disappeared from the discipline, also because the market does not like discretion if it is not favourable to its interests (Prior, 2005), and politics can be reluctant to publicly assume the responsibility for controversial choices (although the backdrop often sees contingency and perhaps opportunism triumph in opaque forms that are not easy to decipher). Neither perspective seems convincing; nor do I believe that the solution can be entrusted only to market initiatives such as the normative codes of the ‘new urbanism’. To find a way out, we probably need to surpass the most common means of dealing with regulation, looking for new, more fertile relationships between rules, visions, strategies, and urban projects (Section 4.4).

### **3.6 Strategies: From Rhetoric to Action**

The urban planner’s strategic vision can be read in two ways. On the one hand, it is right to highlight the evolution of interests and functions of the discipline. The topic no longer relates to controlling the uses and physical transformations of the territory, but rather to an idea of development regarding space, as well as society, the economy, and the environment. For this purpose, the traditional tools of town planning no longer seem sufficient; a new perspective that could be called ‘strategic spatial planning’ seems to open. This means reconsidering and developing conceptual frameworks and methodologies for strategic action in the field, which originally took shape as the art of war and were developed considerably in the business world. In the late 1900, that vision was adopted first by the public administration and then (in the last decade), even in the field of planning. This is the most common narrative, which underlines a few positive features: opening the horizon, multiplying tasks, renewing tools (among which the new ‘strategic plans’ and various forms of ‘spatial planning’ stand out). The difficulties with the programme and the unexciting results after more than 30 years of experimentation remain in the shadows.

Another reading is possible — perhaps malicious — but anyway inspired by the principle of critical realism. The strategic vision marks the destination of a slow drift that progressively saw other, more demanding or pretentious models of planning fall: the rational/comprehensive plan, capable of measuring and prescribing a future project; structural frameworks as justification and a unifying guide for a consistent set of well-programmed local operations. For the planning culture, the arrival at strategies represented a form of inevitable, although provisional decommitment. General, detailed prescriptions do not work in the long term and the possibility of building programmatic frames of reference that actually anticipate and guide the set of local choices also seems dubious. A reasonable alternative may be the formulation of a few essential objectives and scenarios, to be clarified through techniques and norms only in subsequent phases when hypotheses and choices are better developed. The strategic orientation is no longer an alternative or complement of the traditional urban plan, but rather a less ambitious or binding reinterpretation or surrogate. A weak idea of both planning and strategic action is therefore delineated, representing a local compromise of modest importance and interest compared to the canonical models of strategy-making in the political world or that of businesses competing on the market. It is not the step backwards that is so scandalous. In fact, the move does not seem to lack some reason, and nevertheless represents just a preliminary step in the process that one intends to take. The indisputable fact is that the disciplinary representation of the trend is often oversized or misleading, as banal rhetoric that would instil security and ensure new prestige for the professional figure, but risks remaining superficial and in vain, a less meaningful form of discourse with respect to political or entrepreneurial interpretations of the concept. In the specialized literature, however, there is practically no trace of these concerns.

The problems basically arise because the planning interpretation of strategic action is generally reductive compared to the original political or entrepreneurial models. The error seems clear in one inaugural contribution, the paper by Kaufman and Jacobs published in 1987 simultaneously with the first important studies on the meaning and potential impact of the strategic vision in public administration sectors (Bryson, 1988; et al., 1988). The two authors claim that the business strategies exert an undoubted influence on the new experiences of ‘strategic planning’ in the public realm. However, it should be recognized that the innovation is not radical because the fundamental method and concepts have long formed part of the urban planner’s training, as demonstrated by theories on planning as a process

of decision-making and implementation (Kaufman and Jacobs, 1987). I do not believe that the opinion is well founded. The analogy regards only a few forms and procedures that reproduce the logic of rational action in schematic, superficial terms, as a pure sequence of methodical steps that should guide a subject towards a choice consistent with the principles of rationality (defining objectives, analysing the problem, and so on: Haines, 2000; Simerson, 2011; Leleur, 2012). Is it possible or useful to reduce strategic action to the application of a general methodology? The error seems clear. If we consult some canonical text by the experts in military strategy (for example, the recent contributions by Freedman, 2013; Gray, 2015), the vision that emerges is incomparable. Developing a strategy does not mean replicating a form of ‘strategic thinking’, but it assumes two essential requirements: turning intentions and assumptions into effective action and success, which requires agreement and cooperation between multiple strategies and actions concerning the choices in question (as Gigi Mazza always maintained: 1994, 2000). The strategy is interesting as a capacity for action, which can only be joint or cooperative, as is clear in the business world (Mintzberg, 1994, 2007, 2009). Otherwise the function of the discourse remains rhetorical. It is easy to see that the two conditions are generally underestimated by the planning literature dedicated to the new strategic line, which is vast, but also repetitive and not very fertile.

Andreas Faludi was one of the first to introduce the topic (1986a), remaining on the threshold of a rational, scientific concept of planning, which was simply reformulated in less assertive or demanding ways (like a ‘second-best’ model with bounded rationality). Louis Albrechts became an official herald of the trend, with a great number of contributions that generally did not dispel doubts as to simplicity or ambiguity. At the turn of the new century, the author noted the European interest in new forms of spatial planning with a strategic orientation (Albrechts, 2001; et al., 2003). The salient facts were the innovation of the approach compared to tradition and the high expectations regarding the expected results. A few years later, however, the need for revision and refinement had already emerged: ‘strategic spatial planning revisited’ (Albrechts, 2004); ‘shifts in strategic spatial planning?’ (Albrechts, 2006); ‘bridge the gap: from spatial planning to strategic projects’ (Albrechts, 2006a). The first corrections did not seem satisfying, while it is true that the author felt the need to multiply his exhortations: ‘more of the same is not enough!’ (Albrechts, 2010); ‘how to enhance creativity...’ (Albrechts, 2011). There remains the fact that the score was not reassuring after more than 20 years of experience: ‘re-framing strategic spatial planning’ was still the priority (Albrechts, 2013);

‘ingredients for a more radical strategic spatial planning’ were necessary (Albrechts, 2015). The path was therefore marked by failed promises and critical reflections. The author’s arguments did not indicate a way out, also due to a few objective limitations: a traditional idea of knowledge and decision-making; overestimation of the methodological question; and the incapacity or unwillingness to choose among alternative options. Should the vision be synoptic or selective? Is it more important to design a hierarchical tree of decisions or choose priorities? Is it enough to indicate objectives and lists of actions without reasoning on the technical and political feasibility of the operations? In effect, Albrechts’ reflection is pushed to the threshold of actual problems: strategic action should be the result of social coproduction processes (2013); it is not enough to indicate objectives and programmes without studying the merits of a truly strategic project (2006a). However, Albrechts did not warn about the need to keep a distance from disciplinary positions that are limited to reiterating a methodological or rationalist inclination (which are still incredibly widespread). There is a resulting shadow of ambiguity in a contribution that risks remaining exhortative and immobile in time.

Similar objections can be raised regarding considerations on the topic of various famous authors. These are limited to confirming an interest in the trend, not only in the initial phase (Healey et al., 1997: Counsel, Allmendinger et al. 2003; Friedmann, 2004), but also after the first delusions (Gunn and Hillier, 2012; Kunzmann, 2013). Salet and Faludi (2000) announced the revival of that strand of experience (which evidently should have encountered some difficulty in previous years). However, the perspective remains eclectic; without distinctions or judgements worthy of merit, three positions unequal in institutional, communicational, and interactive orientation are brought together. What will the winning profile be? Other authors have been concerned with clarifying fundamental concepts, but the discussion has remained academic: ‘the treatment of space and place in strategic spatial planning’ (Healey, 2004, 2007; Davoudi and Strange, 2009). What is generally lacking is a clear, selective position on the intrinsically political roots of the notions of strategy and strategic action, i.e. the recognition that the fundamental dimensions of the problem are social action and social interaction, and that every important decision is an ‘emerging effect’ (Mintzberg, 2007). A general vision is preferred, one that continues to confuse political reasons with the ambitions of rationality and method (see ‘In Search of the “Strategic” in Spatial Strategy-Making’ by Patsy Healey, 2009). There is less criticism of the approach as a strategy functional for the interests of a neoliberal society (from the pioneering

contribution by Forester, 1984, to Olesen, 2014), an approach that could lead to manipulation of public opinion and consensus with its edifying narratives (Mantysalo et al., 2020).

Completed experiences have not clarified an underlying error: Should we aim at the strategic plan as an additional device that should anticipate and guide the development of traditional planning tools, acting as a well-developed variation of the ‘structure plan’ already tested without convincing results? In this case, what would be the salient characteristics of the innovation? The most recent experiences show that the trend is losing strength and relevance. The development of ad hoc devices is increasingly rare. Today, the topic is addressed quickly when setting up canonical tools, where the great objectives of the urban plan are enunciated summarily. The main alternative was to understand the new ‘strategic spatial plan’ as a tool that tends to replace the traditional urban plan as a technical response to the shifting interests of the discipline, from the functions of controlling the uses and transformations of the land towards the support for economic/territorial growth. This hypothesis has given rise to an enormous flow of reflections and experiments, but these seem to have been in clear decline in the last ten years. The laws have changed in many countries and similar tools have been cancelled or become more marginal (see Section 4.3). Something evidently did not work, not even in this strand, which seems to have entered a crisis as the alternative line that I delineated above. Related experiences hold little importance for understanding the reasons for the failure. In Italy, for example, we recorded an intense yet late wave of interests in the early 2000s. An apparently naive ideological movement formed, enthusiastically and diligently feeding the new route without lingering on doubts or criticism (as confirmed by the scholastic, unproductive literature: Pugliese and Spaziante, 2003; Fedeli and Gastaldi, 2004; Martinelli, 2005). The prediction was easy (Palermo, 2004, 2009): the trend rapidly dropped off without leaving any significant traces. The result may be no different until the discipline adopts a less reductive notion of strategy-making that recognizes the centrality of politics (Eraydin and Frey, 2019) and effective action (Golsorkhi et al., 2010). Under current conditions, the most plausible scenario is the interpretation of the strategic vision as a tactical device to liberate urban planners from historical responsibilities that are considered too onerous today. The conclusion may seem paradoxical. To imagine a more interesting future on this front, the discipline must learn from more lucid positions that have emerged in the field in the private sector, where the topic has been addressed more realistically and effectively (Section 4.6).

### 3.7 Visions: From Imagination to Policy-making

Do the difficulties in strategic discourse depend on the extraneousness of the original references compared to the planning world? Emerging interest in the ‘vision’ may be understood as the tentative disciplinary answer to a few unresolved problems (Abbott, 2020; Dixon and Tewdwr-Jones, 2021). Instead of looking for inspiration in other contexts, internal traditions that were undoubtedly important must be collected and developed in the most appropriate ways. *Teoría general de la urbanización* [General Theory of Urbanization] by Ildefons Cerdà was a vision. Howard’s ‘garden city’ or Abercrombie’s ‘greenbelt’ were visions, as innovative ways of conceiving how to redesign a complex territory that inspired different planning paradigms (Pinder, 2011). If the gaze focuses on the existing urban form, the Y-shaped image that Luigi Piccinato deduced from the morphological study of the city of Siena was a vision, just as the upended T depicted Gigi Mazza’s weak attempt to leave a strategic mark on the urban development of Milan. On that scale, the vision represents an essential interpretation of the possible structure and evolution of the urban form, which becomes a potential trace for future development according to the organic, co-evolutionary concept of urban design that Ludovico Quaroni always claimed (1967, 1981). After the controversial results of the city plans designed in the 1990s, even Bernardo Secchi wanted to reclaim that perspective, recognizing the key function of *visioning* in the urban planner’s work (Palermo, 2025, Chapter 4). The hypothesis therefore seems simple and clear; and convincing on paper. A managerial concept of strategy-making is not sufficient. The strategic orientation seems justified and even indispensable; however, it must be organized in space with attention to the physical and morphological dimensions that the management culture lacks (Joyce, 2015; et al., 2014). The strategy must find specific reasons and modes in the actual territory. The urban planner’s interpretational and design-oriented capacity may be decisive for developing generative visions, and confirmation of this is found in the literature on ‘city architecture’ or urban design. In perspective, one could imagine a reorganization between the unfortunately distinct traditions of planning and design. Planning is not content with defining rules and functions, but should measure itself against material forms and actual transformation projects. This is an interesting scenario that unfortunately has not developed as hoped.

It is true that for some time, a strategic and visionary approach has generally claimed the most plausible perspective for a discipline facing a clear crisis in its foundations and perspectives. However, in many cases, the

turning point would be reduced to promoting and applying the techniques of ‘scenario planning’ (as I documented in Palermo, 2025, Chapter 10). This is an unacceptable simplification that will not produce significant results because the choice takes us back (with all its limitations) to a managerial and methodological concept of strategic thinking. Let’s explore the specialized literature, which effectively seems to have expanded in the last decade. The first observation is that it is reasonable to harbour some doubt as to the common nature of the problems that emerge in the respective fields — strategic management and urban planning. For a great public or private company, the scenario method is a strategic response to growing turbulence in the context, which shows influencing factors of uncertainty, ambiguity, or risk. Under these conditions, the company organization must show a capacity for quick action — transitory if necessary and certainly flexible — that can learn from the experience (Lindgren and Bandhold, 2003). These requirements are not familiar to the planning tradition. Growing attention to ‘scenario planning’, which was broadly developed in the realm of strategic management, may mark a turn that now seems necessary and ripe. Should the urban planning of our days accept to become a highly flexible and adaptive practice? Not all disciplinary players would be ready to share this conclusion. The interesting issue is the exploration of what is possible, which prevails over the attempt to foresee a largely indeterminate future (Wayman et al., 2014), or imagine some utopian design as a desired model of the future (two claims correlated with the modern planning tradition).

A possibilist cultural orientation is not unknown in the area (Palermo, 2022, Section 8.3), but it should always be heard with favour and relief. As Ogilvy (2011) observed, the scenario method helps us to avoid two traps: nostalgia for the perfect utopia, and resignation before a crisis that seems insurmountable. There is a range of possibilities among the two extremes. Exploring and discussing them is a good way to increase awareness and trust that the problems can be faced. Due to experience, not only should caution grow, but so should the decision-makers’ sense of responsibility, their capacity to anticipate risks and design solutions, to act flexibly but with consideration, and to face difficulties without losing hope. In this sense, experimentation with the scenario method may serve an educational function. Other positive factors can be easily identified: the benefits of learning through experience, recalling an important planning tradition from Donald Schön to critical pragmatism; the function of reframing as a way of conceiving or reformulating the problem, which opens the way to new treatment opportunities (Ramirez and Wilkinson, 2016); the invitation

to prudence that grows from the plausibility — which is never certainty — of the conclusions of any investigation into the possible options, but does not exclude the search for more desirable choices, with the spirit of the practical visionary, which was well interpreted by Dewey, but also the great precursors or masters of planning (in fact, the expression was associated with figures such as Geddes, Nolen, and Abercrombie).

Other potential contributions seem to be less relevant. Planners are misled if they think they can learn something from ‘scenario planning’ techniques. Only simple dissertations are available on current methodologies (Schwenker and Wulf, 2013; Ramirez and Wilkinson, 2016), faithfully following the model of formal or systemic rationality (the planning culture has long recognized the limits of a similar approach). It would also be practically useless to study in depth the conspicuous literature on the topic in the realm of strategic management. The first reason is that the problems that are actually addressed are very different; there are few relationships between the strategic interests of multinational companies or central governments and the local context of planning action. In addition, it should be noted that in the strand we call ‘scenario planning’, an unproductive school has quickly formed a set of scholastic reflections that are only preparatory or have useless details, introducing the usual causes for concern. Is it a question of art or science (Ogilvy, 2011)? Who are the true founding fathers: Kahn and Wack in the United States (Chermack, 2017) or Jouvenel and Berger (the French school: Godet, 2006)? Why, after a few decades of intense development, did that field of knowledge and instruction still show a confused conceptual and methodological framework, raising doubts as to the effectiveness of the doctrine (Cordova-Pozo and Rouwette, 2023)? The strongest objection is substance. The strand of ‘scenario planning’ developed after the Second World War to imagine the future, but over time, it became a practice to manage uncertainty and risk (Joyce, 2022; Burt, 2023), so it is not capable of supporting the effort of imagination that planning has always required (Secchi, 2015). The conclusion is that the unexpected interest in this sector by various areas of planning is not really justified. Moreover, it does not lead to great hope, but rather just a few preparatory — or even worse, methodological — contributions.

Instead, the vision should be considered at once an image of the future of the territory and a political act. Any potential form assumes a strategic agreement among institutions and the actors implicated in decision-making. Form becomes substance only when its essential features have been identified and defined with the aim of designing a transformation project

that holds truly strategic value for the future of the territory. In this sense, the vision has political content and becomes a device for territorial governance, but it also holds significant design content as an image of the future of salient transformations in the context in question. The interpretation is certainly more difficult than the formulation of any objective or scenario according to the general methodology of strategic thinking. A sort of ‘spatial project’ is configured in the sense tested in France in the 1990s and taken up in Italy by Alberto Clementi and others (Palermo, 2025, Chapter 13). A planning figure is outlined that does not imitate the effort of imagination or the creativity of *starchitecture*, but operates as a ‘practical visionary’ in line with a few great disciplinary traditions. This is the idea that, in my opinion, may represent a substantial innovation compared to traditional planning models, but also a merely managerial concept of strategic action. However, it does not seem to me that this idea has found significant references in the planning literature or research. The future of the vision, as with the strategy, seems destined to a more trivial perspective in the discipline.

### 3.8 A Planning Idea of Urban Project

It may seem paradoxical, but the planning literature has long dedicated little attention to the issue of the project. There is no comparison with wide-ranging dissertations on the plan, rules, strategies, or visions that I mentioned above. This, despite the undoubted crisis in the modernist paradigm, which conceived the executive project as the last stage in an ideal, coherent, high-performance process. Experiences of this type are increasingly rare. The most common alternative alludes to a different world in scale and content. The urban project becomes an overall vision — ‘politique de la ville’ [urban strategic vision] — a programmatic or even just rhetorical frame of reference that should be valid as an image of the future of the territory, capable of raising hopes and mobilizing interests, but also, in principle, guiding material action despite the ambiguities and uncertainties mentioned above (Section 3.6). Between the two extremes — specific executive action and the overall suggestive vision — there remains an uncultivated space that should arouse some embarrassment because it introduces an idea of urban development mainly based on urban or architectural projects, with subsequent area transformations that rarely express a shared strategy. How is it possible that planning has little or nothing to say on the topic, after the canonical forms of development control experienced a clear regression, while the vision of the plan as an emerging suggestion is often generic or ritualistic? The question remains marginal. Few contributions

address related topics and the perspectives are almost always partial or elusive. If we listen to good intentions, the ‘urban project’ relates especially to the strategic dimension, with political and social implications. Even in France, where two important strands of research and experience were developed contextually in the 1990s — dedicated respectively to the project as a physical transformation of the territory and as a social construct (Palermo, 2025, Chapter 13) — a divisive rift remained between the two trends. Not only that, social and political analysis can be edifying and fideistic rather than realistic and critical (Pinson, 2009). Elsewhere, the situation still seems less promising. The urban project is mostly configured as an independent field of interests, where the aspirations and opportunities of the land and real-estate market prevail (Bertaud, 2018; Beyer, 2021). Urban policies seem to be concerned with accompanying emerging processes instead of guiding or controlling them. The discipline is surprisingly silent, or remains limited to intertwining hypocrisy and opportunism. There is abundant rhetoric on principles or aspirations, embarrassment or resignation before established facts, some indignant voice when damage is seen, but in general a weak capacity to affect the course of events. Even the area of critical reflection seems more marginal compared to the late 1900s.

One exemplary document is *Strategic Urban Projects: Catalysts for Change* (2011, edited by Oosterlynck, Albrechts and others). The premise is the turn that the discipline now seems to have justified. The conditions have changed and the traditional plan for controlling land uses and urban transformations is no longer deemed adequate. A more active approach is needed, one that can orient and support economic/territorial development processes according to the principles of sustainability, equity, social innovation, and clear democratic legitimacy. The answer to those needs is entrusted to an emerging paradigm of strategic spatial planning (which I introduced and commented on in Section 3.6). The ‘strategic urban project’ would be an essential device for applying that paradigm, as a hinge between the long-term vision outlined by the strategic plan and effective action. It would be developed selectively in a specific area, guaranteeing high quality transformations due to expertise in urban design and the possibility for social innovation by mobilizing multiple actors whose interaction may in some cases become new institutional networks. It is a pity that these are rarely the effective results. They mostly deal with just hopes and recommendations, or the idea of strategic planning in the dedicated literature reduces to mere exhortation (Albrechts, 2006; 2006a). The problems are real, but the discussion avoids the most critical points. It is limited to proposing benevolent/indulgent rhetoric towards the discipline and profession, cele-

brating a strategic model of the plan and a potential role for experts that are not prominent in reality. Yet some critical voice has long highlighted that the urban project in many cases is a purely market operation which has little to do with the edifying objectives that I have just recalled (Moulaert et al., 2001; Swyngedouw et al., 2002). Less radical observations (such as Salet and Gualini, 2007) also recognize that many current local transformations are not part and effect of a single strategic vision. If anything, each particular experience can make a contribution — not always coherent or positive — to the formation of an emerging spatial strategy. An important lost opportunity is also worth attention. Oosterlynck and his co-authors recognize that the idea of an urban project derives from typical experiences in Mediterranean Europe (still widespread in Spain, France, Italy) that have supported a physical and design-oriented concept of planning, where designing by parts is an essential component of the plan or risks becoming its surrogate. How does that vision influence the interpretation of the role of urban planners and their professional expertise? How can it be reconciled with the dominance now assigned to the strategic dimension of planning? How is it varied according to the conditions and tension imposed by social and political aspects? There is no trace of similar questions, which I believe to be a worrying sign of the poverty of the discipline.

Moreover, the criticism seems to be widely justified. I have already observed that even in France, where the issue of the urban project was tackled from every side — physical and social — divisions remain among the different strands that are not easy to overcome. Reflections in this respect by Gilles Pinson (2004, 2009) certainly introduce a perspective extraneous to traditional planning (Desjardins, 2020), but it is still distinct from current experimentation in urban design (Devillers, 1994; Mangin and Panerai, 1999). A cultural and factual distance persists, despite numerous exhortations to ‘bridge the gap’ (Albrechts, 2006a). To find a reflection on a planning idea of urban project, it is necessary to push beyond the disciplinary frontiers. It is necessary to reconsider some marginal (albeit prestigious) branches: the physical planning of Samonà, Quaroni, and De Carlo, in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s; *urbanismo estratégico* [strategic urbanism] in Spain in the 1980s and 1990s (Bohigas, Busquets, de Solà Morales); the coeval planning school in Porto guided by Nuno Portas with the support of the urban morphological studies by Vitor Oliveira and his research group; French experiences with the *projet urbain* in the 1990s (mentioned above: Huet, Devillers, and others); the brief phase of city plans designed by Gregotti and Secchi in Italy in the same period; the original trend guided by Matthew Carmona and John Punter in Great Britain towards the end of

the century, who, acknowledging the shift in planning from the traditional master plan to new forms of strategic plan (highlighted by Marisa Carmona et al., 2009), were concerned — in contrast to Oosterlynk, Albrechts, and other influential planners — with giving a design-oriented substance to the emerging form of the plan (Carmona and Punter, 1997); ‘new urbanism’ in the United States from the 1980s to today, which seems ambiguous to me, but is consistent and continuous over time (Katz, 1994; Dutton, 2000; Talen, 2005; MacDonald et al., 2019). This set of experiences is undoubtedly vast and important, and the leading figures are authoritative, but all the strands remain far from orthodox planning. They probably represent the most interesting variations on the topic in this section, but they have not received clear institutional recognition. They seem destined to remain confined to an ambiguous frontier or be understood as a dangerous alternative competing with the discipline. This has led to a stall that can only be overcome with difficulty, until the planning institution officially admits that creating urban projects within the plan is an open, unresolved problem that traditional paradigms have not been able to address or surpass. A metamorphosis is therefore necessary. If this critical node is not recognized, the discipline will always struggle to imagine a more interesting future with respect to the planning responsibility (Section 4.7).

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#### 4. A Future without Foundations

An idea of the city. An idea of urban community. The capacity for vision, strategy, regulation. Coherent, functional relationships between different missions. A repertoire of established tools. The capacity to translate ideas, visions, strategies, and regulations into potential projects and therefore into effective action. If planning were a solid, well-developed discipline, these assumptions would be clear and commonly held, at least as a framework of competing principles if not as a dominant, unique position. Reality is different, as Chapter 3 documents. All of these issues seem uncertain and highly controversial today. Traditions that were once authoritative have lost their credibility and influential capacity. The alternatives seem eclectic and always unstable. It is difficult to see an evolutionary trend, much less an idea of progress; the dominance of contingency remains, becoming the most common, influential condition. We could conclude that planning is not exactly a discipline, but just a set of practices with a notable degree of difficulty and a social and cultural rather than technical nature. The surprising fact is that reflection on the assumptions is growing increasingly rare, despite the failure of the tentative principles for founding disciplinary thought and action over time, and research is always open to new possibilities. Conformism and self-legitimacy can only worsen the situation. If this relates to mutation, discontinuity is necessary; it can only come from criticism of what exists, and a desire for change, which is inevitable. On the other hand, a state of permanent indeterminacy is not acceptable, as it would open the door to opportunism.

The scope of this chapter is to move from the uncertainty and confusion that has arisen with respect to several crucial topics, to point out the interpretations that may be deemed the most pertinent if the objective is to restore an identity, meaning, and perspective in planning. The attempt is not always destined for success. Perhaps we should admit that planning today tends to avoid taking a stand with respect to great questions such as the meaning and consequences that *urban* and *social* aspects assume in this stage (Section 4.1, 4.2). Towards the end of the 1900s, when urban studies — and especially the line of critical orientation — radically addressed these topics, the planning discipline continued to focus on problems relating to the ‘form of the city’ or specific projects for urban parts, problems that in the most important cases were addressed following the emerging paradigm of sustainability. Following this, the social disengagement became increasingly clear. In fact, the most influential image of the city and urban society has now taken the elusive or misleading form of the *smart*

*city*, while the urban question has remained a ritual background or merely rhetorical reference. At the same time, the political and programmatic drive to build a better future, one of the founding reasons of the discipline, has grown vaguer, or become just rhetorical. Priority is given to the possibility for specific, concrete action according to objectively incremental, fragmentary, adaptive logic that marks a profound gap compared to tradition; a gap that also rarely becomes the object of disciplinary reflection. Yet the current movement involves a nontrivial reinterpretation of the principles and tools: vision, rules, projects, and, above all, the fate of the plan as a device that was once decisive, but is now destined to substantial revision. The question lies in rethinking techniques, but also the sense and potential effects of disciplinary action in a stage the great ideal and civic responsibilities are objectively declining. I present my personal vision on these topics (Sections 4.3- 4.7), which stems from a critical reflection on the framework of ideas and experiences that I depicted in the two previous chapters.

#### **4.1 The City: Ideas and Forms**

The discipline rediscovered the topic of ‘city image’ in the 1960s through the creativity of Kevin Lynch, who intended to respond to two needs: better understanding the ways and forms in which the city was perceived by its inhabitants or users (Lynch, 1960); and deducing from that original knowledge a set of normative principles capable of orienting the transformations and urban policies for the future (Lynch, 1981). Following this, the analysis of effective perceptions and behaviour became a more marginal interest, while attention focused especially on defining the normative principles that the ‘good city’ should meet (Palermo, 2025, Chapter 11). In my opinion, this tendency reflected superficial adherence to the managerial culture (which I mentioned in Section 2.3). Instead, a true attempt to better understand the evolution of the urban phenomenon and its social implications was missing, which would have bridged the gap that had formed with the most problematic and critical trends in urban studies in the late 1900s.

Urban theory, as with planning, seems uncertain and divided among a variety of trends (Beauregard, 2003). Perhaps the fragmentation seems even more serious because the fates of different disciplinary traditions are intertwined: geography, sociology, economics, but also anthropology and philosophy. Nostalgia and the search for a common thread inspired a variety of reconstructions that take the form of a careful census of all positions in play (Hubbard, 2006; Jayne and Ward, 2017; Smith, 2017) or record the emerging dualism between alternative visions. In fact, the idea of a city

can change, intended as a form and experience of living (Thorns, 2002; Parker, 2004) or as a material arena of emerging strategies and actions (Bridge, 2014; Pani, 2022). Robert Beauregard's disenchantment and critical spirit stand out (2018), as he refutes the entrepreneurial and political image of the city as a strategic player in innovation and progress, highlighting the most serious contradictions in current urban conditions. The urban concept of 'the political' can take different forms, based on action and conflict created by rebellious movements (Webb, 2017; Beissinger, 2022), or associated with the structural conditions of the economy and urban society. The structural vision can boast an authoritative tradition, but doubts arise as to its topicality with respect to new needs. For example, Harding and Blokland (2014) and Scott (2021) share nontrivial perplexity, although starting from different perspectives: an interest in social practices or the recognized dominance of economic factors. In general, there remains a clear discrepancy between a robust line of modernist inspiration, still tending to identify and represent the structural roots underlying the evolution of urban forms (Davies and Imbroscio, 2010; Scott and Storper, 2015, 2016), and several visions with a post-modern orientation that are more sensitive to the immediate phenomenology of the change according to the contingent evidence that becomes the object of original representations (Dear, 2002, 2003; Amin and Thrift, 2002). This also occurs in the world of planning, concerned as it is with the fragmentation of positions and with no lack of attempts to build bridges and re-establish connections. Emblematic of this are the comparative studies on the Chicago and Los Angeles Schools of Urbanism, inspired respectively by modernism and the post-modern turn (Judd and Simpson, 2011; Leitner et al., 2019). The framework is therefore very diversified, but in the most recent stage, a few tendencies have come to the fore, even if they continue to raise doubts and biased criticism.

The most evident — due to the spread and continuity of the contributions — is the expansion of the idea of what is *urban*: not intended as a limited and specific spatial form, but rather a network of relationships between different scales and distances. In the early 1900s, the dominant tradition at the Chicago School of Sociology (Park, Burgess, and others) considered the principle of proximity to be key and focused on relationships and interactions that took place in the local context. The image of the city developed by Kevin Lynch substantially confirmed the same assumptions. In the early 2000s, a radical turn seemed necessary, rescaling the urban vision and resulting policies (Brenner, 1999, 2000, 2003, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2000, 2004; Sturzaker and Nurse, 2020). The city was intended as

a force field that pertained not only to the local context; it represented a particular scale within a broader system of relationships, requiring care, support, and hopes, but also limitations to possible negative effects. This system should be the object of targeted policies tied to ‘repair, relatedness, rights, re-enchantment’, as necessary requirements for a new ideal of a ‘good city’ (Amin, 2006). The concept of planning also had to be renewed to act on that trans-scalar and dynamic reality (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Amin, 2007). The idea of a city as a scale for a multilevel system was not original in geographical thought, but it had traditionally been associated with a well-ordered hierarchical structure (from Christaller to Berry, as noted by Brenner, 2019). Nor was the idea of interactions at a distance original, which questioned a model of community based exclusively on the principle of proximity (Melvin Webber’s intuitions, 1964, were also forward-looking). What changed due to Brenner, Amin, and others’ concept of *urban* was the potential strength of the relationships (in many cases destined to prevail over local characteristics), the multiplication of possibilities, and the uncertainty of the results. Cities and communities are realities that complex social and spatial processes ‘enact into being’ (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Farias and Bender, 2010). Understanding this complexity becomes a prerequisite for any desire for urban design or governance. The exhortation has not always produced convincing results. For example, the announcement of a ‘new urban question’ in the 2000s seems dubious (Secchi, 2010; Merrifield, 2014). I see only the traces of longstanding problems that introduce the conditions of living, environmental quality, social equity... all critical factors that politics and planning have evidently not been able to manage or solve in the long term (Palermo, 2025, Chapter 5). I also share the doubts that some authors (Scott and Storper, 2015, 2016) have formulated regarding the ideology of ‘planetary urbanization’ (Brenner, 2013, 2018; Brenner and Schmid, 2014; Ruddick et al., 2017). This tends to consider the urban area as an unlimited, outsized phenomenon, destined to reproduce on an increasingly larger scale. An indefinite extent could only jeopardize the specifics and utility of the concept, hiding radical differences between global cities in the Western world (the priority of conventional urban studies: Murray, 2022) and the uncontrolled settlement developments in the Global South. This would lead to great embarrassment for urban planners, whose professional profile was designed to give a structure and form to a well-defined territorial context.

The orientation towards *rescaling* was often associated with the reintroduction of a critical view of urban studies. With a growing spread, the phenomenology of emerging problems seems to be evidence of typical needs

and processes of a neoliberal society and economy (thoroughly documented in analysis by Bob Jessop, Neil Brenner, Jamie Peck, and other similar scholars: Brenner and Theodore, 2002b; Leitner et al., 2007; Jessop et al., 2008; Peck et al., 2009, 2012, 2013). The main answer from the discipline was a renewed appeal to the tradition of ‘critical theory’, still inspired in general by the Frankfurt School of Sociology, as a manifesto of good intentions in the wake of the modern project, which assumed (Brenner, 2009; Marcuse and Imbroscio, 2014) an analytical capacity to detect the reasons and real effects of current processes, the possibility of orienting the course of events towards emancipation and progress. The rejection of conditions that actually exist was implacable and the exhortation for a critical concept of the urban area was indefatigable, but the literature generally maintained an academic character. Effective contributions to action in the field were modest and progress in the empirical knowledge of the new urban phenomenology was also limited. A vast and consistent intellectual exhortation remained, but it was also repetitive and a bit academic. This vision of theoretical work seemed outdated and perhaps infertile, if not evidence of a series of inherited problems.

In a generally traditional framework, it is worth noting an innovative line that has different cultural roots with a postmodern inspiration, thus remaining circumscribed and even controversial (there is no lack of criticism), but one that can rely on a group of undoubtedly tenacious, active, brilliant supporters. The key issue is still the shift from a formal, well-defined idea of the city as a space of proximity and consolidated relationships to a process (‘becoming places’: Dovey, 2009), as the somewhat unpredictable result of the possible composition of a multitude of interests and actions that come to interact in a spatial and social context. The process does not result in a new finished organism (‘the unfinished city’: Bender, 2007), but just a temporary assemblage of multiple elements that preserve their relative autonomy (in the future, they may give rise to new and different combinations). This means conceiving reality (the city) as the emerging effect — due to its contingent, transitory constitution — of a variety of ongoing processes involving multiple stakeholders, structures, actions, and interactions in the transformation practices and use of the space and urban forms. The relational and multiscalar idea of a city evoked by Brenner and Amin is confirmed (in fact, Amin himself reformulated his vision based on the concept of assemblage: Amin and Thrift, 2017); however, the framework wound up being fluid and unstable, increasingly far from any reassuring hypothesis of order and structure. The vision is clearly postmodern, inspired by Gilles Deleuze (DeLanda, 2006, 2016; Buchanan, 2020); de-

veloped by Bruno Latour (Latour, 2005; Farias and Bender, 2010); and taken up again by a few urban planners to reconsider the evolution of the public space (Sendra, 2015), mobility (McCann and Ward, 2012), urban sustainability (Rydin, 2012), marginal areas (Lancione, 2016), and regeneration programmes (McGuirk et al., 2016). In general, the very formation of urban places (Dovey, 2009) and their representation through maps were reconsidered and, like the ‘diagram’ conceived by Deleuze, configured as a *space of possibilities* (Dovey et al., 2017). This was not the first time that the planning culture had turned to postmodern philosophers, even though different attempts appeared to be objectively arbitrary and inconclusive (Hillier, 2007; Gunder and Hillier, 2010). In this case, the analogy is supported by justifications and interest, although a few disciplinary scholars more faithful to tradition took a critical attitude (Brenner et al., 2014; Storper and Scott, 2016), because a similar approach could lead only to a ‘naive objectivism’ aimed at describing emerging appearances, incapable as it was of explaining and regenerating the phenomena, highlighting and correcting their structural causes. In effect, it would be imprudent to understand the vision as a ‘social theory’ with a clear value for interpretation, much less regulation. A few authors may have overly investigated the literal paraphrasing of Deleuze’s (Dovey, 2009) or Latour’s thought (Bender, in Farias and Bender, 2010), but the exercise remained academic and — beyond certain limits — irrelevant. The idea of assemblage represents just a plausible, promising heuristic that should be suitably developed in the effective context due to a commitment to investigating contingent events and effects that should overlook prejudice that is too conditioning (including traditional hypotheses that explain the structure of phenomena: Dovey, 2011; Farias, 2011; McFarlane, 2011a). This is the challenge, but the available evidence is still not as solid or exhaustive as hoped after more than a decade of (repeated) discourse and (always partial) experimentation.

*Rescaling and/or assembling the city, and/or critical thinking:* these are the most influential guiding principles that have emerged from the field of urban studies in the last 30 years. How has the planning culture reacted before these suggestions? The call to criticism has not had the expected consequences. There has been a clear rejection of the neoliberal trend in society and public policies (Hackworth, 2007; Pinson, 2020; Hollands, 2023). The ideological orientation, however, has not always produced solid, meaningful contributions on new critical investigations to unveil the actual powers, causes, and effects of pressing urban problems, and indicating promising solutions. Those applications have remained confined to a particular branch of the discipline — such as radical or insurgent planning —

which refers to a now distant tradition (at least from the 1970s); it does not reveal important innovations over time, but rather maintains an occasional character (becoming possible only in periods and contexts where particular combinations of factors are valid: Hou, 2010, 2020; Swyngedouw, 2018). In most cases, the critical commitment did not become an influential requirement for ordinary urban practices.

The idea of a city as a set of trans-scale relationships aroused different and partly surprising reactions. Initially, the message in some authoritative circles was simply ignored. The main topic of interest remained the ‘form of the city’ (as in the study by Warner and Whittemore, 2012, on the situation in North America), in the search for a lost compactness (in Europe: Burgess and Jenks, 2000; in the United States: Ross, 2014; Talen, 2015) due to rampant suburban sprawl (everywhere: Duany et al., 2000; Richardson and Bae, 2004; Bruegmann, 2005). In the best cases, the topic was not addressed according to merely formalistic criteria, but according to the emerging principles of urban and environmental sustainability (Williams et al., 2000; Jenks and Dempsey, 2005; Jenks and Jones, 2010), which demanded an allowable compromise among the (potentially contrasting) interests of economic development, environmental protection, and social justice (Campbell, 1996). There is no trace, however, of the set of large-scale relationships evoked by Brenner or Amin.

The main disciplinary response to that family of problems is found in another branch of the discipline which developed in the 1990s around the image and topic of the *polycentric city*, through authoritative contributions such as the analysis by Peter Hall, William Salet and Tassilo Herrschel in Europe (Salet et al., 2001; Herrschel and Newman, 2002; Hall and Pain, 2006), and Saskia Sassen and Susan Fainstein in the United States (see the *Reading* edited by Catherine Ross, 2009). In the 1920s and 1930s, the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA) had already upheld a change in paradigm, i.e. the need to shift the focus from traditional problems in the inner city and suburbs (two clearly critical situations) to the less familiar topics of territorial development and large-scale environmental protection (Seltzer and Carbonell, 2011). What is still lacking compared to subsequent orientations in the late 1900s was the search for a new *integrated* vision of the entire system, implying the regeneration of historical settlements and a new design for their trans-scale relationships (Davoudi, 2008). In my opinion, the most interesting version in this sense was formulated by Peter Calthorpe (1993; 2001, with William Fulton), who developed a new, sustainable concept of the *regional city* as a network of places and

communities on a large scale, the result of a complex evolutionary process supported by targeted policies and projects regarding the regeneration (not abandonment) of critical historical areas, the sustainable development of infrastructure and new settlements that are deemed necessary (versus models of suburban sprawl and the *edge city*), and the desire to integrate the set of interventions (a step beyond suggestions in the garden city or those from the RPAA). Using more eccentric language, similar positions were outlined by Grahame Shane (2011). A comparative study on European and American experiences can be found in *The Futures of the City Region*, edited by Neuman and Hull (2011); complementary contributions were published by Xu and Yeh (2011); Jones, Lord and Shields (2013). The same vision was officially adopted by the nascent ‘new urbanism’ movement, which, however, translated Calthorpe’s original investigation and experimentation into more schematic or simplistic professional recipes (Talen, 1999, 2019); Jill Grant (2006) formulated reasonable criticism based on a comparison with coeval tendencies in Europe and Asia. Nevertheless, this seemed to be the point of greatest proximity between emerging trends in planning and urban studies.

In the following decades, the paradox reported by Koolhaas (1995) was confirmed: urbanization processes were taking over, but urban planners were continuing to lose their identity and influential capacity. The urban phenomenon took on the form of *megacity* or *megaregion* (agglomerations of more than 10 or 25 million residents multiplied), but urban planners seemed unable to face the new scale and growing complexity of the problems, as such settlement forms often represented ‘unplanned urbanism’ (Murray, 2022). Many contributions were limited to describing the most superficial evidence of ongoing urbanization processes (Kraas et al., 2014; Jayan, 2015; Kumar, 2022). Rarer still were critical reflections on the phenomenon (Harvey, 2000) and the resulting governance problems (Sorensen and Okaka, 2011; Lorrain, 2014). Diagnoses and project proposals continued to repeat the principles and model of the regional city, but the vision seemed to lose its original hopes and strength. For example, Jonathan Barnett’s discourse (2020) was weaker and vaguer than the founding manifesto by Calthorpe and Fulton (2001), while the specialized literature continued to favour very simple topics (compared to the actual situation), such as the neighbourhood project or walkability (Brody, 2013, 2016; Palermo, 2025, Chapter 11). A few authoritative voices pushed towards more radical conclusions: ‘planning for the unplanned’ (Aseem Inam, 2005; Reid et al., 2025) is an arduous enterprise; the problems to face are ungovernable if reasoning is based on the modern project (Diana Cuff, in So-

rensen and Okaka, 2011). There remains the possibility of action by parts through area projects with a certain strategic importance, whose dimension and complexity can grow significantly in newer processes, until they take the unsettling shape of *megaprojects* (Fainstein, 2009; Del Cerro, 2013). This naturally does not represent the solution, but rather a decisive part of the new problems. Action by parts and the resulting need to coordinate or integrate partial interventions are certainly not uncommon tasks for the discipline. They now tend to take impressive forms and dimensions, creating obstacles that cannot be avoided (here is another tangible sign of the current mutation).

In the meantime, the rhetoric of assemblage has found some success in the discipline, but it is not unheard of in these cases either. The fundamental idea is that the form of the space and the sense of a place are always the product of a set of relationships and practices (as Christopher Alexander or Jane Jacobs always maintained). The perspective could hold critical value in the Marxist-inspired visions that refute any structural determinism (thus in the wake of Henri Lefebvre rather than in Althusser's tradition). As a result, they mark a difference with respect to the most traditional concept of critical urban studies, which I recalled in a previous step (Brenner, 2009; Scott and Storper, 2015; Scott, 2021). The most important result is that some unorthodox ideas and practices wind up playing a key role in the evolving discipline. A key point is that the spatial transformations are generally not the faithful result of a finished project, but an 'emerging effect' (as Pierluigi Crosta maintained starting in the 1980s) of the provisional combination of multiple factors, actions, and interactions in and part of the context (Dovey, 2009). While the production of space occurs primarily through mechanisms of this type, two deductions are plausible. First, urban action preferably assumes an *incremental* form (McFarlane, 2011b; Dovey, 2014) because it is necessary to delimit the field and adopt an experimental method according to tentative tests and adjustments during progress. Second, the weight of *informal* initiatives and practices (Dovey, 2012; McFarlane, 2012; McFarlane and Waibel, 2012) grows in real processes, as they do not strictly respond to institutional rules and procedures, but rather represent a creative interpretation of the space of possibilities by stakeholders directly involved in the process. In due time, the set of events gives rise to an 'informal city' (Laguerre, 1994; Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014; Lombard and Horn, 2024). We can conclude that the unexpected interest of the discipline in topics of assemblage does not open the way to new discoveries or inventions. Instead, it seems destined to focus on factors and orientations traditionally deemed to be marginal or heterodox: the weight

of emergencies, the rationality of incrementalism, the inescapability of what is informal (Stevens and Dovey, 2023).

My general conclusion is that the new urban challenges do not seem to open comforting perspectives for the discipline. Criticism remains a side branch. The assemblage drives towards tactics and informality. The multiplication of scales and relationships sheds doubt on any possibility for planning action. It feels weaker and more marginal than the most innovative urban ideas that have been confirmed in the last two or three decades. In this framework, growing attention in the same period to the line of innovations and experimentation called *smart urbanism* risks becoming a diversion that would avoid the most serious problems that have been on the agenda for some time, but may become the matrix for new, negative effects.

The idea of the ‘digital city’ originally and mainly alluded to the possibility of rationalizing a few urban administrative functions or economic activities due to innovative development of information technology (Laguerre, 2005). Following this, *smartness* became a more ambitious requirement due to the claim or hope to improve the overall quality of the environment and life, as well as creative possibilities and attractive capacity of a city (Scott, 2016; Halegoua, 2019). Paradoxically, however, that broadening of horizons was accompanied by an embarrassing revision of the idea of the city (‘the forgotten city’, as Philip Allmendinger rightly suggests, 2021). Exemplary proof of the current reduction is the image of the ‘senseable city’ celebrated by Picon and Ratti (2023) as a diffuse network of sensors and automatic control mechanisms capable of representing and orienting a vast set of individual behaviours (or perhaps all of them). The power of technology today enables the primitive dreams of cybernetics following the Second World War, but also the consistently neglected promise of a new urban science (Batty, 2005, 2013; Lai, 2021). The authors overlook objections that have been known for some time: the weakness of a merely inductive concept of knowledge, which would avoid the fatigue and responsibility of the social construction of conceptual frameworks and empirical experiments; the gap between the detail of elementary observations, which should represent all real processes, and the poverty of the meanings because the data reveal the sensible behaviour of individuals without an identity or history (the idea of *human agency* that Picon and Ratti favour is quite weak); but also the claim of deducing relationships in meaning and structural effects from the pure analysis of individual behaviours and movements, which remain anonymous and indistinct (it seems to me that

the authors more seriously repeat Bill Hillier's error, using the 'space syntax' method (Hillier and Hanson, 1984) to explain the evolution of the urban structure based on the pure distribution of individual mobility, an assumption that Ratti himself had previously criticized: Ratti, 2004). The strongest objection, however, regards the oblivion of the city as a physical form and place of meaning to share, as if those aspects were irrelevant compared to the technological platform of sensors and connections (Ratti and Claudel, 2017). Under these conditions, any discourse on *urban quality* becomes implausible. In fact, the sheets that the author dedicated to a series of well-known cities around the world (Ratti, 2023) are summary, marginal, and sometimes misleading (such as the image of Milan-green-city or Paris as a theatre of participatory urban design).

Carlo Ratti's urban vision may hold as the epitome of the most questionable applications in smart urbanism that are multiplying in a variety of contexts (I presented a framework of the tendencies in Palermo, 2022, Section 4.4). No-one denies the potential interest of laboratory analyses that are now possible. The sense of limitations cannot be overlooked, however. Technological innovation cannot act as a surrogate for the lack of understanding or good governance of actual cities. The effective contribution depends on a set of conditions that are not taken for granted. Adopting an effective expression by Ben Green (2019), we could say that what is needed is a 'smart enough' city (planning) that represents not only the entrepreneurial interests of an economic sector (Hollands, 2008; Wiig, 2015; Karvonen et al., 2018) or presents itself as a solution/model for every problem (like a sort of neomodernism in a high-tech version: Greenfield, 2013; Cardullo et al., 2019). It must be aware of the ethical dilemmas (Kitchin, 2016) and problems of sustainability that urban questions and *smart* policies continue to arise (Colding et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2018). It must recognize the decisive function of the context, which could seriously jeopardize the impact of any technology (Luque-Ayala and Marvin, 2015; Marvin et al., 2016). It must be ready to measure itself against emerging effects (Cowley and Caprotti, 2018) and the 'wicked problems' (Goodspeed, 2015; Colding et al., 2019) that will likely arise during the processes. These are topics that remain marginal in the official literature of the sector. While these responsibilities are avoided, the concept of the urban area that planning proposes is today very precarious and reductive compared to the current challenges of urbanization and criticism.

## 4.2 Communities of the Place or Socio-Spatial Organization

There is still a sizeable gap between the most ambitious reflections on the urban area and the visions and experience of normal planning that continues to underestimate or avoid a family of problems (which even theoretically should be considered absolutely pertinent and relevant). Is the attention to issues of local society or community, that is, the peculiar social aspects of current planning practices, different and more meaningful? The evidence proves otherwise. On the one hand, there is a clear formation of disciplinary trends expressly dedicated to the topic, such as the concrete experiences of ‘neighbourhood planning’ promoted by British policies in favour of ‘new localism’ or the old American movement of ‘community planning’, which has always favoured problems related to building the necessary local consensus on territorial choices of collective interest. Worth noting are also a few ideological orientations that are more circumscribed but sharp and continuous over time, generally tied to a guiding figure — such as Murray Bookchin, David Graeber, or Alberto Magnaghi — who knew how to indicate a goal as a virtuous scenario, even if destined to remain an exception or exhortation with respect to the most common course of real practice. In a majority of cases, there remains a doubt that the *local community* is mostly configured as an ‘empty signifier’, to use Lacan’s image adopted by Ernesto Laclau to discuss the notion of populism (Laclau, 2005), that is, as a loose concept that does not circumscribe or define a unique, clear field of meanings, but remains allusive, like a frontier open to multiple possibilities (Amin, 2005); a ‘boundary concept’ in other words (Bowker et al., 2016; Palermo, 2025, Chapter 10). In the best of cases, these relate to the limits, but also the potential interest of planning interpretations of social aspects in a given spatial context; otherwise, some fear of superficiality or opportunism seems justified. The issue is often referenced, but the terms remain broadly rhetorical or elusive.

It is difficult to give meaningful significance to official literature on the idea of ‘community planning’, which has long been established in the Americas and Australia. The most common references take a pedagogical, repetitive form destined to replicate unimaginatively over time (Kelly, 2000, reissued in 2009; Heywood, 2011, reissued in 2024). The notion of *community* is irrelevant; it merely becomes a surrogate for settled society in the area being planned. Neither concept — society or community — is actually the topic of discussion (Clements et al., 2008). Nor are the method, techniques, or the idea of planning itself problematic. The vision is scholastic, positive, reassuring, up to the point that it officially reintroduces (as in the man-

ual by Eric Kelly) the rational/comprehensive paradigm as a conceptual and operational frame of reference. The representation should be solid and well-developed, but it risks remaining devoid of evidence.

To give a meaning to the idea of community, we could look at various interpretations of what is *local*. In Italy, the work by Alberto Magnaghi is the most important contribution, consistent and tenacious in the long term. Other authors have presented similar visions with a clearer ideological connotation. Murray Bookchin associated community self-organization processes with the free manifestation of an anarchic or libertarian spirit (Bookchin, 2006; the book includes essays written between 1989 and 2002). David Graeber gave a leading role to rebellious social movements (Graeber, 2013; 2025, with Nika Dubrowski). Magnaghi does not express a partial or partisan vision, but trusts in the possibility of coherent, supportive, and responsible social formation not as a utopian goal, but as the evolution of the community that inhabits a territory (Magnaghi, 1990, 1998, 2000). Hope becomes prejudice. It is reasonable to aspire to self-sustainable territorial development capable of producing common good with respect to processes generated by the market and globalization, which are often unfair or dissipative. Empowering local communities with responsibility as a key social actor would be an essential step in the desired direction. This is because there would be an ‘awareness of the place’ as a set of identifying values, needs, knowledge, and shared experience, which could guide local society towards choices oriented at the common good (Becattini, 2015; Magnaghi, 2020). It is as if the condition of proximity were the obvious premise for a state of social cohesion and the capacity for virtuous self-organization. These are the cornerstones of the paradigm that Magnaghi called ‘territorialist’. Like what occurred with the idea of ‘concrete community’ supported by Adriano Olivetti (one of the influential sources of Magnaghi’s vision; Rugini, 2024), it is an ideological exhortation that is rarely echoed in reality. It could allude to some traditional form of local society that remains relatively closed and conservative when faced with modernization/globalization, but it is reasonable to doubt the edifying value of such models. Giacomo Becattini (the main interpreter of the economic basis of that vision: 2009, 2015) identified a pertinent frame of empirical references in the industrial districts of the ‘Terza Italia’ [regions focused on SMEs] (Bagnasco, 1977), which undoubtedly formed and were successful due to a network of shared practices and values well rooted in the territorial context. It would be a mistake, however, to underestimate the function of a plurality of economic and strategic interests in the development of those processes. If we refer to the younger generations, the evo-

lution shows the clear erosion of a few traditional values and the growing weight of the sphere of interests, which opens the way to competition and disputes even on the local scale. Carlo Trigilia (2005) and Fabrizio Barca (2006) had to acknowledge this reality, after being strongly committed to a virtuous and effective reintroduction of policies for social cohesion and sustainable local development in Italy.

In reality, the essential nodes of the problem were already clearly anticipated by Arnaldo Bagnasco in the late 1900s. At the time, the author invited a prudent use of the idea of *local community*, because there remained only fragmentary and decomposed traces of the more traditional notion — founded on the principles of territorial proximity and social cohesion — in relation to more specific topics such as identity, reciprocity, trust, and socio-spatial capital (Bagnasco, 1997). He also suggested abandoning the image of the territory as a *living organism*, the metaphor that Magnaghi always reiterated over time to represent a settled community. This is because the analogy might be valid for small traditional communities, but was clearly inadequate as soon as complexity grew. The various values and interests in play requires more sophisticated forms and tools of *social organization* (regulation, exchange, cooperation, contract reliance) to guarantee the indispensable requirements for coordinating and integrating the individual parties (Bagnasco, 2003). While those analyses had and continue to be grounded, the ‘awareness of the place’ risks becoming a nostalgic recollection or a rhetorical call to an imaginary identity (Jullien, 2018). In too many cases, the community of the place represents only a false assumption or hasty presumption. The result is that for the discipline, the ‘territorialist programme’ is configured as deontological requirement inspired by edifying values with the risk that it remains a theoretical petition. The community dimension of the place is a possibility that can justify civic and social commitment. However, this will always relate to an ‘upcoming community’ (i.e. one being formed: Agamben, 1990), like the uncertain and provisional result of two great factors that the territorialist culture tends to overlook: tension among interests that are varied, distinct, and sometimes contrasting, but nevertheless not cohesive or supportive and not just local; and the influence of relationships on various scales and distances, which interfere with the local scale in often influential ways (according to the visions emerging from the urban area that I recalled in Section 4.1). At any rate, the outcome depends on a coevolutionary process of ‘social construction’ (Bagnasco, 1988), which should take place but can never be taken for granted.

Two families of recent events seem to confirm and even reinforce the conclusion above. I am referring to the most recent interpretations of the ‘new localism’ in Great Britain and the idea of community that can be associated with populist ideologies that are overflowing in a variety of settings in the new century. The first topic was raised by the Labour policies in the late 1990s. By tradition, the British system of planning gave the central government a significant directorial role. Giving a greater degree of autonomy and responsibility in pertinent territorial choices back to the local sphere was a reform-oriented objective of the Blair government, although it did not reject influential guidance and control by the central authorities on the national and regional levels (Tewdwr-Jones, 2002). The scenario changed radically with the Conservative government in charge from 2010 to 2024. Essential responsibilities and powers were devolved to the locale systems with the possibility of more active involvement by stakeholders and networks of interests rooted in the territory (following the *Localism Bill*, 2010). Functions and tools in large-scale planning were largely dismantled, deleting a long history of structural and strategic ambitions. Directions from the central government were focused on reintroducing benevolent rhetoric (on the ‘big society’ and environmental sensibility), but also or especially guaranteeing a certain level of building and territorial development to face reported needs. The reason for and scope of the change were based on a simple, clear principle: inhabitants in the place understand the problems and potential of the territory better than anyone else. Giving them (rather than superordinate authorities or unelected experts) the responsibility for detailed choices is a democratic decision that can make the planning process more effective and just (Gallent and Robinson, 2013).

Is a promising space for action for the ‘communities of place’ evoked by Alberto Magnaghi therefore created? The evidence is controversial. Observers ask: Is a transfer of ‘power to the people’ (Brownill and Bradley, 2017) really underway? Some studies have highlighted a few encouraging factors. Experiences in ‘neighbourhood planning’ have multiplied quickly, enabling the mobilization and reconstruction of a variety of visions and local interests (Gallent and Ciaffi, 2014). To describe the trend, Brownill (op cit.) deemed it useful to adopt the principle of *assemblage* (introduced in Section 4.1), recognizing that localism is not always a purely local phenomenon. There is an awareness of some risks (deregulation, the NIMBY syndrome, the potential tension between market interests and environmental protection), but the overall score can be considered positive (Yuille, 2023). Other voices instead express worry and criticism: reform has favoured the affirmation of more influential and unscrupulous local interests; conflicts

of interest, episodes of clientelism, the need for opaque compromise between divergent visions and strategies have multiplied (Parker et al., 2019; Sturzaker et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2022). The most evident material effect was the drive for growth (as Yuille himself recognized, 2021) rather than care for the local environment. The capacity of British planning to create an adequate, shared vision for medium- to long-term and large-scale transformations are seriously weakened (Lord and Tewdwr-Jones, 2018; in this respect, refer to the critical sources cited in Chapter 2). In contrast, the door has opened to a neoliberal interpretation of urban and territorial development (Brenner and Theodore, 2002a, 2005). This is a dissonant framework with respect to the irenic scenario delineated by Magnaghi.

The second emerging topic that planners should reflect on is the idea of community underlying the populist ideologies in vogue today (Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017). Any community vision always assumes that the subject pertains to a social complex that transcends the individual. The forms and mechanisms may be different, such as ‘identification, subordination, or fusion’, as Roberto Esposito suggested (1998). Yet in the age of populism, we are rethinking the way in which these categories can be conceived (I already discussed some effects of this trend on planning culture and practice in Palermo, 2022, Section 4.10). *Identification* can be understood as adherence to the presumed values and desire for action that seem to prevail in the local context. This means recognizing the dominance of the majority at the expense of minority voices, which the populist ideology actually tends to exclude. The strategy of *immunization* (Esposito, 2002) is valid, which, to limit the danger of contagion, may look to annul any source of potential risk. The value of *peoplehood* as a sense and respect for the common belonging to the human condition therefore fails (Smith, 2020). Ideas of solidarity and tolerance shift to the background with respect to the principles of affirmation and protection of party interests according to an individualistic vision of the world that is reproduced — exalted — on the scale of a territorial system conceived as a collective actor. This is a concerning limit of populism, whatever the ideological orientation, be it the right (studied by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017) or the left (Mouffe, 2018); from this point of view, the distinction between the two sides is not important (Kenny et al., 2020).

*Subordination* is firstly an entirely cultural fact, which can also take a political form as the delegation of power to authoritarian leadership, which presents itself as formally democratic, but with illiberal substance (Crewe and Sanders, 2020; Rosanvallon, 2020). A radical shift is thus complete:

from the American constitutional principles ('we, the people') to some form of autocracy ('me, the people': Urbinati, 2019; Chatterjee, 2019), where an ambitious, unscrupulous leader poses himself as an authentic, unique interpreter of the true will of the people (or better yet, the majority), in the name of which he intends to act with authority, without conceding much space to institutional mediation or the voices of civil society. Thus, a unitary idea of 'people' that negates the principles of pluralism and diversity in favour of a (presumed) common identity and will can open the way to such strong and authoritarian leadership that it risks the fundamental principles and possibility of democracy itself (De la Torre, 2014; Tobias, 2022; Drache and Froese, 2022). With less dramatic consequences, forms of populism and demagogic leadership are not unheard of, even on the local scale (Kenny et al., 2020).

*Fusion* is always an ambiguous perspective because it introduces the rejection of individual autonomy and responsibility in favour of some transcendent entity (Phillips, 2014). Wise interpreters of the community spirit state good reasons for halting the demands of self-referential, possessive, and irresponsible individualism with respect to the context (Walzer, 1990; Mulhall and Swift, 1992; Sandel, 2018), but in this case, the alternative is unsettling. In a growing number of cases, the majority political control is forecast along with the formation of an autocratic regime. While community thought looks for a balance with the values of liberal society (Etzioni, 1995, 1996; Tam, 1998, 2019, 2021), the populist ideology reintroduces a regressive idea of community, which Amitai Etzioni considers antithetical to the (desired) perspective of 'liberal communitarianism' (Etzioni, 2014, 2018; Walzer, 2023). I add an additional note: the theories of 'communicative rationality' assumed that convictions and individual behaviours could evolve due to ideal forms of argumentation and public debate. The language of populism, however, seems indecently simplistic or even brutal (Moffitt, 2020). The call to reason is therefore out of place and probably useless (Jones, 2020). It would also be futile to limit oneself to deploring the lack of style. Looking to show the negative consequences of those visions concretely and convincingly remains the only possible answer; however, because it relates to 'faith' in many cases, perhaps the evolution of the facts alone can give rise to some rethinking. The current trend is the defensive and probably myopic answer to the fatigue, delusions, and injustice of a modern era that has become globalization, but the answers to problems by democratic society are insufficient and late (Müller, 2016; Elliott, 2021; Kenny, 2025). Such processes have eroded the community value declaimed by tradition (perhaps authentic, perhaps imaginary). It would

now be paradoxical to hope to find a better future through a simple ‘return to local communities’ (just as nations cannot hope to leave the global crisis only by looking for refuge in sovereignty). If the culture of populism today is truly influential, the currently possible local community is very distant due to certain characteristics contrasting with the ideal model hoped for by Magnaghi.

In effect, Bagnasco’s intuition (1997) was broadly corroborated by later events. We can now recognize the explosion of the idea of local community, which has taken forms that are not only varied, but often incompatible among themselves and with respect to the original notion (I outlined this tendency in Palermo, 2004, Chapter 8; today the movement seems even more evident and widespread). Gated communities: closed and socially cohesive due to a selective process based on class and market criteria, or even an ethnic basis (Blakely and Snyder, 1997; Atkinson and Blandy, 2006; Bagaen and Uduku, 2015). Communities of practices: the emerging effect of spatially sharing a few cultural and professional interests (Somerville, 2016; Blokland, 2017; Howard and Rawsthorne, 2019). Virtual communities: elective networks of remote interaction that, due to new technologies, could overlook the material conditions of the state and relationships of proximity (Schroeder, 2011; Goodspeed, 2017). ‘Inoperative communities’ (Nancy, 1991; Devisch, 2013): aggregates of individual subjects that share only coexistence in a common space, therefore constituting a multitude that can give life to contingent collective behaviours, but (in contrast with actual ‘social movements’: Melucci, 1982) expressing the typical manifestation of a post-political society rather than ties of solidarity or objectives of social transformation. Or ‘policy community’: the *polity* that in civil society is mobilized around a specific policy question under the given conditions (Hajer, 2003; Carr, 2006). All of these are forms of social organization (in some cases contingent and only temporary) that, in the given phase, may be more current than a *community of place*. I can understand the embarrassment in the discipline when faced with the clear crisis in one of its traditional foundations and the variety of emerging suggestions. The impression is that in the end, the most common choice is to avoid the issue, leaving it in the hands of builders and urban market operators, who (as I recalled in Section 2.3) still make use of the most traditional rhetoric with great ease. In Italy, the discipline basically seems to reject any discussion of the relationships between physical and social forms. We could assume that trust in the possibility of usefully dealing with the problem has failed. Perhaps some doubt has arisen as to the relevance itself, if it is true what Emily Talen (1999a, 2017) recognized. She said that designing a physical

form does not guarantee that it will determine social behaviours, but can offer only opportunities and suggestions of some relevance; therefore, it is not necessary to associate the discipline with an overly committed social doctrine — after ‘new urbanism’ has for decades promised worthy development in such relationships!

In this respect, the disciplinary reflection in Italy does not seem to push much beyond an *organic* vision that is still elementary and even outdated, because it revisits a few positions that have already emerged in the 1950s and 1960s without significant innovations (at the time they could be considered ground-breaking: Doglio and Venturi, 1979). I am alluding to Ludovico Quaroni, who considered the idea of *urban organicism* as an assumption and indispensable requirement for any planning process; Adriano Olivetti, who conceived planning as a form of collective action, where technicians had the task of helping local society discover its purpose and contextual possibilities; Giuseppe Samonà, who recognized the partiality of planning action as ‘action among actions’ that should converge in an organic framework of interpretations and projects; and Giovanni Astengo, who deemed an approach to be organic only if it was capable of integrating the technical and political dimensions of the intervention, thus conceiving planning as a social, democratic, and participatory process. I am also referring to Luigi Piccinato, who instead proposed a sort of ‘rational organicity’, favouring the technical problems of regulation and design of the forms (I addressed these issues in Palermo, 2004). These are not equivalent positions, but reveal a common fact: the idea of *organicism* is nevertheless valid, but there is no trace of the more complex topics of *socio-spatial organization* raised by Bagnasco. Among them all, the most popular vision in ordinary practice is likely Piccinato’s: simplifying or intentionally reductive, but seemingly more functional.

The embarrassing conclusion from the first two sections of this chapter is that the discipline seems reluctant or incapable when it comes to developing key questions such as *social* or *urban* aspects. Can we assume that this limit is irrelevant? It is not an original situation, but it tends to take more serious forms without a reasonable hope that something might change in the near future. It is as if the discipline had given up questioning itself on the fundamental reasons for its invention and social reproduction, concentrating only on problems related to everyday techniques and tactics. It is difficult to imagine that the situation will change unexpectedly, but two requirements should at least be hoped for: not accepting the oversized or instrumental ideological representations that the newspeak of urban devel-

opment tends to divulge as a surrogate; and re-establishing a few minimum principles of truth regarding the existing conditions through a responsible and more suitable exercise in *critical realism* (as Allmendinger and Beauregard suggested). I will try to respect these recommendations in the sections below, where I discuss the main technical problems that the discipline has to address when searching for more convincing perspectives.

### 4.3 The Form of the Plan

Urban planning is a strange discipline, or at least a paradoxical field of practice, which traditionally assumes the ‘plan’ as a unique tool, decisive on paper for the identity and relevance of the profession. Over time, however, whatever the context, it has been necessary to acknowledge a few critical situations: the form and interpretation of the tool are surprisingly uncertain and changeable; the balance of experiences has never actually been positive; the elements of dissatisfaction have even continued to grow, despite repeated attempts at revision and reintroduction. However, the form of the plan has not become a central topic of discussion, therefore lacking a careful, transparent reflection on the reasons for the instability and failure, but also on the most interesting road to explore in the future. The delusions probably hide a common difficulty that proves to be serious and remains unresolved in time: both the way of dealing with the rules to use or transform the territory and the need for action in the field. To simplify the discourse, I take the situation in Italy as a primary empirical reference (similar processes have been verified across the Western world, with a few differences in period and context).

The planning law of 1942 faithfully organized the founding principles of modern planning according to Marco Romano (1980), who noted with satisfaction that the legislative act anticipated by a few years the important British reform (1947) that represented the highest expression of the desire to publicly control spatial transformations. Romano, however, did not consider other, less-positive factors: the unsettling fact that it was the first and only general law issued in the sector in Italy; the ideological and practical consequences of the long period of Fascism on the capacity of the public administration to perform an independent and responsible role; the weakness of the disciplinary culture, which was limited to scholastically replicating experiences and techniques developed elsewhere, as demonstrated by the manuals published at the time by Dodi, Rigotti, and Piccinato (Romano criticized the limits of the first two texts; Piccinato was recognized with a greater social commitment that is difficult to rec-

oncile with a concept of the doctrine based on authority and technique). Another condition seems underestimated: the discipline in Italy at the time quickly presented itself to play an influential role in the current processes of democratic rebirth, even though many leading figures had been trained under Fascism. However, the interpretation of the role was largely technocratic, and therefore destined to arouse some problems with respect to the desired civic growth of public participation and interaction. However, any ideological vision easily risked clashing with purer, more intransigent positions; several intellectuals (Fabbri, 1975; Romano, 1980) reproached Italian urban planners after the Second World War for their limited ‘class consciousness’. It should be added that the technical application of the guiding principles of the modern era could also arouse some perplexity. We see, for example, the plan of Milan (1953), lauded by Giovanni Astengo and Luigi Piccinato as one of the first important applications of the new law (no. 18–19 of *Urbanistica*, 1956), but it is questionable with respect to key issues: the oversized weight of urban growth predictions; a policy for an urban shift to the service sector and residential decentralization not supported by the adequate development of rail infrastructure; a general lack of innovation in infrastructure, which confirmed many indications of preceding plans; and the strategically weak spatial reorganization of urban services (Oliva, 2002).

At any rate, the ideal form of the plan at the time seemed clear and indisputable in Italy, as an approximate design of networks, zones, and central places accompanied by the normative definition of the main parameters: plot sizes, coverage ratios, building density, heights, and distances. A ‘final project’ was configured, which should have been implemented consistently over time. In other contexts, the vision had long been questioned and possible alternatives widely explored, with special attention for topics relating to decision-making, learning from experience, building consensus, and suitable adaptations during progress. The Italian planning culture (except some forward-looking but singular voice) appeared with serious delay on those fronts. The legacy of Fascism probably continued to weigh on it. The technocratic/scientific tendency was revealed to be an improbable and inadequate move for circumventing the difficulties, even if Giovanni Astengo’s vision was inspired by a generous enlightened desire. Only in the 1960s and 1970s, and thanks especially to Campos Venuti, did a pragmatic, possibilist variant of the basic model emerge. This was marked by multipurpose zoning, ecological and environmental sensitivity, and care for several morphological features in parts of the city subjected to rules for their use and transformation. Above all, it included an idea of planning as a

public activity to be administered over time, rather than a design/model to build faithfully in an unknown future (Campos, 1991). Many ordinary experiences in the 1970s and 1980s, however, maintained a more trivial and objectively reductive mark, limited to bureaucratic application of the basic model, becoming the most common practice after the decrees on standards and zoning in the late 1960s. More patient, wise observers also had to recognize the inadequacy and negative effects of such practices, although they represented only a partial application that was not always consistent with the inspiring principles of the national planning law (see the calm yet inexorable opinions of Paolo Avarello, 2000).

As a result, with some delay, it also seemed necessary to renew the forms of the plan in Italy. Two primary demands influenced the attempts at revision, in line with the orientations already tested in other countries, although with clear differences in phase and a somewhat different temporal sequence. One great problem was the rigidity of the tool, which expected to prescribe the future with differing degrees of detail (from the large vision to specific operations). Over time, however, it was generally destined to substantial variations due to the emerging gap between plan design and the actual reality. One possible solution was already tested in the late 1960s in countries such as Great Britain and France, but it reached Italy only in the second half of the 1990s. The basic idea was to distinguish different components in the urban plan: structural frameworks with programmatic value destined to produce analyses, objectives, guidelines, and directives, organized in space and revisable over time; the basic regulations for the existing city; and effective operations to use or transform the territory, which were defined technically and normatively binding. Specific attention was therefore reserved for the construction and possible evolution of the vision, which was meant to orient the process, in a more open form compared to tradition, according to the contingent conditions of a quickly changing urban reality and the resulting possibilities for learning. The visioning capacity of the structural plan became a particular priority topic. The demand may have seemed justified and evident. In reality, though, it tended to express a variety of needs that emerged in different phases and were confusedly interwoven, with ambiguous results that generally did not meet expectations: a public idea of spatial and large-scale planning in the 1950s and 1960s; a reinterpretation of planning in the 1980s and 1990s as a tool to support economic/territorial development, which assumed partnerships between the public and private spheres; and the growing influence at the same time of multilevel governance problems and spatial integration of sector policies driven by the European Union. This related to three distinct

perspectives that were not easy to reconcile. The emerging effects were not intuitive and are worthy of reflection.

The second large drive to renew the traditional form of the plan was the deficit of urban quality in bureaucratic planning — like the plans based essentially on general zoning schemes established by sector laws (the prevalent practice in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s). Such criticism inspired a variety of attempts to rehabilitate issues relating to the urban form and design in planning experiences. We can distinguish different tendencies (which I have already delineated above): improving the morphological quality of urban regulation; recognizing a more influential role for urban projects in plan design; or aiming at the autonomy and priority of the development project for strategic urban areas with respect to the idea of the general plan. In Great Britain, France, Spain, and even in Italy, those experiences grew in weight and importance throughout the 1990s. They generally represented an original phase of experimentation that followed the period of structure plans as an attempt to overcome the now clear limits in the previous ‘structural’ approach. In Italy, the two trends were practically contemporary. In fact, one can note that the topic of ‘urban projects in the plan’ predated by some years the development of ‘structure plans’, even if the leading figures only consisted of a few elites and the period of experimentation was brief. The evolution of experiences marked three questions worthy of attention. Are we actually faced with ‘new forms of the plan’ — structural or design-oriented — that highlight a substantial discontinuity compared to the modern tradition? After 20–30 years, we should acknowledge the substantial failure of those attempts. What were the main causes such that critical studies still seem to be lacking? Finally, what are the most up-to-date tendencies, i.e. how can the plan for the future be conceived and evaluated? We will quickly examine the succession of guiding ideas, experiments, and results. There are at least five steps that seem useful to distinguish.

### *1) Modernity at Large*

Arjun Appadurai’s image (1996) alluded to the great cultural processes of globalization, but I adopt it here as a useful metaphor for the hopes and claims of the modern urban tradition of governing large-scale spatial transformations (an intrinsic and fundamental demand according to Luigi Piccinato, 1947). In fact, towards the mid-1900s, ‘regional planning’ became a frontier topic for the discipline and, apparently, a priority on the governmental agenda. The challenge was to address intense demands for investment, reconstruction, economic development, and territorial rebalancing due to a medium- to long-term and large-scale public strategy. The modern

project cannot be confined to city walls. To be fully realized, it should guarantee adequate organization and scheduled development for a vast system of functional and territorial relationships. That vision inspired the Dutch doctrine of planning (Faludi and van der Valk, 1994; Needham, 2000), the *aménagement du territoire* [territorial arrangement] in France (Merlin, 2002; Desjardins, 2017), the *Raumordnung* [spatial development plan] in Germany (not during the first phase of reconstruction, but in the 1960s and 1970s, when exemplary programmes, such as the reorganization of post-industrial areas in North Rhine Westphalia were realized: Briesen and Strubelt, 2022). The different lines of experience shared a few salient characteristics. They always dealt with public initiative programmes based on a hierarchical spatial order, a detailed basis of knowledge and assessment, the actual capacity to invest the necessary resources, and public management of the processes. For some time now, none of the hypotheses can be taken for granted. Reiterating similar positions without criticism would involve some risk, at least creating new ‘books of dreams’ as was said in Italy about Giorgio Ruffolo’s ‘Progetto ‘80’ (1969), in a country where, in contrast to other European contexts, discourse on regional planning has remained just an ideological narrative (Allione, 1976).

That vision quickly lost all credit and hope. However, at the start of the 1970s, it was still one of the influential frames of reference of the British innovation of the ‘structure plan’. Some observers attributed a more radical meaning to the reform, as opening to the topics of ‘planning policy’ versus the traditional logic of ‘blueprint planning’ (Solesbury, 1974). However, the current interpretation is more trivial. The point was not to better highlight the political aspects of the planning process, but rather to represent a public vision of desired development (Needham, 2000), capable of assuring order and structure for the territory, justly and effectively guiding the course of operations. This was also the most common interpretation in France, where a similar tool, the ‘schéma directeur’ [directive scheme] was instituted and tested in the same period. The same perspective was then taken up in Italy with great delay throughout the 1990s. The first great transformation of the original model of the urban plan thus took shape. In the meantime, however, other visions were conquering centre stage.

## 2) *Governance and Integration*

In the 1980s and 1990s, the new experiences of the European Union aroused a fascination that would be difficult to imagine today. This also affected the realm of spatial planning even though it was not included among the institutional competence. With respect to the ‘structural’ orthodoxy that

I mentioned above, there were two substantial elements of innovation. The public vision of a complex territory cannot be hierarchical or unilateral, but must recognize the problems of ‘multilevel governance’, i.e. the need for coordination and agreement among the different levels of government that have some responsibility for the territory in question. In addition, any attempt to design an overall vision assumes a capacity to coordinate, or better yet integrate a variety of sector policies. The function of planning must meet those political and administrative needs. If the two requirements are respected, the large-scale vision changes the meaning, form, and means of interpretation compared to the ‘structure plan’. In effect, towards the end of the 1900s, the planning literature dedicated original, conspicuous space to such topics. The paradox is that the tendency was not justified by a direct institutional demand, since urban planning did not represent an official voice of the European agenda. However, a few very active members of the discipline are working hard on that new frontier, perhaps to present themselves for an effective role in the economic/territorial policies promoted by the European Union, or perhaps to restart a disciplinary review justified by the evolution of the supranational institutional framework (Faludi and Waterhout, 2002; Waterhout, 2008; Faludi, 2009, 2010).

The structural concept of the territorial plan — up to then the most accredited version — gave way to an idea of ‘spatial planning’ that recognized governance among different levels of government and the integration of sector policies in a specific territorial area as two essential priorities (OECD, 2001; Tewdwr-Jones and Williams, 2001; RTPI, 2007). The innovation was to ensure better efficiency and a greater impact on the planning process (Hulsbergen et al., 2005; Nadin, 2007), even if the convergence among multiple objectives remained a complicated problem (Haughton et al., 2010). The perspective was supported by an influential media movement aimed at self-legitimacy (the planner’s) and pedagogical goals (improving the quality and effectiveness of public policies). Among conflicts of interest and the optimism of will, the process hinted at some limitations that would be best not to underestimate (Dühr et al., 2007). In fact, the results did not meet the commitment or expectations; there were many discussions of principle, virtuous exhortations, and methodological recommendations, but little concrete proof of innovation or the success of the practices. One of the most important products of the period was the development of the ESDP (European Spatial Development Perspective, 1999). This was just a manifesto of general principles; edifying but nearly self-evident. Despite the enthusiasm of a few disciplinary circles, it was difficult to imagine that the developments would have been relevant (Palermo,

2006). In effect, the lack of significant results was also recognized by those who had always believed in that programme (Faludi, 2018). Governance and integration are certainly two key topics for urban planning today and in the future, but they cannot be evoked without recognizing their essential *political* nature, a task that is even more arduous in the age of sovereignty and localism (as Faludi himself had to recognize, 2018a). In the present situation, the idea of ‘spatial planning’, like the ‘structure planning’ that was tested before, also did not seem to represent a plausible or fertile frame of reference in many cases. The result was that the effects on the form of the plan and planning experiences were not very significant, despite public recommendations to apply the vision of the ESDP in national settings. In Great Britain in 2004, the legislative and instrumental framework of planning changed significantly. The reform was based on a renewed idea of *spatial planning*, but the European influence seemed tardy (Hague, 1996; Twedwr-Jones and Williams, 2001) and below expectations (Allmendinger and Haugthon, 2009). In the same period, other needs proved to be more influential.

### 3) *Growth Dependence*

The planning function cannot be purely regulatory; in fact, an excess of limits would become an obstacle for the actual possibilities of city and territorial development. The objection is familiar to market operators, but it is also shared by those analysing the urban phenomenon (e.g. Glaeser, 2012). The premise suggests rethinking the sense and capacity for planning action, which could be intended as a key tool for promoting urban development, naturally in equitable and sustainable forms (OECD, 2001; Nadin, 2007). This is the vision that inspired the creation of the *Schéma de cohérence territoriale* [Territorial Coherence Framework] and the *Plan local d’urbanisme* [Local Urban Plan] in France (2000), or the *Regional Spatial Strategies* and *Local Development Framework* in Great Britain (2004), which, after the structural experiment in the 1970s, could represent a second great attempt at renewing the form of the plan. The intentions were reform-oriented. There was an implicit trust that politics and the administration were able to orient the process around virtuous objectives as a guarantee of public interest in the ongoing transformations. There was plenty of awareness of the variety and potential strength of private interests mobilized by each actual process of urban transformation, but also a reliance on the capacity of mediation and synthesis by the public authorities, always in equitable and sustainable terms. Are these hypotheses plausible? Some caution seems appropriate. Many observers have revealed that this new scenario marks an increasing ‘growth-dependence’ in urban planning

(Rydin, 2013; Waterhout et al., 2013; Ferm and McTomaney, 2018). Ultimately, the objectives of sustainable development can become weakly justified support for the emerging demand of building and urban growth. Planning becomes a necessary procedural institution for accompanying the progress of transformation processes (Haughton et al. 2010; Haughton and Allmendinger, 2014). The contribution with respect to determining the sense and actual milestones of operations was more modest, while the requirements of *deliverability* and *viability* of the interventions were decisive (Ferm and McTomaney, 2018). A so-called ‘post-planning’ scenario can therefore be delineated (Palermo, 2022).

The criticism certainly has a foundation. Unfortunately, it was not accompanied by any alternative vision or more convincing tools. In Great Britain, the forms of the plan desired by the Labour party were dismantled by the Conservative government starting in the 2010s. The replacement — from the general indications of the *National Planning Policy Framework* to the ambiguous practices of *Local Planning* and *Neighbourhood Planning* (which I have already commented on) — did not represent a response to objections, but rather an acknowledgement of reality. ‘Growth-dependence’ is accepted as a legitimate opportunity; without any scandal, it can become the main function in the new context. Must we long for the forms of spatial planning tested by the Labour government in the early years of the century? Various figures in the area in Great Britain support a similar position, but Allmendinger and Haughton (2009) are more disappointed. The experiences could not maintain the reform-oriented promises overall and the main effect was to facilitate urban development processes. In those cases as well, ‘growth dependence’ became a likely perspective. The two authors do not hesitate to claim (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010) that it would be necessary to conceive of an alternative not only to traditional instrumentation, but also to the 2004 reform. The problem is that ideas are lacking and a substantial change does not seem probable.

#### 4) *The Gap Between Planning and Design*

When searching for solid innovations, it is natural to examine an old problem which has never found a satisfactory solution: How should urban planning deal with problems relating to the quality of the form and the urban project? In the late 1900s, we could see a clear revival of this question along a variety of lines (Palermo, 2025; Chapter 11, but the main topics have already been mentioned here). In France, the interest in the *projet urbain* became an alternative to ordinary planning practices. In Spain, the same topic inspired a strategic and design-oriented reinterpretation of *ur-*

*banismo estratégico*. In the United States, form and quality became desired requirements of regulation (more than the plan) due to experiments with ‘form-based codes’. The orientations were different, but the common feature was that partial interpretations of the greater objectives were always addressed.

Italian experience in the 1990s was brief and limited to a few eminent figures, but it held value as an ideal, thus enabling in-depth discussion on the possibility of a new ‘design-oriented’ form of the plan. In theory and in practice, Vittorio Gregotti maintained the need to conceive of the urban plan as a morphological and physical vision of the future city. A structural frame of reference is indispensable, but in contrast to the previously tested ‘structure plan’, it cannot consist only of an analytical or evaluative scenario. It should represent a hypothesis for ‘organizing the space in terms of form’ (as De Carlo used to say), which would preordain a few spatial choices of strategic interest as well as the design-oriented development (at least indicative) of several salient areas. Bernardo Secchi insisted on the necessary discontinuity of the form of the plan: because traditional models could not design a meaningful idea of urban structure and form, which requires a unitary open-space project extending to the entire urban territory and regulatory-binding projects for strategic areas (see Gabellini, 1990, on the plan for Siena). Those contributions (for a summary, see Cagnardi, 1995; Tosi and Renzoni, 2017) seized the suggestions of physical planning anticipated in Italy in the 1960s by a variety of architects/planners such as Samonà, Quaroni, and De Carlo. Developing those premises, they were able to create an interesting laboratory of innovative experimentation. The result was controversial. It is difficult to doubt the good reasons that inspired the practices, but the outcomes marked a variety of critical aspects. The key issue is the normative value of the ‘project in the plan’. While this is a purely indicative exercise, the risk is that the experience is too laborious with respect to concrete utility, because there can be no certainty on the actual impact of design-oriented guides on effective transformation processes (perhaps summary indications may play an equivalent role). If the guiding project becomes binding — such as the numerous area projects that Secchi developed in his plans — the risk is that the tool becomes rigid with detailed prescriptions that may be premature with respect to the evolution of the processes. The result would be inevitable and laborious recourse to plan variants. The realistic conclusion seems to be that the interpretation of the plan is too ambitious and complicated. The commitment is notable, but risks being jeopardized during implementation; simpler and more cautious solutions may seem appropriate (in fact, that form of the

plan quickly faded, and not only in Italy).

The comparison with British experience is interesting. Matthew Carmona (2018) observed that the main line was seen in Great Britain only in the second half of the 1990s, with a certain delay compared to experiences in other countries. However, it found fertile ground in the emerging will (which I already mentioned) to conceive not only a regulatory but also proactive plan capable of directly affecting economic/territorial development. The quality of the form and urban projects became a potential factor in the development strategy (Carmona, 2020). Academic considerations highlighted the possible modes of innovation in the development plan (then in use) according to morphological and physical principles: vision, rules, and plan projects (Carmona and Punter, 1997). The Labour government gave a significant impetus to the *design review*, due to the CABE (Commission for the Architecture and the Built Environment: Carmona et al., 2017). The ideology of ‘urban renaissance’ became the positive rhetoric supporting experiences of urban regeneration in continuous expansion (Punter, 2012). However, after two or three decades, the score is not comforting. As occurred in the United States, the issue of quality assumed a private orientation (‘marketizing design governance’: Carmona, 2019), as possible leverage to enhance ordinary market operations. The public function is more marginal today, for which a partial course correction can be observed. Carmona himself (2018) set out the main doubts. The priority would no longer be to renovate the content of the traditional plan in a morphological and design-oriented sense, but rather to conceive more agile and targeted ad hoc tools with the goal of offering an exhaustive framework of related guidelines (*Urban Design Framework*), along with more specific technical suggestions for issues and areas of special interest (which could take the form of *Design Codes*). Once again, Ludovico Quaroni’s distinction (1967) between the ‘piano-idea’ [a spatial vision for the city] and ‘piano-norma’ [a set of binding spatial rules] emerges, but the relationship between the suggested original devices and the institutional instrumentation of the plan remains opaque. Once again, the demand for fertile fusion of the two worlds seems destined to remain unmet. Care for quality does not pass through a renewal of the form of the plan, but foresees complementary developments, which could potentially replace the general plan in the long term. We must conclude that a design-oriented form of the plan still remains an unrealized dream.

##### 5) *Towards a Unique, Strategic, Simple Framework*

The reality today shows the dominance of a different form of the plan. We

consider the most recent interpretations of the *Local Plan* in Great Britain (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2014; Ferm and McTomaney, 2018), the *Plan Local d'Urbanisme* in France (Desjardins, 2020; Dupuis-Lyon and Heinrich, 2022), and the 'piano urbanistico comunale' [municipal urban plan] in Emilia Romagna, after the regional reform in 2017 (see the monograph in *EcoWebTown*, 27, 2023). A common trend emerges from different contexts. These are unitary tools (organization into components is not expected) that are potentially self-sufficient (in fact, they work even without other complementary tools on a more or less detailed scale). The prescriptive content is intentionally limited (many choices are postponed to later opportunities based on authorizations, conventions, or, more rarely, operational plans). A strategic function prevails, acting as a general guideline, while morphological and design-oriented indications are generally modest. Are these the essential features of a new ideal plan that represents the most up-to-date trends? The conclusion seems plausible, but is certainly not obvious. There is a significant difference with respect to the original model, as with the simplicity of the solution compared to ambitious attempts at renewal that we have observed in the long term. These facts lead me to reiterate the need for a disciplinary reflection, to account for the change and demonstrate the possibility of a dignified interpretation.

Overall, the reaction from the discipline still seems inadequate. Some authors simply seem to negate any criticism. The last *Reading* by Hillier and Healey (2010) tends to confuse *planning* and *spatial planning* (an error, admonished Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009). Paradoxically, the authors are not concerned with clarifying the idea of *spatial planning* that they intend to support, despite the polysemy that I have highlighted in this section (the framework of possible variants is even larger). They limit themselves to bringing together a variety of positions without any interpretational or critical framework, as if the potential conflict of interpretations and the risk of contradictions or negative effects on the practice were irrelevant. Other authors do not hide their worry. Yvonne Rydin (2013) denounces the 'growth dependence' of the discipline. Klaus Kunzman (2022) recognizes that many reform-oriented ambitions have proved to be illusory. Ferm and McTomaney (2018) acknowledge the weakness of the theory; the communicative approach that was long a totem of academia also shows limits that cannot be reasonably underestimated. Inch (2021) and Sykes and Sturzaker (2024) track the score of British experiences in the last 15 years, which is not exactly comforting. The awareness of problems is a positive fact, but the resulting perspective remains fragile and unpromising. Rydin limits herself to hoping that institutions and existing tools will work more consis-

tently with the best principles. It would be the planner's task and capacity to favour an interpretation of the rules and opportunities that is more consistent with worthy, shared values (Rydin, 2013, Chapter 10). The reasons why this hope was not respected in the past while it may now unexpectedly be met remain obscure. All the other authors cited here agree on a common vision: territorial governance introduces ethical demands and requirements for sustainability that can never be ignored. Planners seem to be assigned to interpreting those needs in technical and administrative terms. Their profile will therefore always be current and relevant for politics and for society. However, the narrative overlooks the concrete difficulties of playing a role that is so demanding in actual practice.

It seems a further step is needed. It is right to recognize the limits of current conditions, but I maintain that any illusion of being able to overcome the difficulties without any meaningful change — true metamorphosis — in the role and means of action is unfounded. The form of the plan has changed radically over time; the evidence seems irrefutable. Following the form, the sense and function have changed. Today, this is only a simple and flexible frame of reference destined to guide or even just accompany emerging actions (Haughton and Allmendinger, 2014). In contexts such as the Netherlands that boasted a solid spatial planning tradition, the influence of informal processes is also growing (Meijer and Ernste, 2022), while the interpretation of wise reform-oriented principles is still a matter that arouses doubts and reconsideration (Nadin and Fernández-Maldonado, 2023). If this is the reality, can we suppose that plan-making is still the planner's essential (principal or only) task? If these figures still aspire to some social recognition, perhaps the sphere of their expertise and responsibilities should be redefined, assuming clearer, more decisive commitments with respect to implementation, strategy-making, and the project in progress that are discussed in the sections below. The hypothesis seems simple, almost tautological, and I am surprised that it remains on the margins of disciplinary discourse.

#### **4.4 'Beyond the Regulation Approach'**

Bob Jessop invited us to reflect on the topic (Jessop and Sum, 2006). Studying the evolution of mechanisms that regulate capitalistic development processes, the author highlighted the growing importance of governance devices and networks that guarantee a certain stability in an intrinsically conflict-ridden system and seemed destined to replace other, more traditional regulatory tools. The tendency seems general and has strengthened

over time. The possibility of interpreting the function as a ‘command and control’ regime seems ever less up to date and appropriate (Baldwin et al., 2010, 2012). Regulation can no longer be understood as an assumption or a foundation of the governmental capacity. Rather, it represents a set of principles and mechanisms to adapt to possible governance practices in the context. The managerial capacity therefore becomes a decisive requirement (Lodge and Wegrich, 2012). The current change reflects a profound transformation of the idea of politics itself. To use Salvatore Natoli’s rich image (2019), it is the aim of politics that is changing, ‘from the theology of the kingdom to governing contingency’.

The observation is certainly grounded in the urban sphere as well, although the question there remains surprisingly marginal. With respect to urban planning rules, a few technical problems are especially interesting (although the disciplinary discourse in the field is not innovative: Section 3.5). The most traditional ideology is probably still influential. In Italy, for example, contributions on the topic are intermittent and generally compatible with disciplinary orthodoxy. Matteo Bolocan (1997) investigated the functions of socially regulating urban planning as the result of the interaction between public regulation and a variety of interests and strategies in the context. The vision is suitably complex, but the possibility for process direction and control remains a plausible assumption due to cooperation among the parties. Stefano Moroni (1999) analytically reconstructed the regulatory content of the plans without addressing the problems of contingency. Rather, he reiterated the widespread idea that questioning the plan as a key tool means risking the identity of the discipline and profession (ibid.:15). Following this (2010; 2012, with Alexander and Mazza), the author criticized the teleocratic ambition of the traditional plan, but only to contrast an abstract idea of regulatory code with general worth and automatic application, indifferent to the context and discretionary responsibility of the public authority. This ideological vision exalted the presumed capacity for the self-organization of complex territorial systems with respect for few simple and general rules. At the same time, he avoided the actual problems of governance.

I maintain that a change in paradigm is necessary. How should we understand (public/social) regulation when the challenge lies in ‘governing contingency’? The dilemma is clear. Should we still aim at uniform, rigid, binding rules beforehand (as suggested by the modern tradition) or conceive of diversified, adaptive, discretionary devices while the work is in progress? Reason and experience should push us towards the second op-

tion. Law, politics, and society itself tend to express a different position, one that is more prudent or opportunistic. The (presumed) certainty of the rules would be a more reliable, simpler, and less onerous solution (both technically and politically). Adopting a unique building index is a tangible result of this orientation; however, it is a choice that has no substantial justification because the equivalence of rights should be valid only for equal environmental and urban conditions. Faced with this dilemma, there are two common strategies. The first is the intertwining (not unusual in the field) of hypocrisy and opportunism. The most rigorous certainties are proclaimed in the public sphere. Backstage and over time, there has been significant openness towards adaptation to contingent conditions. The main alternative tends to limit the imposition of prescriptive rules. The functions and areas of regulation are resized; the times are delayed as much as possible. Binding rules are issued only when the choices are deemed to be mature, i.e. when the implementation of an urban transformation project is imminent. In the transition phase, less demanding guidelines and directives are used to for an objectively weaker and vaguer function. The content is *soft* and the spatial delimitations are *fuzzy* (Haughton et al., 2010). In Italy as well, the perspective became explicit and legitimate after the reform in Emilia-Romagna in 2017. In theory, conformity with the programmatic indications should facilitate the operational development of a project; non-compliance should become an impediment for any development hypothesis. However, exceptions to the rule are very common and even rather simple (for example, in France, the lack of a territorial frame of reference should exclude the possibility of local settlement growth, but the prefect can always allow an exception: Dupuis-Lyon and Heinrich, 2022). If we again consider the two scenarios delineated by Emily Talen (2012) on the possible evolution of urban planning rules (Section 3.5), the road seems clear, with no alternatives. The idea to improve the formal quality of the rules seems implausible, except when the *form-based code* is strictly associated with an ongoing project. The prevailing trend marks the dominance of flexibility and contingency, although not accompanied by more mature theoretical considerations.

My opinion is that it is not enough to recognize, with prudent or resigned realism, the confirmed trend. The planning culture should take responsibility for current models of governance, which always imply discretionary choices, a capacity to learn from experience, risks of legitimacy, and transparency in the processes (Gaudin, 2014). The managerial aspect of the processes is exalted, although it should not be understood trivially as a methodical exercise in systems thinking, but rather a strategic experience

of ‘joint action’ in a multifaceted context (see Section 4.6). The hypothesis of ‘rule savings’ becomes a wise move that should not respond only to precautionary or opportunistic rationale. Let us not forget Giancarlo De Carlo’s call (1994): ‘It would be ideal for an urban plan to not require norms because everything would be already said in the drawings with such terse language that it is clear and persuasive’. This is neither a technical nor communicational detail. The author questions the idea of general plans limited to regulating quantities, such as detailed plans that prescribe quantitative parameters without addressing problems related to configuring the urban form. A planning culture that does not forget its architectural roots should be aware that imposing rules is not the only or required strategy to ensure decorous quality in urban operations. If politics, administration, and society were able to guarantee the production of real transformation projects with a suitable quality due to relevant urban design and design review processes, the function of a priori regulation — with the related dilemmas that I have mentioned, but also the concrete risks of a bureaucratic trend — would be more marginal. De Carlo’s dream could find some actual development. I think it is important to be aware that regulation does not represent a value in itself, but just an instrumental remedy for the weakness of our society. This ironic attitude would be justified if the related risks and responsibilities were not underestimated. The evolution of the language is always meaningful. It is no coincidence that traditional interest in the issues of ‘design control’ has gradually been declined, while discussion on ‘development management’ has multiplied (Ben Clifford in Ferm and McTomaney, 2018). We must accept the idea that the rules are simple, modest, and up for review as long as one condition is respected: the weaker current regulation becomes, the more necessary it is that planning assumes clear, responsible commitments regarding effective action in urban transformations. ‘Beyond regulation’: the disciplinary responsibility should shift from regulatory assumptions to the effective capacity for action. The current demands of governance in social processes and the quality of the design-oriented results push in this direction.

#### **4.5 Reconsidering Implementation**

In this framework, the traditional concept of implementation is out of place (as I anticipated in Section 3.4). The primary reason is that the very idea of the plan is questioned. There are two main objections. The first is that implementation does not relate to a completed project that must simply be followed faithfully and effectively as possible; rather, it relates to a devel-

oping framework destined to be specified through adaptations over time according to the image of ‘planning by doing’ (Section 3.4). The second objection is more radical. The urban plan was traditionally viewed as the fundamental matrix of every relatively significant urban transformation. Today, however, it should be clear that it is just one policy tool available to politics and the administration, requiring mediation and integration with other programmes and strategies. There are various results in relation to the priorities and combinations of tools adopted in the context. The paradigm of policy tools represented an important innovation in political studies. What was anticipated in the late 1900s has been confirmed and developed in recent years. In this respect, Michael Howlett published a vast, up-to-date *Handbook* on the topic in 2023, which confirmed the topicality of the paradigm, but also the difficulty in conceiving and corroborating relevant innovations. The conceptual frames of references are still basically the same as in the late 1900s, except for some negligible details: specific attention to ‘procedural’ tools that affect the organization of the process; and the distinction between positive effects (that favour the efficient production of a good or service) or control (aimed at conditioning the stakeholders’ behaviour to avoid undesired consequences). It is precisely this behaviour that should feed into the new tools in question, those that have taken shape due to the development of new communication technologies, nudging, and the interaction/collaboration between players. A little-discussed constant is the ‘utilitarian’ orientation. The topic of choosing the most suitable tools for the context in relation to the stated scope is generally addressed with a rationalist approach aimed at achieving the best possible benefits. The reiterated connection between policy tools and policy design expresses a similar orientation (Howlett, 2011); frankly, the positions may seem to be surpassed in the planning world.

Nevertheless, the reflections on these contributions were only partial in the discipline. The most common tendency is limited to exploring the possible impact of different political tools in managing the plan (Stead, 2021). Less clear is an awareness that planning can be done with tools other than the traditional plan. If we still assume Christopher Hood’s taxonomy (1983), it would be clear that not only the capacity for public regulation of land uses and transformations comes into play. Real policies for public and private investment also count in complementary sectors. The same is true of the concrete capacity of governance, i.e. interaction and agreement among a multitude of independent stakeholders. Communication policies also count and are increasingly decisive ‘in the digital age’ (Hood and Margetts, 2007). The willingness to challenge the mystifying rhetoric regarding the

urban question that is so popular today would be a great innovation, aiming to regenerate a 'planning awareness'. Recognizing the variety of available tools and possible strategies would now be a cornerstone of the discipline, with the resulting need to reconsider the professional and educational profile. I am not sure that the vision is shared or has actually been tested. As a way of rethinking the implementation, the change would be radical. The main problem no longer lies in applying a dominant tool — the plan — but rather choosing and implementing the tool or combination thereof that is most appropriate for the context. Yet there is an important clause: the operation should not be understood as just an exercise in instrumental rationality, but as an effective interpretation of the idea of planning policy, the idea that the planning culture has long struggled to accept, seeking refuge in structural or strategic simplifications (Section 4.3, Section 4.6).

The way in which this practice can be developed raises interesting problems. Should we give credit to a new perspective of 'policy design'? As I anticipated in Section 3.4, the vision should be familiar to the 'design-oriented' tradition of planning, but it is currently being developed mainly in political studies. Contributions have multiplied in the last 15 years. The fact that design topics may become a frontier of policy-making may be surprising, although they struggle to find room in the world of planning. This is because emerging questions were a traditional legacy of disciplinary considerations in urban planning. For more than a century, planning culture tried to apply the suggestions of instrumental rationality, then it folded back on various forms of 'bounded rationality', winding up correcting course towards an idea of programmatic vision and more open, experimental, adaptive process management. We find the same fundamental elements in the 'design-oriented' concept of public policies, which have taken different forms in the last 50 years. First came the aspiration for a 'design science' that met the needs of the public administration (Herbert Simon's thesis, 1960, 1969), followed by 'behaviouralist' variants as a compromise for bounded rationality that allowed rigorous principles to be adapted to the contingent reality (Cyert and March, 1963; Simon, 1982). More recently, a change in paradigm has been needed to address two converging needs: the growing demand for flexibility and a capacity for innovation, which required a more creative and experimental approach to the simple application of problem-solving techniques; and recognition of the variety of actors involved in the decision-making process, which entailed adequate mechanisms of interaction and agreement among the parties. As a result, any relevant project needed to be conceived as the result of a social process of joint production. We can therefore distinguish three primary trends (van

Buuren, Peters and Lewis, 2023): a) the interpretation of policy design as an exercise in instrumental reason, which can take a technocratic orientation; b) an exploration of what is possible through open and innovative practices for investigation and learning; or c) a creative act that assumes the synthesis of multiple interests and visions that are influential in the context. The first line is the most traditional, but it did not manage to keep its promises (as has also happened in other fields, including planning). The experimental or cooperative alternatives (which are not mutually incompatible) are a more recent discovery and challenge. They are configured as emerging modes in a ‘new design for policy-making’ (Howlett, 2011). Two main types of representations emerge from the literature. While acknowledging the new orientations, the most consistent line continues to favour a rationalist vision, in which the central question is the choice and application of the most appropriate tools for achieving the stated objectives in the context and period (Howlett, 2019). Evaluation is based essentially on measures of effectiveness presumed by the tools being used (Peters, Capano, Howlett et al., 2018). A more limited number of contributions challenge the dominance of instrumental reason and also tend to enhance the political dimension of the processes (Peters and Fontaine, 2022); however, they do not reject a systemic vision of the problems (confirming the permanent influence of the comprehensive ideology) and the importance of the intentionality of the individual actors, whose visions and strategies should be composed in the final project. The framework is therefore more complex compared to the *old design*, but it may not be perfectly consistent, balanced between suggestions of different orders. One point that does not seem up for discussion: whatever the approach that is adopted in the context — old or new, instrumental or more sophisticated — a ‘design-oriented policy-making’ experience will produce superior results compared to any non-design practice which relies only on opaque, contingent, perhaps opportunistic mechanisms. The design orientation would therefore represent progress worthy of attention and support (Howlett and Mukherjee, 2018). What reactions might guide a similar scenario for an old urban planner?

The reading of this family of contributions — which outline a substantially unique and ambitious framework — may be understood as an ethnographic experience, i.e. as a type of voyage through a parallel world, where planners can find — intact and surprisingly up to date — the traces of a distant past which may seem exhausted in their eyes. The fundamental questions discussed today by this branch of policy studies are basically the same as the ones presented long ago in the public debate on urban planning: the ‘old/new design’ alternative 50 years ago; the hopes (and crisis) of the ‘col-

laborative' paradigm 30 years ago. The world of policy studies seems to ignore that reality based on a disconcerting prejudice: architecture and urban planning would not deal with human, social questions, but only physical transformations (Peters and Fontaine, 2022: 1). Marking the anticipation of the times does not mean claiming a title of merit. Simply speaking, the 'reflection-on-action' even then forced at least a part of the planning culture to investigate that family of topics (I can think of my first books, which touched in a restricted, but certainly curious and enterprising disciplinary area: Palermo, 1981, 1983, 1992). I think that urban planners today can look with empathy on the current debate between political scholars, but also with a certain disenchantment. It is difficult to assume that those sources can generate new fertile interaction. The impression is that one is witnessing the replica of a reasonable path, but rather like *déjà vu*, which has no alternatives. There is no doubt: in this field, the rigorous project of a 'design science' does not stand up; the methodological promises of problem-solving are not enough; an experimental orientation is inevitable, but not free of risk; the perspective of inclusive, participatory choices, which should take the form of collective coproduction, may be an objective and hope, but encounters serious difficulties that should not be underestimated.

A considerable part of the recent literature on policy design continues to neglect these problems (Howlett and Mukherjee, 2018; Howlett, 2019). Only some voices are justly critical and reflexive (see the *Handbook* by Peters and Fontaine, 2022, particularly the contributions by the editors, Le Galès, Pierre, Colebatch, and Siddiki). In truth, the situation is paradoxical. Under current conditions, the formation of policies demands a capacity for innovation, experimentation, learning, and multi-party agreement. Those requirements, however, are objectively inconsistent with the most common political reasoning, the institutional principles of certainty and transparency in public decisions, and bureaucratic methods used by the public administration. Political scholars are inspired by the world of 'product design' as a framework of creative experiences in innovation and experimentation. However, it is clear that the material context is incompatible with the political/administrative sphere. There are therefore good reasons to doubt the possibility of a trivial transfer of ideal models and good practices from one field to another. While the same scholars had examined the evolution of experiences in urban planning/urban design in the long term, their judgments would have been more cautious or less obvious. My conclusion is that, unfortunately, this line of studies and experiences is not capable of offering new indications with respect to the historical dilemmas that torment planners. The now widespread interest in policy design only confirms

that there is a family of common problems, which unfortunately do not seem to allow for immediate or satisfactory solutions. The exploratory orientation does not reach the goal, but rather represents the failure of other ambitions that lack limits or a foundation (like the idea of ‘design science’ itself). The experimental orientation becomes a necessity, but may not be understood as an individual experience. It also brings into play forms of know-how different from expert knowledge, such as the urban perception of the *flâneur* (Westin, 2014), the cognitive function of bricolage (Zittoun, 2014), the effects of *nudging* and participation (Westin and Joosse, 2022) or the ‘tacit’ influence of common sense (Gascoigne and Thornton, 2013; Delaney, 2019); positions that are still not legitimized by the disciplinary sector most faithful to tradition. The collaborative orientation expresses an irenic desire that is generally illusory, as the long history and controversy of ‘collaborative planning’ has shown.

To neophytes of policy design, allow me to suggest a change in perspective. It might be appropriate to prioritize questions of design policy (or planning policy). This is not a play on words. The crucial question underlying exploratory or collaborative visions is the political dimension of the process. The variety of interests and visions in play is a very plausible condition. As a consequence, the result of the process is generally an ‘emerging effect’, not the immediate product of some party intentionality. Building a vision of public interest means facilitating mediation and agreement between competing strategies. This is because the topic cannot overlook the capacity of governance of a complex territory. It is surprising that this political content remains in the shadows in various branches of today’s policy studies (save for a few exceptions, which I have noted). After much experience, planners may have understood that the limit is not sustainable. Likewise, it no longer seems willing content itself with the idea of implementation that pertains to a traditional concept of the discipline. The dominance of the political aspect of processes is a condition that can theoretically no longer be negated. Nevertheless, the influence of tradition is, in today’s planning world, weaker than what seems to be valid in the field of policy studies. Planners now find it difficult to draw influential lessons from it.

#### **4.6 Making Strategies**

While the topic of interest is the effective capacity of action, the specialist literature on strategic spatial planning does not offer important contributions. The main objectives are academic or just methodological. The texts illustrate the virtue of the approach and are rich with recommendations

on the ideal way to proceed. Unfortunately, they are configured as pure petitions of principle. Indeed, no solid or convincing argument is presented in support of the formulated theses. The discourse is limited to introducing some hypothesis that are generally ambitious, but uttered with a disconcerting light-mindedness; however, it does not seem able to offer relevant justification or developments beyond simple statements. Criticism of traditional planning is summary, but inexorable. Instead, the difficulties that may risk the presumed 'strategic' vision are ignored. Complex commitments (more arduous than those required by tradition) are announced with apparent naivety, as if their realization were not an open question loaded with hidden dangers. In fact, in many cases, an adequate analytical representation of the complexity of the problems is lacking. There is uncountable evidence. Patsy Healey (2003, with Albrechts and Kunzmann; 2007, 2009) does not doubt that strategic spatial planning is a 'transformative, integrative' practice, i.e. one that is capable not only of producing the necessary substantial changes, but also of ensuring a framework of coherence among partial actions. It is not clear how this desire can be fulfilled instrumentally, because the effective means of action remain vague and may often seem weak. They introduce (only) the actors' imaginative capacity, a reframing of current visions, the renewal of the agenda of problems to face, the expansion of the framework of opportunities. Frankly, one struggles to grasp the specifics and scope of the innovation, which only reiterates the known contrast between traditional land use planning and emerging forms of spatial planning (Section 4.3). The author herself recognizes that the discipline has always had to face similar problems (in Burnham's plan for Chicago, as in Abercrombie's 'Greater London'). The emerging thread would, mysteriously, be able to not only solve technical problems, but also encourage the formation of a new 'political community' (Healey, 2009). These are just exhortations or 'idle chattering', as professionals in the sector lament (Section 3.2), while the conceptual framework remains weak and confused. According to Louis Albrechts (2004, 2006; 2013 with Balducci), the strategic approach would be able to ensure a variety of heterogeneous, complicated objectives: selecting a package of areas and specific topics of primary interest; generating an influential, shared frame of reference for partisan visions and actions; guaranteeing the capacity for critical analysis of the context and tendencies, but also effective 'multilevel governance'; and producing and making pertinent decisions. The objectives are certainly not original, but it is not clear how and why they should finally be at hand, due to the strategic approach. Albrechts' vision presents only an embarrassing syncretism: at the same time, the new

approach should be ‘selective and integrated, visionary and action-oriented, rooted in the places, and open to multiscalar relationships’ (Albrechts, 2006). It is an excellent case of ‘squaring the circle’, as Dahrendorf used to say (Palermo and Ponzini, 2015. Chapter 3). I believe that this literature is not only irrelevant, but can also lead to negative effects because it indicates a false perspective and develops it in inadequate ways. Ignoring the concerns and doubts that some scholars cannot conceal, after making a rigorous reflection of experiences (Oosterlyncks et al., 2012; Ziafati Barfarasat, 2015).

As partial justification of the trend, we can see that a large part of the literature on strategic planning in the public sector does not offer more comforting contributions. If we read the most recent texts by John Bryson (who had inaugurated that line of research and experience 30 years before), a permanent state of uncertainty and dissatisfaction are striking. What are the particular requirements of a ‘strategic approach’? Must the vision be comprehensive or incremental? How is it possible to overcome the limits that each of the two positions continue to propose? How can complicated relationships with the context, contingency, and implementation be managed? These are old, elementary questions. The author must admit that progress has not been sufficient (Bryson et al., 2018). Many contributions are reduced to a pedagogical exercise that remains repetitive and inconclusive; manuals that recount good intentions and general methodological schemes are not enough. If the challenge is truly to ‘make strategies’, I believe that two moves are essential.

The first is to change the focus. In effect, over the long term in the world of corporate strategies, there has been a progressive shift in the topics of interest. As Paul Flemming (2014) has documented, by analysing the evolutionary trends in the last 50 years, the strategic orientation initially assumed a long-term horizon. Already after the Second World War, the growing environmental turbulence induced companies to abbreviate the timescales of strategic planning. Since the 1980s, a new change in paradigm has emerged: attention has shifted from the original ambitions of planning towards the priority functions of strategic management. It is true that a large part of the literature dedicated to the new topic has maintained a scholastic and methodological nature. There have been innumerable contributions of this type, but only a few works (for example, Rabin et al., 2000; Henry, 2007; Carpenter and Sanders, 2014) are concerned with discussing a few fundamental assumptions. Must the logic be comprehensive or incremental? How much does the intentional vision of the ‘strategist’ or

emerging effects matter? Nevertheless, the implications of the change cannot be underestimated. The *managerial* interpretation of the issue not only evokes the forms of the process and method of decision-making/implementation, but marks the centrality of the problems of ‘governing contingency’: emergencies and unpredictability of the context, risk management, a capacity for orientation and adaptation under uncertain conditions, conflict management, and construction of the necessary agreements (Joyce, 2015, 2022). A similar tendency has already been seen in the field of planning, though not without objections or resistance. Now that movement may find support and new possibilities for development through the most up-to-date business strategies, which recognize the relevance of a design-oriented approach (‘managing as designing’: Boland and Collopy, 2004).

The second move is related, but more radical. It is not possible to ‘make strategies’ if the radically *political* dimension of the process is not recognized. A significant result is possible only through interaction and agreements (at least partial and provisional) among divided interests. It would be an illusion to assume that the format governing the production of the strategic plan is a suitable context for conducting that political process. Party interests are rarely willing to make their position explicit in a public arena; the claim that convictions can evolve and converge towards an agreement through an ideal communication process is illusive. The political management of the process passes through other phases and modes. The operation is certainly complex, because it introduces two different positions: the provisional convergence of interests around a partial choice; and the need to recompose local interventions within a sustainable overall vision, which requires governance capacities on many levels. The point that seems to elude the naive enthusiasts of strategic spatial planning is that the desired plan generally does not function due to an objective deficit of politics, or particularly due to a deficit of governance in the political aspects of the process. Those nodes are very clear to some strategic management experts. I consider Henry Mintzberg to be exemplary; he is cited by the planning literature, but evidently remains misunderstood. Bryson finds his critical judgements on more orthodox positions to be too bitter (Bryson et al., 2018), and Albrechts does not share the objections that Mintzberg raises against any strategic vision that aspires to be comprehensive, i.e. dealing with all dimensions of the problem in an integrated manner (Albrechts, 2004). The author’s contributions, however, should be illuminating. Vast empirical documentation has highlighted the disordered variety of possible interpretations of concepts of strategy and strategic action (Mintzberg et al., 1998). The responsibility for some choices cannot be avoided. The

author does not hesitate to recognize the dominance of several factors: actions and interactions, emerging effects, crafting, and learning (Mintzberg, 1987, 1994, 2007). There is no scientific or technocratic illusion, but responsible practice of ‘art and craft’. A strategy in use is always an emerging effect of a varied field of interests and interactions, which any individual actor can try to orientate; less plausible is any claim of control over the entire process. A design-oriented dimension remains relevant because an influential strategy need policy design, but also tends to rely on specific projects relating to topics and areas of special interest. In this sense, the idea of strategy intertwines with the idea of vision and territorial governance (Section 3.7). However, even those projects do not generally express the intentionality of the parties, but rather an ‘emerging effect’ (Mintzberg and Westley, 2001). I agree entirely with this vision (Palermo, 2022, Chapter 7), the only one that is truly sustainable. I believe we can conclude that an important part of the disciplinary discourse on strategic spatial planning is unjustified and inconclusive. From this point of view as well, the crisis in the foundations seems to be a topical and influential fact. Planners should have the humility to learn from some branches of private interests which have proven their awareness and sense of responsibility.

#### **4.7 The Project that Matters**

How can the performance of urban planners be measured and assessed? According to the principles of instrumental reason, the criteria may seem simple and clear: it would be sufficient to check the conformity of the completed events compared to the intentions declared in the plan. Under current conditions, however, after the great mutation I have tried to represent, the verification may lead to worrying results. In many cases, the gap that emerges is significant, and it becomes difficult to maintain that planning has been successful. Based on new experiences in spatial planning, a few experts have suggested modifying the point of view. The fundamental requirement would not be conformity between programmes and effects, but rather the capacity of planning to influence how the main actors in the process see, consider, and therefore act. This was the thesis supported by Andreas Faludi (1989, 2000) and Dutch scholars that assume the concept of performance as a guiding principle for assessment (Mastop, 1997; Mastop and Needham, 1997; Mastop and Faludi, 1997); similar positions were formulated by Bernardo Secchi (2000). ‘Shaping the mind’ would therefore be an important result, or one that is even superior to any short-term material milestone. The argument is not uninteresting, because the

need to improve understanding of the problems and open new perspectives with respect to the concrete means of addressing them is clear. However, similar hopes should not become an alibi aimed at justifying the incapacity to achieve the clarified objectives, claiming presumed intangible effects as a surrogate that is difficult to verify (in fact, the risk lies in supporting an idea that becomes impossible to falsify). I claim that certain caution regarding these topics is suitable. We cannot evade responsibility for the events: urban planning today is right in asking for an effective contribution to the quality and functionality of transformations in the city and territory. The project that matters above all is one that produces any positive change in the urban conditions.

This rarely relates to the definitive project that faithfully implements the intentions of an existing plan; that traditional model is now generally outdated. It is difficult to nourish great expectations for the independent initiatives of some influential market operator capable of realizing relevant transformations in the actual field, but often indifferent to an idea of public interest (the result may be disappointing: I already noted the severe limitations of a few urban transformations underway in Milan, but Battersea Power Station in London is certainly worse). Nor would it be sufficient to focus attention on the programmatic frameworks that should guide strategic developments in a complex area. In too many cases, the actual contribution is just rhetorical or tends to act as ‘heresthetic’ to manipulate consensus (Riker, 1986, White, 2013). The project that matters is the one that respects two essential requirements: it represents a legitimate and shared political project that takes the form of architecture; and it guarantees a sustainable transformation capable of combining the essential requirements of technological innovation and economic development with the principles of social cohesion, environmental protection, governance capacity, and morphological and functional consistency of the existing settlement. To quickly illustrate the requirements, two references can serve as models or at least potential traces: Giancarlo De Carlo; and the disciplinary movement that formed around the principle of sustainable urban design.

De Carlo’s contribution was of exceptional interest, not only for its lucid and forward-looking vision, which distanced itself from the most influential positions at the time (from the culture of the CIAMs to rationalist/functionalist urban planning) to indicate different, more fertile paths. His experiences in the field showed the possibility of a ‘practice of the project’ that pushed beyond the good intentions of design coding or review, but also the *structural frameworks* developed in Gregotti’s or Secchi’s plans.

These were ‘true projects’, as De Carlo specified with irony containing controversial hints, that addressed the problems of ‘organizing the space in terms of form’ (the primary mission of urban planning), giving a physical and morphological expression to a ‘political project’ emerging from the context (as Paolo Ceccarelli observed when commenting on the plan for Urbino in the 1990s: De Carlo, 1994). I do not know of any more significant experiences capable of combining two dimensions that generally remain separate: the formal exhibition of *starchitecture* or *transnational urbanism*; and the assumptions and political/social ambitions of the *projet urbain*. Alone, the reference to De Carlo’s vision and works may be valid as a high interpretation and integration of these topics (De Carlo, 1964, 1966, 1992, 2005).

To find a pertinent background, I turn to the most current discourse on ‘sustainable design’. I know, of course, that the idea of sustainability has been put at risk by unbridled, instrumental rhetoric: mere petitions from public authorities, or the hypocrisy or mystification of market operators (Parr, 2009). On the contrary, an ideology with the opposite sense has sadly long been active, tending to negate that family of problems and justifying irresponsible behaviour. However, just open any respectable manual that offers a pedagogical introduction to the topic is enough to agree on the pertinence of the questions and the need for the resulting requirements. As a guiding document, we consider the texts by Steven Cohen on the ‘sustainable city’ (2014, 2018) and by Avi Friedman on ‘sustainable design’ (2015, 2021). It is difficult not to share their priorities. The new fact is the essential space now dedicated to a family of ‘ecological/environmental’ topics that were traditionally more marginal. That expansion of interests does not represent an emerging sector specialization, but rather (as Yvonne Rydin intuited in the 1990s: Rydin, 1993, 1995, 1998; Blowers and Evans, 1997; Davoudi, 2000) an essential orientation for any significant experience in planning or design. Technically, attention is not focused only on the master plan, but extends to the main topics of physical planning: the project for built forms, care for relationships between built forms and open spaces, and the guidance and assessment of ways of living that may take place in a settlement. Friedman’s contribution and similar manuals are not always innovative. The impression that the requirements of sustainability do not differ from the necessary qualities for any good practice of urban design is reasonable. Nevertheless, the agenda of problems illustrated by that family of texts is certainly correct, just as the call for greater disciplinary commitment on these fronts can be shared. In too many cases, market operations seriously avoid these responsibilities.

In the resulting framework, I glimpse the possible traces of ‘planning the urban project’ (Palermo, 2017; 2025, Chapter 13), that is, the particular reasons for and contributions to the concrete intervention by urban planners in the effective production of urban transformations. In sum, two lines of action should be indispensable: care for the relationships between project and context (intended as form, environment, and compatible functions); and the concept of design as an open process that cannot evade discretionary responsibility, attention to collateral effects, a capacity to learn, and adaptation according to the course of events. The project that matters should find a sustainable balance between political intentionality, material interests, design hypotheses, and effects emerging from the context. The goal is ambitious and complicated. It measures the true difficulties of planning tasks, which transcend the sphere of pure regulation or visioning exercises that risks remaining ephemeral. New room for innovation and experimentation opens (Palermo, 2025, Chapter 13), although it still does not have many certainties or clear foundations.

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## 5. A Future to Build

‘The future is built day by day.’ This is the message that Bernardo Secchi left to us (2015), although of course it is neither obvious nor unambiguous. It could be intended in at least two ways that differ in meaning and perspective: as a call to a development process that is still in progress and destined to achieve the desired goal, which will guarantee progress and wellbeing for all of society (the ideology of the modern project); or as recognition of the dominance of contingency, which permits only a tactical, provisional, incremental concept of urban action. The first hypothesis could remain purely an illusion, despite the best intentions, while the second is a ‘second-best’ option, but one that is wise and functional in many contexts. The risk is that the discipline assumes increasingly weak or opportunistic forms. In a specific context, the dilemma could evoke the enlightening confrontation between Habermas’ and Rorty’s visions in the late 1900s (Finlayson and Freyenhagen, 2011; Finlayson, 2019). While the former did not doubt the possibility — or better yet, the need — to fulfil the positive values and effects of the modern project (Bernstein, 1985; Habermas, 1987), Rorty’s vision conceded a lot of room for the factors of contingency and irony (but also solidarity: Rorty, 1989), recognizing the need to forever discuss the dominant ideology (even those oriented towards progress) and adapt action to the conditions of the time and context. The fundamental point is that the two visions should not be confused (Hedrick, 2010; Kilanowski, 2021).

Secchi’s recommendation must therefore be interpreted, necessarily adopting a stance. Throughout this book, I have claimed that a great mutation has already occurred with respect to the ambitions of regulation and control in modern urban planning. This means assuming some responsibility in reasoning about the completed process, justifying its results, and clarifying the technical and social implications. In other words, it means showing that the course of events does not represent just the abdication of the generous original ambitions, nor the triumph of opportunism. Even though ‘urbanism today is a field whose parameters, goals, and methods are unclear and often contested’ (Eric Munford, 2018). With this in mind, I believe that a few lines of research and discussion draw the attention. The first objective is to open a discussion on the main transnational trends, because a regionally limited horizon would be too narrow and partial. It is true that the official planning culture traditionally pertains to Western society; however, that culture has, for some time now, also absorbed topics and visions that have emerged in other parts of the world. The result is that

the strongly directive models (inconceivable in the Global South: Bhan et al., 2018; Rukmana, 2020) have faded, while the burden of flexibility and contingency has grown. The second objective is to discuss (à la Rorty) the most common forms of discourse with respect to the city, territory, and planning, which are today the voice of more directly implied economic interests, or the demands of professionals in the sector. The doctrines of disciplinary academia come last (often in unsatisfying, but nevertheless unconvincing terms). The third objective is to overcome eclecticism, or worse, the pervasive ambiguity of the planning culture, which tends to evade responsibility for a choice between potential paradigms that are alternative and sometimes immeasurable. I believe that we should acknowledge that disciplinary action is generally achieved by partial interventions and through local projects. The prevailing logic is therefore pragmatic and incremental in the ‘ville en éclats’ [city in pieces] (Bailly, 2025); the problem lies in keeping risks and the negative effects of a ‘(too) disjointed incrementalism’ under control, as Charles Lindblom already admonished (1965). The fourth and last objective is to focus on the tools through which the discipline performs its essential functions in the given period. Whatever the context, one trend seems to emerge clearly. The production of the master plan (or its current variants: spatial plan, strategic plan) no longer represent a great event in the history and life of the city. It has become a practically ordinary administrative act to perform quickly, while public attention and institutional and social expectations have become objectively modest. The questions that politics and society itself ask of technique today seem to be oriented in another way. The priority is no longer the formal preparation of a new plan, but looking to better understand the crucial processes underway, the plausible consequences within a short horizon, the problems that could become priorities, and possible lines of action to avert imminent risks. Of course, if the technique responds to those needs using only ‘scenario planning’ or by automating smart technologies, the most likely result is a vicious cycle.

There remains a need to determine the essential planning tools in a given phase. If the logic of intervention by parts prevails, it would be reasonable to concentrate efforts on the quality of local transformations, which ultimately represent the decisive measure of the eventual success of the operation. It is not sufficient to suggest guidelines and directives while the space is reduced to prescriptive rules. Planning should be able to affect the effective quality of the resulting interventions due to direct efforts in policy-making and urban design; it should also take responsibility for any negative effects. The objective dominance of the local dimension does not

mean that traditional interest in territorial and strategic visions with a long horizon should be abandoned. However, the orientation seems to change: it is no longer the time for great utopias, nor is it sufficient to conceive some general scenario. A framework seems important if it is capable of selecting and organizing a set of local projects with clear cross-scale and strategic interests. In this sense, there is an essential connection between the capacity of design and visioning. ‘Reframing strategic urban projects’ (Salet and Gualini, 2007) becomes a decisive step in rebuilding a frame of reference destined to evolve over time, based on the development of effective actions and according to the adaptive logic of learning from experience. The change, therefore, does not seem marginal. It introduces the horizon and tools, passing through forms of discourse and the guiding paradigm. In my opinion, building a dignified future, as Secchi hoped, means working positively in each of these areas, proving that we know how to coexist with the precariousness of the foundations, which I denounced in Chapter. 4. To end this contribution, I reconsider the four lines of action.

## 5.1 The Horizon

Local commitments cannot negate the importance of an overall vision, which cannot be limited to declaiming shared values and objectives or self-celebrating a professional figure that has seemed weak and uncertain (such as more acute and responsible observers admit) since the ‘end of the modern era’ was declared (Vattimo, 1991). A transnational comparison helps to understand how some problems are not contingent, but rather structural and related to common interests in a variety of contexts. It would be necessary to recognize, first of all, that the most influential planning traditions are particular expressions of Western culture, but they seem extraneous and almost irrelevant in other parts of the world (Murray, 2022). According to Ananya Roy (2005, 2009), the discipline should dedicate greater attention to actual practices in the Global South, potentially drawing new energy from such experiences; however, the idea risks remaining a matter of principle (Murray, 2022). The clear fact is that the demand for flexibility and contingency seem to prevail everywhere, questioning the foundations of the modern tradition. A vision alternative to historical models does not seem clear, well-developed, or shared, and the development of the best reform-oriented hopes have not been convincing. In fact, the forms of urban discourse everywhere reveal growing elements of weakness, delusion, and uncertainty. In the Netherlands, the capacity to publicly govern processes has long been questioned: ‘to good to be true’ (De Roo,

2016). The traditional ‘rule and order’ image of Dutch urban planning is perceived today as a myth that has given way to the concrete experiences of ‘shared governance’, where the public must operate in agreement with important private interests. In France, 25 years after the ambitious reforms (2000) that renewed the programmatic frameworks and local instrumentation, the state of the discipline arouses a lot of fear. Now we see a new need to reinvent the essential tools (*Urbanisme*, no. 442, 2025). In Great Britain, after nearly 15 years of Conservative government (but the difficulties had deeper roots), a sense of discomfort prevails in disciplinary circles faced with widespread practices that negate the best principles: ‘wrong answers to wrong questions’ (Inch et al., 2020). Compensation seems difficult, but the challenge is clear. In this context as well, ‘reinventing planning and the planners’ would be necessary (Davoudi et al., 2020). In Spain and Italy, the course of experience is no longer positive, but the disciplinary discourse seems even weaker and introverted. In the last 10–15 years, Italy has struggled to find any meaningful trace of critical analysis or suggestion for renewal. It is certainly not enough to seek refuge in the memories of the past, once again repositing a reading of the classics that is scholastic and lacks innovative contributions (as occurred with Novarina in France, 2023; Gaeta in Italy, 2024). Nor is the positive commitment from professional institutions sufficient, continuing as they do to reiterate not only edifying values, but traditional disciplinary roles and potentially influential programmes for action (see the most recent documents by RTPI in Great Britain or the APA in the United States).

In general, there is a striking gap between discussions of principle — always committed and promising — and the reality of effective practice — rather more fragile, opaque, or opportunistic. Under these conditions, local commitment is not enough. Someone should deal with rebuilding a unitary, albeit structured vision that can be used as a critical frame of reference, but also as a matrix for any change in course. The question should be well understood. The scope cannot be to reaffirm the unity of the discipline, when reality shows the explosion of ‘many urbanisms’ with diverging trajectories (Ryan, 2017; Murray, 2022). It would also be useless to look for an ideal paradigm that is finally able to meet the best requirements (Walker, 2015). The priority is to give a unitary meaning back to a framework that risks disintegrating into the demands of technocratic order (from Faludi’s rationalism to smart urbanism) and the irreducible reality of informal practices, which do not pertain only to the Global South (Roy, 2005, 2015), but also affect the latest revisions of the modern project (Innes et al., 2005, 2007). It would be necessary to re-establish a few essential truths to show

that certain difficulties are now pervasive, but also to reconsider the change that remains a binding need.

## 5.2 The Forms of Discourse

The evolution of disciplinary discourse is an interesting topic emerging from the necessary considerations. It still seems fruitless to focus on the communications from land and real-estate operators after what I presented in Chapter 2. This is also because the video of Gaza by President Trump has become emblematic, leaving viewers speechless. Unmasked, it may represent the dark side of market logic when there are no limitations or necessary counterweight. A call to reality, an invitation to sobriety — versus the excess of emphasis and mystification — may be the dignified response. Either that, or nothing remains but to look for comfort in the ‘criticism of cynical reason’ (Sloterdijk, 1992). However, we cannot ignore the discourse of professional associations that offer an important representation of the spirit of the times. I have already mentioned North America several times. I referenced the rhetoric of the APA, aimed at exalting the ethical code of the profession, but also improbable traditional tools (from the comprehensive plan to standard regulations, which in reality have long been open to many doubts and discussion). I also denounced the unjustified ambitions of new urbanism, which presents itself as a manifesto and guide of universal value, but is actually configured as a traditionalist movement that could develop neighbourhood models (Ruthesir, 1997; Ryan, 2015), but remains without ideas or words before the unsettling reality of the megacity. However, the long-term appraisal of the planner’s profession does not indicate severe criticalities (Birch, 1980; Johnson et al., 1998; Birch and Silver, 2009).

European experiences also arouse some perplexity. In 2003, the European Council of Town Planners (a professional association with members from 14 European countries) approved a ‘New Athens Charter’ in Lisbon, the result of five years’ work. The initiative did not lead to important developments, but it is interesting for the intentions (contradictions) that it highlighted. The CIAM Charter, conceived in the 1930s, was a manifesto that could be heavily criticized today, but at the time it expressed a clear, ground-breaking vision compared to tradition: a modern idea of architecture and the city, a functional interpretation of planning, a technocratic concept of the professional role. Those premises yielded a well-structured framework of specific hypotheses and prescriptions for the future. The development of the ECTP stemmed from an incomparable context, with a

postindustrial city and postmodern culture; planning should care for development more than regulation; it should be participatory rather than technocratic; it should take the form of an evolutionary process rather than a blueprint. As a result, the manifesto could present nothing more than a summary diagnosis of the new problems and a few recommendations in favour of integrated development and greater urban connectivity (Hulsbergen et al., 2005; Davoudi and Madanipour, 2012). We could conclude that the idea of a new Charter seems little justified in the given period and context. It is no longer time for simplifying, assertive visions. The forms of discourse should change. Better-reasoned diagnoses are necessary, as are more complex programmes for investigation and action.

Different professional associations have, in fact, addressed topics of this importance. In Great Britain, outstanding exponents of the Town and Country Planning Association (the legacy of the Garden City Movement from the early 1900s) explored the possibility of ‘rebuilding British planning’, after a long period of crisis that, in their opinion, had lasted since the 1950s (Ellis and Henderson, 2014). However, the contribution does not seem to be up to its ambitious objectives. It is configured as a broad manifesto of good intentions — in the housing sector, for a stable economy, against climate change — but it does not clarify the policies or tools that could enable actual progress in any of those fields. The influence of the garden city or new town culture seeps through, but it is reasonable to doubt the importance of those visions compared to the complexity of emerging problems (in this case, the critical observations aimed at new urbanism are probably also valid). Some years later, the same authors (Ellis and Henderson, 2019) proposed a strategy in 10 moves to overcome the crisis in British planning, guiding it towards a sustainable future. As they say, it is not sufficient to denounce the end of the great urban utopias in Great Britain as in Europe, or the particular responsibilities of the current government; however, the capacity for proposals is still modest. These relate to just a few generic *attention-shaping* contributions referring to nearly obvious topics and objectives, which are merely stated: restoring a medium- to long-term national vision in planning; reorganizing planning institutions; creating the conditions for governance actions to become more creative and make the professional figure of the planner more suitable for place-making; renewing professional training (which, in the authors’ opinion, has lost its great traditional roots); encouraging participation; and initiating different policies for housing, government revenue, the environment, and planning standards. Their conclusions are emphatic (‘time to choose... time for a U-turn’), but in reality, the technical content of the proposal is modest.

The topic of discussion would be just a political orientation, the remains of which are just vague programmes and commitments.

The stances adopted by the most important British professional association, the Royal Town Planning Association (RTPI), no longer seem important. In the second half of the 1900s, the institution had long stopped academic aspirations, which wanted to radically renew the disciplinary profile, distancing itself from the tradition of town planning to adhere to a ‘process-oriented’ concept with more relevant goals relating to the economy, society, and the environment (Healey, 1985). However, at the end of the century, the RTPI did not hesitate to align itself in favour of ‘new planning’ — the political objective of the new Labour government — as a tool to support economic/territorial development (as long as it was sustainable) with functions and responsibilities not limited to controlling the use and transformation of the land. The idea of spatial planning (which I already illustrated in Section 4.3) clearly inspired the manifesto published in 2001 (RTPI, ‘A New Vision for Planning’), and was reiterated again in 2010 (RTPI, ‘Shaping the Future’), when the end of Blair’s political period was already clear. Following this, a long period of Conservative government began, which, according to academia, marked the downfall of the discipline (Sykes and Sturzaker, 2024). How did the Association react to the circumstances? I would say very weakly: avoiding direct confrontation with the government and looking for some diversion to remedy the objective crisis in planning. In 2021, the RTPI document ‘Planning for a Better Future’ limited itself to suggesting — as priority guidelines for reform — questions such as ‘plan-making (on the local scale), development management, green growth, climate change, nature recovery, planning with and for people’. It is difficult to find a strategic vision, a specific meaning, a cultural or political programme in the document. In 2024, attention was focused on the topic of ‘strategic planning in England’, a perspective that is hard to consider innovative, while the score of completed experience should arouse some concern. New ideas are lacking, as is an adequate analysis of the technical difficulties that have accumulated over time. Conformism and self-legitimacy are largely shared principles, while awareness of the current crisis remains in the shadows; there is little willingness to publicly address more complicated or compromising topics. The simple principle that a profession should present a positive image of its role in the world is valid for building consensus and trust. Maybe Bob Evans (1993) was not wrong when he guarded against the risks of professionalizing the sector, which tended to underestimate the political and social aspects of the processes (an opinion shared by Reade, 1987).

Are disciplinary doctrines able to question such a sweetened image, bringing to light the actual critical points while offering some reassurance as to the possibility of overcoming the resulting problems? This could be an institutional function of the planning culture, but the perspectives do not seem promising. The voice of the discipline proves to be more feeble and marginal amid public opinion than the discourse of market operators, or sector professionals. Nor does it assume explicit or much less unambiguous forms. Unfortunately, an eclectic orientation persists, in some situations taking the shape of syncretism; nevertheless, it is destined to raise uncertainty and confusion. How lightly can we claim, in unison (Teixeira, 2020: 47-48): ‘a planner must be a scientist, a designer, a visionary, a political advisor, a mediator, an urban manager’? The vision is inspired by the second Charter of Athens (2003; see Hulsbergen et al., 2005). These clearly different positions, sometimes incomparable or in clear contrast, are brought into the same scene without the capacity, responsibility, or humility for a critical review — as I documented in the previous chapters, every time I addressed the topics of the theory (Section 2.2, Section 3.2). Above all, the fundamental function of selective orientation continues to be missing. What are the vision and lines of action that technicians can present to politics, the administration, and urban society?

### **5.3 The Paradigm**

Any proposal should find reason and support in a suitable critical reflection on completed experiences. I believe that it would be honest to recognize that the principles tested in theory were a failure. Scientistic delusion. Rationalist mystifications. The communicative/collaborative myth. Post-structuralist diversions. The strategic narrative. The smart neomodernism of architecture technologists. The vanity of authorial designs, or starurbanism. But also critical thought that fails to become action in the field. If the discipline does not admit that these were errors and that they nevertheless dealt with paths that are now precluded, it risks recognizing the good reasons of those practitioners that consider academia to be irrelevant, destined to remain self-referential and socially ineffective. Freedom from that heritage would be necessary to choose and lay claim to a framework of more pertinent principles. I have already indicated a trace of this (Palermo, 2022, Chapter 8). In my opinion, urban planning must be understood as an administrative practice that assumes politically relevant content, but also the responsibility to realize concrete and sustainable projects. It requires a pragmatic approach, although one that is critical and reflexive; the capacity

to adapt to contingencies and learn from processes, which is always exercised with a sense of responsibility; and attention and care for what is possible to be explored with critical realism and a reform-oriented approach. In this sense, the pragmatic concepts of planning and design that seem to respect these requirements are interesting.

The most common rhetoric and a large part of the disciplinary literature are not consistent with this set-up. No willingness for self-criticism emerges, nor does the openness to choosing and justifying the guiding paradigm. Conformism, eclecticism, and syncretism still prevail. The questions I have posed in this book do not seem worthy of interest. However, I believe that it is necessary to assume responsibility to delimit and clarify the field of action of planning, while recognizing the fundamental principles, roots, most important sources, and frontiers. I do not think it is possible to ‘build the future’ without this initial step. It is useless to exorcise incrementalism, whose risks are easy to denounce; there is no alternative either in practice or in principle. The actual change is generally piecemeal, as Karl Popper recognized (1957). The point is to interpret that practice, which cannot be avoided, in line with several reform-oriented values and design-oriented requirements, i.e. as the expression of a culture of change that manages to become an edifying practice. This means governing contingency in flexible and adaptive ways, but consistent with a few nonnegotiable principles. There are no certainties or foundations, just a political and design-oriented disciplinary commitment that can have a better chance of success the clearer and more pertinent the understanding of the role and challenge are. This does not mean rediscovering the culture of pragmatism (Bernstein, 2010) as if it were a unique, definitive frame of reference that only requires application. At any rate, the revival was poorly understood by a few disciplinary actors (as I maintained in Palermo, 2022, Chapter 8). The topic of interest is the way in which a few general principles can be developed concretely to renew the means of investigation or the urban project, but also the means themselves and the sense of disciplinary discourse. *Phronesis* is not an abstraction, but an ordinary requirement of the practice (Kinsella and Pitman, 2022). This is why I am closely following the new contributions emerging in these fields: as a vision of the world (Festl, 2021; de Waal, 2022), ethics (Liszka, 2021), experimental design (Dixon, 2020; DiSalvo, 2022), social inquiry (Schwartz, 2020; Bowen et al., 2021; Gross et al., 2022), pragmatic environmentalism (Carolan, 2017), and the production of knowledge (Pihlström, 2021; Chang, 2022). A paradigm consists not only in a conceptual framework and technical language; it also needs exemplary experiences. This is a moving field that still requires exploration

and reframing, but it can offer interesting indications on the way practices are conceived and developed.

## 5.4 The Essential Tools

There is no doubt: the ‘urban project’ has become the key tool. The contrast between project and plan is no longer a current topic. In fact, the question has dissolved for two reasons. On the one hand, the market unfortunately often sanctions the independence of the urban transformation project compared to any urban-planning rule or forecast. On the other hand, the plan cannot overlook the area project; not because it is able to prefigure it (as was hoped in the 1990s), but because today’s planning tools take on a locally completed form only when a local project is mature. Only at that point is it possible to assess the substance and quality of disciplinary action in the context. Paraphrasing Mintzberg, ‘plan-making is not what you think’ (Mintzberg and Westley, 2001). It would be reasonable to expect that the planning culture knows how to discuss visions and habits from the past to take new, specific responsibilities. What is the particular contribution of the discipline to the production of good urban projects? Rehabilitating the original tradition of physical planning is not sufficient. Significant reflection has now shown that each actual ‘projet urbain’ introduces fundamental questions of social and political impact (the important line of studies developed in France is worth noting: Palermo, 2025, Chapter 13). In fact, the sensitivity to those dimensions sometimes risks prevailing, wiping out once again the connections with specific problems of physical planning. The dialogue between the two traditions and the possibility of fertile convergence are a milestone that continues to be arduous and improbable. Due to his ingenuity, training, and experience, Bernardo Secchi was the most qualified figure in Italy to achieve important results in this sense, but the expectations were only partially confirmed. A few important developments were available on relationships between geographical and political/social visions (Warf and Arias, 2009; Whitworth, 2019). Fertile interaction between urban planning and urban design may be conceived only in a few specific contexts, as De Carlo stated (De Carlo, 1964, 2005). The theoretical discourse cannot push beyond the formulation of a few minimum requirements, which good practice should never avoid (Palermo, 2025, Chapter 13).

If urban action is generally partial, i.e. it concerns specific limited areas, does it still make sense to look after the vision? How should the question eventually be understood? This is the last prerequisite that seems suitable

to report. In this case as well, there is an emerging need to distance ourselves from different interpretations. It is not possible to reduce the vision to the short list of scholastic objectives that introduce a project for a plan. Nor should it be understood as an authoritative design that could trigger a sort of ‘creative leap’. Nor is it the sophisticated result of some analytical exercise in ‘scenario planning’. Two requirements seem essential. The vision must be rooted in the territory. It should therefore also include and refine those strategic projects that represent the clearest manifestation and tendency towards change in the area in question. Networking may emerge as a collateral effect of some really innovative project (so it is important to examine the externalities of each influential project: Section 3.8, Section 4.7). It may be the result of policies aimed at coordination between partial interventions (Faludi, 2004; Janin Rivolin and Faludi, 2005). Or the object of intentional policies to integrate multiple forms of action, even if the perspective is often abstract and unrealistic. I recall the ‘transformative, integrative’ claims of the strategic narrative (Section 4.6). Each local intervention can introduce some element of innovation for the framework, which will evolve according to a gradual, adaptive process in relation to the developments of the specific partial projects. That system of relationships may establish an idea of the vision as a potentially strategic tool and influential device for ‘spatial governance’ (Twedwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 2006). The perspective confirms now-unquestionable centrality of the urban project, which is increasingly decisive for the fate of the discipline.

## 5.5 Epilogue

I do not feel like making predictions about the future of urban planning, but I do not see any reason for optimism. I can say, however, that some requirements are now mandatory. It makes no sense to close the field within a regional arena without considering what is happening in the rest of the world. It is impossible not to question a variety of disciplinary arguments that have long been accepted as common heritage, but which prove to be unjustified or misleading. The limits of academia seem evident; perhaps the contingent commitment in local practice is not sufficient. One feels the need to reconsider the disciplinary functions and also the paradigm. The role cannot be technocratic or arbitrarily creative. The administrative/managerial dimension becomes decisive, as does the design-oriented task. The priority is to complete the complicated transformation process in parts of the city. The logic may be represented correctly with Popper’s idea of ‘piecemeal social engineering’, a reform-oriented version (for a mature

liberal society) of the most common incremental practices. Partial interventions are the key to the process. They must be guided and verified according to more rigorous criteria than usual, because the discipline should take greater responsibility for effective projects, after the objective drop in traditional commitments. Sharing a vision of the care and potential development of the territory would evidently be a desired milestone. The most plausible way to interpret the topic is to consider the parts undergoing transformations and form a network of them, reasoning on their possible evolution and necessary adaptations over time. This bottom-up perspective is compatible with a concrete idea of strategic action. In several situations, it will be possible to develop a more orthodox approach, but what I have recalled are a few minimal conditions for ‘doing urban planning in the era of contingency’.

This is a modest perspective compared to the glorious models, although not without its dignity. The conditions have changed radically. I do not believe that the discipline can evade the need for a metamorphosis if it wants to escape the decline and risk of performing a solely bureaucratic or rhetorical function. In my opinion, the lines of change that I have delineated represent a plausible interpretation of the reform-oriented demands of 20–30 years ago, even if we should recognize that the circumstances do not seem favourable. Politics has largely abandoned any enlightened orientation, contenting itself with *heresthetic*, i.e. manipulative communication (Sunstein, 2025). The administration should deal with the current management problems. Public opinion seems disoriented in the post-truth world and probably tends to suffer in the struggle for democracy. Are reform-oriented hopes once again destined for failure? It is possible. If planners have already resigned themselves to this situation, it would be good for them to change professions. They delude themselves, however, believing that it is sufficient to reiterate virtuous principles, dated exhortations, and solutions already falsified by experience, as happens to authoritative exponents of the discipline. The future depends on the capacity to renew the role and technique under real conditions that are objectively complicated. The challenges and possibilities have been highlighted. Less evident is the responsibility and desire for change in the world of urban planning.

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## Part II. Discussion

### 6. Metamorphosis with an Exercise in Memory (Patrizia Gabellini)

With his latest text, Pier Carlo Palermo completes a course of research and reflection that was already presented in two books published in the span of just a few years. This trilogy stands out from his previous work, not for the systematic verifications on the state of urban planning (introduced with the title of the first book: *Il futuro dell'urbanistica post-riformista* [The Future of Post-Reformist Urban Planning], Palermo, 2022) where he collects 'frontier trends', nor for using a biographical approach to trace the contribution of 'contemporary classics' in Italian planning (*Roots and Frontiers. Figures and Cultures in Contemporary Urban Planning* – Palermo, 2025). Rather, it stands out for the willingness (which spans the three works) to push for a 'reaction' in the discipline, implementing a few theses, or better yet, indicating the lines of work that seem the most convincing in the light of the current mutation. Being the first to react to this urging with a written contribution is not easy. It involves various exercises to intersect the discussion by specifying the point of view and a reflection that has matured over time, in order to avoid a trivial response to the basic questions posed in the book.

I begin with the point of view, given that it cannot be distinguished from the experiences of those who are beginning to speak; I refer to my relationship with theories, which are always filtered by practice (Section 6.1). I then continue by explaining why urban planning should not lose its anchoring in the physical space, which is fundamental for situating itself amid the many issues raised by Palermo (Section 6.2). In the third section (6.3), I address the evolving forms that the plan has taken, and which may reasonably persist. In the fourth and last section (6.4), I refer to the question posed by the title of this book and the role of urban planners in the given conditions and with respect to the multitude of skills involved in

governing the territory.

## 6.1 Between Theory and Practice: Discontinuity

I consider Pier Carlo Palermo to be the only Italian theoretician in the discipline. It is therefore necessary to start from his idea of the relationship between theory and actual interests and real practices, and from the idea of those in urban planning in Italy who seem to ‘consider the international world of *urban planning* as a separate body, perhaps extraneous’ (Section 2.2 *Theory*). In the different roles that I have covered, I have always focused on the *products* resulting from the common practices of those who consider themselves to be urban planners (Crosta, 2010). Plans and projects, regulations and guidelines, agendas and cognitive frameworks are the places where their knowledge is deposited and their investigation occurs, serving as examples for others working in the same area. I have always favoured *grey literature* as a first-hand documentary repertoire and this is the observatory I have used to probe theories.

### *Percolation*

For those studying at the school of architecture in Milan starting in the 1970s, urban planning was presented as an area in a clear crisis, where a diaspora was forecast (Fabbri, 1975; Romano, 1983; Tutino, 1986). The interest I began to cultivate in the discipline as a student at the time led me to try to understand *what it was like* and *what it did* by observing it up close. And I have never stopped doing so. ‘Real practices’, explored through products and eminent figures to identify their arguments and techniques (Gabellini, 1987; Di Biagi, Gabellini, 1992; Gabellini, 2001; Gabellini et al., 2007), together with direct experimentation, designing plans and working as a councillor, fed into my way of understanding urban planning. From this position, I developed the idea that the influence on practices of urban planning theories occurs through *percolation* and that it may provide some explanation as to the confusion of sources and reduction they are subject to when planning practice relies on theoretical contributions. The theories are not seen as ‘an extraneous body’, but rather as reasonable interpretations, aimed at generalization, to be recalled and tested under the given conditions and circumstances, with the adaptations allowed by the skills and critical capacities of practitioners. Ultimately, the functions of anchoring and orientation are often instrumental in consideration of their penetrating strength in the public discourse. The propensity of urban planners is to look for possible confluences to make *good use* of them (De Luca, 2025), all the more so if the theories of interest have different objec-

tives: proposing a different thematic focus for action; delineating criteria for action; and understanding how the city changes. As such, they intercept the planning process differently and, adding to the substantially utilitarian attitude, they may explain the *theoretical confusion* that Palermo observes and criticizes. I maintain that this way of absorbing the theories emphasizes that urban planning, not coincidentally, was called a *discursive formation* by Bernardo Secchi.

Translating theoretical concepts and principles into practice is well exemplified by the recent assumption of environmental issues in urban planning. Their inclusion in planning discourse, with the consequent operational development, is attributed to the urging of the European Union, which translated the United Nations' objectives into programmes and projects. In turn, that request was the sounding board for research promoted in 1968 by the Club of Rome, together with Massachusetts Institute of Technology on *The Limits to Growth* (Meadow et al., 1972). The initiative of international bodies was credited with a series of incentives for collaboration between participants and the exchange/integration of approaches, knowledge, techniques, and tools pertaining to different disciplines and areas of knowledge. This has conveyed a *theoretical cluster* (underlying the claim of sustainability) and it has also favoured the confirmation of a method that varies according to the strategy/action binomial, entrusted to complex procedures and contributing to the construction of a discursive form that overlaps traditional language. This arrangement, which joins the persuasive strength of the semantic utopia with best practices and guidelines, is poured into urban planning, both informing a series of informal tools (starting with the Sustainable Energy Action Plans and Climate Adaptation Plans) and encouraging its connection with formal tools. The introduction in urban planning occurred through two primary moves: the first consisting of an expansion and/or investigation of the field to include compatible topics, the second in pursuing a long-lasting status for newly created tools. I attribute the first move with the adoption of biodiversity, ecological connection, and ecosystem services as guiding concepts to give a new path to landscapism and the material welfare already found in urban planning; and the second move, with new investments in green and blue infrastructure and greening plans.

The holistic approach and theoretical construction conveyed by the European Union were submitted to a decomposition/reduction/adaptation process involving the selection of a few variables to be translated technically, the use of targets for politically important timeframes, and the de-

velopment of nature-based technical solutions (D'Onofrio, Trusiani, 2018; De Toni et al., 2025). Similar annexation, filtered by the need to refer to the demand for greater flexibility of the plan, can be seen in the translation of strategic planning theories into urban planning that erupted in the 1990s (Curti, 1996). Informality, visioning, performance, and assessment became the cornerstones of a process to dismantle the hierarchical/deductive arrangement of planning. Other theories that have aimed to interpret the change in era, circulated through numerous exchanges in international planning, have also penetrated with similar means, influencing the set of urban planning products.

### *Incidence*

Pier Carlo Palermo recalls Michael Neuman's observation where the latter had to acknowledge that the most developed functions of the theory were certainly preparatory ('explanation, prediction, justification, normative guidance'), but still did not seem capable of influencing urban and social practices as desired. There are probably various explanations for this distance between action and theoretical discourse (although planning practices do not refer simply to action). At least in part, I believe the distance should be attributed to the lack of attention in urban planning theories to the historical and geographical contexts wherein they develop and for which the application is convenient. In this case, they do not always support testing through practices situated precisely in time and space, pressed by demands that remain entrusted to *contingent* interpretation that are missing convincing indications in theories. The strength of contextual conditioning in urban planning, which is not just socioeconomic or political, is added to the ways of building urban planning products involving competitive rather than cooperative figures, even with respect to the theoretical references.

Activities such as description, interpretation, design, assessment, and regulation refer to practices that have progressively become the prerogative of different experts, acquiring various degrees of autonomy and relying on theories that are often conflicting. It so happens that a single urban planning product (composite and at different ages) can assemble parts that reflect a tactical approach (in the design-oriented proposal) with others that are marked by a scientific and technological approach (in assessment), influenced by the most captivating rhetoric of green or smart trends (in interpretation/argumentation), or uncertain between conformity and performance (to transfer into regulations). Parties that perform different functions and have different targets (citizens, politicians, technicians, operators, and owners, etc.). A judgement on planning practices and their relationship

with theories cannot overlook this specific aspect of a plan that has become a *practice of practices*. This does not justify the resulting confusion, but it should shift attention to the effective possibility of theories to legibly affect practices in the urban and social realms when conveyed by planning products. If their path of penetration in products is tortuous, with effects that may be disorienting, the way of affecting urban and social practices is labyrinthine, since it moves through a disintermediated policy, a variety of interests, the logic of communication, etc. It seems to me that this lack of alignment is accepted in a magmatic condition that also makes theories tentative, and Palermo presents proof that is difficult to refute.

## 6.2 Maintaining the Centre: Regeneration

### *Urban Revolutions*

With regard to the origins of modern urban planning, Leonardo Benevolo (1968) and Giorgio Piccinato (1974) advanced different ideas. The former attributed it to the utopian and socialist movements, situating it in England in the first half of the 1800s, while the latter attributed it to the 19<sup>th</sup> century techniques conveyed in manuals, situating it in Germany between the formation of the empire and World War I. The two interpretations indicate two different constituent natures: political and technical/administrative. The literature gives a contested genesis of urban planning with respect to its *raison d'être* and expertise that is not limited to its origins. Referring to Italy, Guido Zucconi (1989) focuses in particular on the different professions ranging from the 1885 law for Naples, which established a few basic tools for urban planning intervention, to the general law of 1942. *Competition* has remained, varying in several ways over time, so it is necessary to acknowledge that the contestants' reasons are not mutually exclusive and that the contest manifests itself on various levels. Considering the 'roots' rather than the 'origins' — as Bernardo Secchi proposed in his comments on Benevolo's book (Di Biagi, 2017) — is more convincing, though it puts at risk the recognizability and social importance of urban planning, and particularly its field of action.

It is acknowledged that great upheaval was induced by the industrial revolution, starting with the massive flow of peasants from the countryside to production centres, leading to urbanization that caused a dramatic crisis in the premodern city and made the lives of new citizens — the working class — subhuman, as Engels witnessed in 1845 (Sica, 1980; Spagnoli, 2012). Giving a form and sense to the *modern* city, which was delineated by another revolution in the history of urban settlements, involved decades

of research and experience in all European countries and beyond, with the emergence of nonuniform positions with respect to theory and facts, as shown by the debate on the Athens Charter (Di Biagi, 1998) and then interventions to adapt pre-existing cities and create new districts for expansion. However, *long timeframes* and *contrasting ideas* seem to be ignored in the criticism of the modern era that took hold in the 1980s and, due to this myopia, did not provide elements for reflection that would help in taking a position with respect to the revolution that is developing before our eyes in combination with unprecedented acceleration and means.

This exercise in memory seems necessary to give the proper weight to the difficulties and contrasting voices that accompany urban planning in this shift to a new era. The shock caused by the pandemic drove the acknowledgement of multiple crises that broke the previous balances in nearly all fields of human action. Like other scholars that conducted sociological studies in the early 2020s, Paolo Perulli (2021) described the dramatic series of crises, forecasting an epilogue in 2050. Among them, ‘polycrisis’ is an effective term for recalling the concurrence and intertwining of crises (economic, social, political, demographic, environmental, health-related, war-related) which coevolve and are amplified in a globalized setting. In his last book (published posthumously), Ulrich Beck considered crises and their effects, but with particular attention for the environment, baptizing what occurs as ‘metamorphosis of the world’ (Beck, 2006, 2016). Bruno Latour (2021) also reasoned intensely on the *metamorphosis*, focusing the discourse on the upside-down relationship with nature as a distinctive factor. As is understandable, after the initial disorientation, this condition favours simplification, an improbable *reductio ad unum*, and in urban planning it reintroduces radical positions hostile to the reformist programme that has long distinguished the modern era. The accent on the post-reformist programme posed by Pier Carlo Palermo (2022) should be a cornerstone of the critical reflection on new urban planning.

### *Translations*

In 1984, Bernardo Secchi wrote a column in *Casabella* that asked readers to consider the current change: ‘Le condizioni sono cambiate’ [The Conditions Have Changed] (Secchi, 1989). He took up the same issue 25 years later with a text entitled ‘Una nuova questione urbana’ [A New Urban Question] (Secchi, 2010), followed by a strong message in his last book entitled *La città dei ricchi e dei poveri* [The City of the Rich and Poor] (Secchi, 2013). Given his curiosity for studies and scholars from different disciplines and a variety of literature — although without losing a focus

on urban planning — Secchi repeatedly drew urban planners' attention to the great general topics for which translation was needed into new ways of working. Aware that urban planning is 'overdetermined', he never interrupted his peculiar search for the unavoidable connection with the changing world, yet he never stopped attempting a *pertinent translation* of the processes and concepts deemed fertile for addressing them with the means reasonably available to urban planning. He therefore proposed using 'open space design' and 'guidance spatial schemes' for a public initiative that could measure itself against the driving force of private transformation projects (Secchi 1989); he translated the concept of universal accessibility into a proposal for a 'porous', 'isotropic' city (Secchi, Viganò, 2014), and the demand for social justice into 'spatial justice'. He brought great questions back to the responsibility that urban planners can and should assume. This attitude is similar to what led Campos Venuti to refine the austerity policy formulated by Luigi Berlinguer 'to renew and transform Italian society' as the reintroduction of 'democratic urban planning', which, with this aim, had to adopt topics for land and agriculture protection (Campos Venuti, 1978). In my opinion, these are teachings to conduct urban planning without losing the focus.

Giving a form and organization to the physical urban and territorial space is a sort of unavoidable motive, a *raison d'être* that emerged early on from developments by social philanthropists/reformers, the forefathers of urban planners (I'm thinking of Ebenezer Howard's garden city and the plans that Patrick Geddes developed in India at a certain point in his life). In addition to climate change with its effects on the environment, landscape, and settlement distribution, the factors that most impact 'spatial orders' today (Bolocan, 2022) include: financialization, leading to new forms of urban rent (Bortolotti, 2024; Pizzo, 2024, 2025), and the extreme fluidity of investment capital with brilliant players in real-estate fund management; the organization of global tourism, which extensively modifies the way that cities and territories are used, along with their physiognomy, even with respect to social composition, i.e. the relationships between residents and nomads (Bei, Celata, 2023; Brollo, Celata, 2023; Celata, Romano, 2020); digitalized communication, which weakens economies tied to concentration, progressively slowing perceptual relationships with the space and the capacity to conduct discourse on the physical space that goes beyond daily life; political representation that, after the programmatic style, also abandoned the empirical style (Pizzorno, 1980); and the loss of the fundamental role of intellectual work (Weber, 1948). Environment and climate, healthcare and wellbeing, economy and finance, society and culture, politics and

representation all follow paths combined in various ways, taking a specific appearance in the urban context, changing its spatiality. For planners, this entails a precise, unavoidable commitment to identifying the factors that affect the inhabited space, as they are perceived, and the actions that are pertinent and possible where they are working in a given phase of *life in that territory*. This means not only addressing the specific interweaving of factors, but also identifying the leverage that is (presumably) effective and practical from time to time. This task is as arduous as it is necessary.

### *Regeneration*

To indicate different types of planning action in urban areas, people in the 1970s began to speak of recovering and reusing what exists, and then, amid growing awareness and ambitions, redeveloping and restoring it via processes that affected large parts of cities and cities of different sizes. Always in search of suitable words, Secchi (1993) presented the strategy of the regulatory plan of Siena as a ‘modification’. On the threshold of the new century, the most widespread reference became *regeneration*, a concept that could be accompanied by *recycling* (Fontanari, Piperata, 2017), understood in every sense of the word. While we are on the meaning of words (given the change in the vocabulary over time), ‘regeneration’ implies overcoming the past and a path that deeply involves the nature of the urban area. It promises the realization of something new with the courage to discard what is no longer necessary, and the effort to recover what is still useful among the existing features. Some years ago, I wrote that regeneration is the field of action in contemporary urban planning and I hinted at its connection with a resilient attitude (Gabellini, 2018). A few years later, regeneration seems not so much a need as a *fact*, not just because large abandoned areas do not find a real-estate solution, becoming land preferred for ‘inventors of places that we will inhabit’ (Granata, 2021). The multiplication of initiatives on molecular decommissioning together with energy and climate upgrades of the building stock changes all cities day after day, and the infrastructure collapse of the modern city is evident, taking the form of a new type of infrastructure (*EcoWebTown* was an early, effective crisis by Alberto Clementi, 2016).

After the phase in which some scholars aimed to identify the range of meanings attributed to regeneration (Pasqui, 2017; De Rossi, Lupatelli, 2022) and illustrate the roads taken by the first experiences in regeneration plans (Aa. Vv., 2014), today we are reasoning about various forms and effective ways of operating (Lanzani, 2024b). The numerous legislative proposals registered by different political parties in Parliament, up to the uni-

fied text by the Senate Permanent Committee on 5 August 2024 followed by another version within a year, evidence political recognition of the economic and social interests mobilized by regeneration, along with the extraordinary enhancement of capital that it realizes and a desire to dismantle urban planning through exceptions to all its tools, such that regeneration is activated freely on all scales. Speaking about regeneration has progressively become the way to understand and deal with transformations in the contemporary human environment (in some cases replacing the expression ‘urban planning’) and its effects are answered in initiatives by *Committees* that act as *disintermediated representatives* of civil society. Urbanization still consisting entirely or partially of untouched land, which keeps alive the problem of land consumption (logistics platforms, areas of clean energy production, large data-processing centres are striking examples), must be considered an integral part of the regeneration that echoes the mutation of production processes. Everything runs, but the debate among planners is distracted; it struggles to be developed, becomes contentious, questions or grabs onto an obsolete disciplinary background without managing to converge on a minimal, new, and shared platform. I agree with Pier Carlo Palermo’s request to work in this direction.

#### *Discriminating and Discriminated*

Covering many scales and forms, regeneration is pervasive in society and the territory. It involves a wide range of economic operators and in this sense can be considered a *driver*. It intercepts the change in demand induced by changing demographics and social behaviours, it quickly leads to enhancement and therefore activates rents tied to the land and finance, and it reconfigures the entire habitable space. Faced with its ample, disjointed, and unprogrammable effects, the capacity of public initiative retracts, and the effectiveness of planning tools and techniques becomes uncertain. The ways in which the strength of capital and the market are expressed in regeneration processes still seem defocused and there is much work to do in this respect. Perhaps the excess attention given to politics and policies has absorbed too much energy, while research on the environment and technologies should be more targeted. In particular, the latter, focused on transformations *never seen before*, could help to seek new spatial orders compatible with the *human size* of settlements.

If regeneration is no longer a choice but a fact, it is necessary to focus on the *discriminating* and *discriminated* aspects. As a discriminating factor, I consider regeneration that aims to recover the conditions of liveability of deteriorated environments threatened by the consequences of pollution and

climate change, aiming to reduce spatial injustice, expanding accessibility to housing, social services, and ecosystem services. This perspective pertains to *possibilism*, an underlying dimension of urban planning that Pier Carlo Palermo (2022) completed with the adjective ‘aware’ to exclude false utopian movements or improbable demiurgeous nostalgia. He recalls this concept in this book, concluding the Epilogue as follows: ‘If planners have already resigned themselves to this situation, it would be good for them to change professions.’ In public discourse, the depth of regeneration (going beyond its extent) is *discriminated*, and can be fully gathered by drawing attention to the *invisible* aspects that move it (Balducci, 2023). Awareness regarding the overall redefinition of the urban foundation it entails would first lead to the question of territorial impacts and differences, the need to carefully consider the distribution of powers and responsibilities related to territorial governance. In Italy, it is not sufficient to consider the dichotomy between metropolitan and inland areas (Borghi, 2017; De Rossi, 2018), but rather it is necessary to consider the many medium-sized cities whose trajectories are incomparable (Mascarucci, 2020), along with the historical granularity of the settlements, the ‘Italy in the middle’ (Lanzani, 2024a) that was once affected by urban sprawl (Lanzani, Pasqui, 2011) and which is affected by varied forms of regeneration today. Developing renewable energy sources, repairing natural disasters, and maintaining and/or recovering biodiversity outline diverse trajectories that are nearly always territorial and cut across administrative partitions and jurisdictions. It is no coincidence that an initial investigation of territorial regeneration is found in the proposal by Sandro Fabbro (2024) and his research group to work on ‘ecopolitan’ systems as a way to overcome a metropolitan vision. Such regeneration invokes the role of Regions, the only administrative entities whose partitions, as underlined by a distant observer, largely correspond to the ancient regions (Putnam, 1994).

This misunderstood (discriminated) side of regeneration — deep and territorial — is not compensated by the treatment of what is recognized; in fact, it sometimes even conceals it. Urban regeneration is often identified with great projects (few and concentrated in the main cities). Widespread regeneration, leaving the shadow following initiatives by the Milan magistracy, risks becoming absorbent and, along with simplification by the media, confused with the demonization of skyscrapers. Extraordinary maintenance is abandoned to a routine, forgetting the essential contribution to energy savings and static building safety. This gap entirely overlooks the fact that regeneration drives urban metamorphosis and as such, is situated at the centre of post-modern urban planning.

### 6.3 Formal and Informal: Decomposition

When everything changes, how does the plan change? Where does it change? How can it resist the excellent urban planning tool that we continue to call a plan? These questions have long been debated and are periodically ignited. This came up in the last INU [National Institute of Urbanism] Conference in May 2025 on ‘Il Piano utile. Priorità e potenzialità inesplorate dell’agire’ [The Useful Plan. Priorities and Unexplored Potential in Action], whose subtitle already announces an openness to solutions that differ from the past.

#### *Conforming versus Performing*

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, European countries sustained a process to institutionalize the urban plan. Although it followed paths drawing on national histories, it focused on the initiative of the public administration and adopted a prescriptive and hierarchical principle of conformity, which was already clear in the Athens Charter. After well-structured international interaction, the Charter had indicated the necessary analysis, identifying plans on different scales and the primary regulatory aspect, including expropriation, recalling the use of ‘reformed’ zoning. The plan was considered a ‘statute of the territory’. In the post-war period called the ‘glorious years’ (1945–1973), a golden age in which Europe experienced rapid economic growth and significant social development with the contribution of urban planning in realizing *material welfare* (Munarin, Tosi, 2011), the position of planning in politics in various European countries began to change amid the lack of a common reference, consistent with the orientation of the respective governments. Tools and procedures took shape based on the legal and administrative structure of the context.

A few years ago, a research group from the Politecnico di Torino made a Europe-wide comparison of planning systems in 39 countries, following up on previous analysis, which, starting in the 1980s (in relation to European integration), aimed to verify the effectiveness of public control in territory governance, the gap between the objectives and results, and the role of technical knowledge in orienting system operations (Cotella et al., 2020). Relying on material collected in 2018 by the European Observation Network for Territorial Development (ESPON), the research group classified planning systems based on their capacity for public control in spatial transformations. The results showed that about half of countries, including the Baltic and Nordic states and the United Kingdom, tended towards a ‘performance-based’ model, in which transformation decisions were not

binding, but addressed case by case depending on negotiation. They abandoned the ‘ideal conformance model’ of binding plans that define transformations a priori, assigning building rights. Assuming a performance-based approach does not coincide entirely with the pre-eminence of the market in choices; in fact, subsets were identified, given that ‘any model can be used to favour the market, if it is the prevailing political intention’ (ibid.: 146). Based on this research, Italy fell within the group of countries with conformance systems, whose rigidity is attenuated through systematic recourse to plan variants.

It was in Italy as well, that Title V of the Constitution was modified in 2001, enabling territorial governance to be ‘concurrent matter’ between the State and Regions, thereby recognizing the situation created with the urban planning delegate to the Regions in 1972. Due to unregulated *concurrency*, regional legislative activities generated effects which Federico Oliva in 2015 judged to be the expression of ‘crazy planning federalism’ and which were examined specifically in joint research by the CeNSU, INU, and SIU on regional laws (Francini, Salvo 2021), opening the way to drafting a proposal for a national law of principles which was promoted by the INU [National Institute of Urbanism]. Amid this complicated framework, the Emilia-Romagna Region decided to move in a performance-based perspective, approving Law no 24 ‘Disciplina regionale sulla tutela e l’uso del territorio’ [Regional Regulation on Land Protection and Use] in December 2017, leading to ongoing discussion due to its connotations and the constitutional presence of urban planning in regional politics.

### *A New Plan*

One important aspect of this law was the return to a single municipal plan (the ‘Piano Urbanistico Comunale – PUG’) that eliminated the operational component and an integrated planning/building regulation. This choice went against both Law 20 of 2000, which established the Structural Plan, Operational Plan, and Planning/Building Regulation, and other laws launched by the Italian Regions, which drew on indications from the INU Conference in 1995 to distinguish structural, operational, and regulatory components in the municipal plan. Following the lack of general (national) reform attempted in 1962, the municipal plan was loaded with elements to adhere to the partial legislative modifications that had followed and clearly changed form with the inclusion of the urban project. The plan in the 1990s was a sort of *hyperplan* that was difficult to read and manage as a whole (Gabellini, 2008), but its breakdown into separate documents with distinct functions was not a convincing solution. The recognition of the

unsustainability of an additive process and the laborious construction of a three-part plan led to the renewed proposal for a single plan. At the same time, it meant acknowledging the impossibility of implementation with an ad hoc (operational) plan and procedures provided for by law, faced with the unforeseeable trend in private initiatives, as well as the autonomy assumed by the Building Regulation compared to the planning regulation (the ‘Testo unico delle disposizioni legislative e regolamentari in materia edilizia’ [Consolidated Text on Legislative and Regulatory Provisions on Building], approved with a Presidential Decree in 2001, sanctioned state authority in building matters).

The language of the 2017 law, which relied on words such as ‘vision’, ‘scenario’, ‘strategy’, ‘action’, ‘performance’, ‘assessment’, and ‘monitoring’, marked the abandonment of a conformative system. It is no coincidence that the main criticism and opposition to the novelties regarded its implications for the relationship between public and private parties (Agostini, 2017). The different role assigned to the municipal administration — orienting and assessing private initiatives rather than controlling them in advance — is defined in various ways in the law, recalling the acquisitions in the long experimental period that opened in the 1980s with an awareness of the international debate. The General Urban Plan no longer assigned building rights, nor did it localize transformation projects or forecast/prefigure the future urban system by classifying areas with specific uses and building capacities; it entrusted implementation of operating agreements proposed by private citizens, which were subjected to an assessment based on the strategy for urban and ecological/environmental quality as the central document in the plan. The tools that remained in the hands of the city administration for (indirectly) guiding the interventions were the implementation plans of public initiative (Gabellini, 2020).

The application of the law, which largely occurred in the main municipalities and many others distributed in the region, focused on a few consequences of the new arrangement. These plans slowed a weak relationship with territorial specifics — not only historical/geographical, but in some cases also socioeconomic. The law no longer mentioned the *structure*, but required a territorial layout to which little or no attention was given. The visions and strategies tend towards homologation and the cognitive framework is rarely constructed or interpreted to recognize the specific trends in the given territory or build/discuss them. Even when the strategies are contextualized, they rarely manage to intercept the observable transformations. Having removed the sizing (an essential technical component of a

conformative plan), *spatial vagueness* is resolved in a mainly rhetorical, if not decorative function of the vision and strategies. A clear reference that can be translated into target indicators and actions for the Environmental and Territorial Sustainability Assessment (ValSAT in the Emilia-Romagna law) is also missing. If the assessment, which is indispensable in a performance-based system, lacks a recognizable and questionable anchor, it loses the capacity to convincingly assess the correspondence of the projects with the declared objectives, highlighting for administrators, technicians, and citizens the position in play and what should be agreed on with operators in the field.

An initial analysis of the new law is still incomplete, given that the ‘operating agreements’ did not take hold, partly due to protraction of the transitory phase to reabsorb the provisions for implementation of the former tools, while the means provided for by the NRRP for public works occupied the space set out in the plan for public initiatives. Bologna, the first city to change its plan issued in 2008–2009 (Ginocchini, Manaresi, 2008) by applying the new law in its Municipal Urban Plan approved in 2021 (Aa. Vv., 2021), intervened in 2024 with a modification whose content was significant in various respects. First, it is worth noting that one of the objectives of the new law was to interrupt the practice of ‘plan variant’, as they were tied to the rigidity of the previous system. It was therefore necessary to reflect on the effective possibility of eliminating retroaction on the plan suggested by monitoring the transformations; adjustments were not only the way to acquiesce to pressure from economic operators, but also to gather bottom-up demands. This was what happened in Bologna, at the behest of an administration that had made social innovation and progressivism the pillars for standing out from the traditional reformist programme in urban planning in Bologna. It was a social innovation intended as openness to the orientations proposed by a range of initiatives and their possible operational effects, as well as support for new civilization by developing a participatory experience. Progressivism aimed to join a municipal focus and global problems, highlighting the political aspect of governance activities (Orioli, Massari, 2022; Gabellini, 2023). ‘Variant 1’ (note the number), designed to ‘align actions in the plan with the mandated objectives’, corrects a few articles in the Regulation, considering the ‘observations and results of the consultations’; it ‘checks the response of the new content with respect to the ValSAT document’; it opens the Explanatory Report with the insertion of two ‘flagship projects’ (the City of Knowledge and Green Footprint), which ‘indicate the calling of Bologna for the coming years’, rendered with images referring ‘to the territory with ideograms, but not generically’

(Comune di Bologna, 2024). The form taken by the documents in ‘Variant 1’ is worth noting for the technically appropriate assembly that emphasized the desire to combine vision, project, building and urban planning rules (the articles of the Building Regulation are also revisited and included in the Variant). In addition, the insertion of flagship projects highlights the need to localize the objectives pursued by the Municipality to orient the attitude vis-à-vis private proposals. It is a type of *figure*, though presented as a ‘hallmark’ of this administration.

### *Disorder and Absence*

While the institutional form of the plan undergoes important modifications to look for correspondence with dynamic and sparkling transformation processes, the *informal solutions* most appropriate for intercepting opportunities of various types (announcements, events, etc.) multiply, with financing that enables effective transformations. Although these are considered tools, if not even plans and projects, they rather concern a *focus* to clearly design the issue at stake and/or the part of the city/territory involved and to meet the needs for social and political communication. Without assuming an institutional role, these products can play a pro tempore task and be abandoned without administrative procedures when they are no longer deemed useful. This task is also performed by a few *master plans* used by local administrations to coordinate and *ground* policies and projects, highlighting intentions and possible effects without undertaking formal processes. What has happened and continues to occur, both formally and informally, leads to a situation that has been read as disorder (Pisano, De Luca, 2025), but which reflects the features of ‘néo-urbanisme’ that François Ascher (2001) summarized as plans that are ‘process-related, reflexive, precautionary, concerted, receptive, and flexible, multivariate, stylistically open, multisensory’.

There are important assonances between the two paths: adaptation of the formal plan to remove rigidity and formalism, and the use of informal products. *Reward-based, dissuasive, equalizing* systems, as well as *guidelines* that out of the entire range of regulations favour lines of orientation, recommendations, and advice, are tools already anticipated in experiments and included in many formal plans. Beyond the different arrays of participants (active residents and citizens rather than stakeholders and institutional representatives) and the methods employed (conferences, roundtables, workshops, etc.), *codesign* translates into the need to give a voice, to listen, interact, draw teachings, and find less incorrect solutions, as well as coordinate policies and make projects operational. These procedures are

applicable and applied to informal and formal tools. To summarize the principles that inspire both, marking a distance from the past, we can use a few contrasts: consistency versus conformity; performance versus model; institutional versus hierarchical collaboration.

Other aspects of informal tools do not find (or cannot find) application in the consolidated forms of plans because they are *situated* specifically in space and time, and also tied to specific circumstances and opportunities. I am referring in particular to the denial of administrative perimeters to embrace scales that are congruent with the issue in question. When we speak of vast scale, area, or area plan, we refer to a territory that falls under various jurisdictions. The terms have long been used in planning and planners have always suffered due to the limits inherent in the forced coincidence between the territory being designed and the *governed* territory (where they were instituted, the ‘comprensori’ [large scale programmatic districts] were short-lived). With few exceptions, obfuscation of the role of Regions and intermediate entities — Metropolitan cities and Provinces — in territorial and urban planning leave municipal planning an orphan imprisoned in its own confines. Codesign, which is already difficult, becomes particularly fragile if the frameworks of reference on the appropriate scales are missing, moreover in the presence of robust sector-based, institutionalized planning. This is another question highlighted by the PUGs, which applied the new law in Emilia-Romagna, when they adopt strategies that do not find adequate answers in the municipal territory.

The transformation of urban planning into continuous operations featuring a sum and intersection of an array of tools was already evident in the early 2000s (Gabellini, 2005), but the formal/informal binary that I have traced may validate the hypothesis of the ‘planning without plans’ that Palermo (2022) refers to when he cites the planning disasters underlined by Aaron Wildavsky. The hypothesis progressively takes shape in the facts, with new laws launched and proposed in the field. The national last law proposed on regeneration is joined by work on the Consolidated Text on Building, pursued discontinuously after 2001 with governments of different political orientations, which overcame the rules to control the types of intervention and ensure public revenue from standards and charges. Supporting the need for the formal plan as a governance tool that pertains to institutions is no longer obvious nor is it trivial. Denouncing the illegality of Italian cities (Chiodelli, 2023), with their contribution to environmental disasters, is the reason that persists since the 1960s in the academic literature and elsewhere (Calvino, 1963). Luigi Mazza clearly argued that the plan has

a statutory dimension (I already recalled that the idea of *statute* is found in the Athens Charter). This charter of rights and duties does not coincide with policy, which, as Carlo Galli writes (2025), ‘is a set of dynamics that cannot be channelled in norms only provided that a *normal* situation is created ... [that] a momentary equilibrium [is] reached’ (ibid.: 39). Frenetic legislation in a magmatic phase and with balanced relationships of power is a problem, and continuous attention to the choices is a need and duty of urban planners. However, continuing research and insisting with tests in the field, dealing with conviction and critically the interstitial spaces that matter in the unpredictable game of coevolution (overlooking the solitude of *reformers* detected by Caffè, 1990), seems the most convincing way to remain within the process of mutation without abdicating.

The great absentee in this disorder is territorial planning, regarding which planners seem to be defenceless. Yet among the territorial projections of Progetto ‘80 (Allione, 1976; Renzoni, 2012) and the more recent ‘National Strategy for Inland Areas’ promoted by the Ministry of Territorial Cohesion in 2013, there are national experiences that are worth revisiting. The SISTeMA [Integrated Development of Multiaction Territorial Systems] (2003) and the Snodo [Junction] 1 and 2 projects (2007 and 2009), promoted by the Department for Planning and Territorial Development under the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport, proposed and practised territorial projects that affected Italy with initiatives entrusted to local administrations and held together by the vision of strategic interregional, national, and transnational territorial platforms (Fabbro, Mesolella, 2010; Bonfantini, 2017). This was a relatively brief event that received little consideration, although it provides useful indications regarding the current mutation, in harmony with the orientation delineated on the local scale: *visions* that abandon the development/underdevelopment duality to recognize an archipelago of situations around the country; *approaches* that reject models in favour of contextual strategies that admit different escape paths for territories and invoke relationships; *policies* that progressively move away from the infrastructure/development binomial and from the master idea of concentration to regenerate the existing heritage and enhance local economies; *procedures* that foresee initiatives for the candidacy of municipalities in codesigning area strategies; *methods* that replace forecasts marked by implementation phases and times with possible scenarios, admitting noncontemporary processes; *tools* suitable for developing multiple indicators and targeted uses with recognizable objectives; and *multilevel governance* based on partnership agreements. The three ministry projects mentioned above were in harmony with a different interpretation of the

country, which highlighted the multiplicity of ‘local environmental settlements’ due to particular relationships between environmental frameworks, territorial matrices, settlement forms, and social forms (Clementi, Dematteis, Palermo, 1996). This planning approach could harmonize with the ‘Inland areas’ strategy centred on the liveability of territories, which developed when the combined effects of the economic crisis, demographic decline, and the environmental and ecological crisis were expressed in the ‘extraordinary climate, biological, and also anthropological, settlement, and cultural diversity’ (Barca, 2018: 552). A strategic national framework and the recovery of a territorial design by the Regions in harmony with these experiences would change the opportunities.

## 6.4 Metamorphosis

### *An Organized System*

It seems clear that Luigi Mazza’s contribution on the different components that coexist in an urban plan, refined over years of experience and reflection (Mazza, 1987, 2004), has penetrated Italian urban planning in ways akin to percolation, such that today, we find them assimilated in various ways. Visions, project, and rules do not follow the same logic; visions pertain to the sphere of policy-making, urban projects are associated with market initiatives, and regulation is the first task of public administration. If stiffened, this clarifying distinction leads us to consider incompatible differences and deem the separation of the three dimensions to be *logical*, jeopardizing the common discourse on living and demand for integration. What would the ground for interaction be between projects, policies, and rules? Urban projects need motivation involving public interest to avoid becoming a mere expression of economic interests or being reduced simply to exchange goods; regulation needs to be justified to avoid being reduced to the aggregation of heterogeneous rules, with contradictions that can unfold only in a legal setting. Both, in highly conflicting contexts, require arguments, which is possible if there is a shared reference. I continue to believe that this can only be a plan, arranged in a suitable way with specified parts.

My conviction is that the vision is not just a strategy, the project not just urban design, regulation not just administration. The vision also pertains to urban planners with respect to the indication of a ‘territorial strategy’ (as Campos Venuti maintained, using the word ‘strategy’ in unusual times). This is compared with ‘form and structure’ (the binomial used by De Carlo) of the planned space, making the ultimate transformation of projects

and policies understandable, imaginable, and therefore disputable, progressively taking shape along with the rules that act perceptibly in the space. It is not an author's vision, but a *figure* (Gabellini, 2024) tentatively delineated through a process involving many different subjects that invokes interinstitutional collaboration, which is sought by urban planners but remains just possible. The *localized, figured* vision may have a brief or long life; it may already be inscribed in city and/or territorial events; it may be drafted or outlined from scratch. It might fall under *responsible possibilism*. Urban projects refer to the relatively extensive transformations that reconfigure spatial relationships as a whole, but their dependence on specific local economies and the labyrinthine logic of politics may lead to their interruption and, not uncommonly, abandonment. The project as well, understood as a proposal compatible with 'competitive polyarchies with a large pluralistic dissemination' (Cacciari, 1981:101), recalls the dimension of what is possible and needs to accept its fundamental uncertainty due to the implementation process (Scharpf, 1981). In the long period of management and approval (a process imbued with contracting, procedures, and adaptive management), a rudder (the vision) and helmsman (public officials, first of all) are necessary, in addition to the activation of a specific assessment different from what is applied with respect to the objectives in the plan. This path does not exclude possible retroaction on the vision. The regulations, which regard not only widespread building interventions, but also urban projects, are perhaps the most tilled ground, whether they are written standards (an insuperable reference is the regulatory range explained by Norberto Bobbio, 1980) or form-based codes (which in Italy rely not only on the long experience in urban design, but also on the evolution of urban coding). The regulations constitute a key to be used as a whole. Working on the regulatory aspect of the plan, faced with social demands and the dynamics of the political decision-making system, urban planners must know how to build a reasonable montage using *critical realism* and *pragmatism*. The combination of vision, projects, and regulations constitutes an organized system without a predefined shape that could be specified in the context and adjusted progressively, but it entails specific urban planning expertise.

### *Roles, Expertise, Responsibilities*

Calls for ideas that have been announced in recent years to award the design of urban plans usually indicate the expertise that the candidate *group* must have. Together with an urban planner, an architect, landscape designer, appraiser, legal expert, etc., may be required, without a faithful correspondence with the figures identified by professional associations.

In the most thorough announcements, we can see the connection between the group composition and issues that the contracting authority would like to address. The only fixed point seems to be the plurality of figures deemed necessary, where the roles, which closely depend on the effective decision-making space conceded and/or occupied, remain entrusted to the internal dynamics of the group and, sometimes more incisively, the group of administrators and public officials. Remaining within a segment of urban planning practice, what is seen directly in the relationship with the administration are analogies that can be found with the situation in the United States as outlined by Palermo (Section 2, *Roles*): the lack of a single solution without the possibility of recognizing the *position* of the urban planner, and without the question turning into a problem to solve. The relationship between role and expertise, understood as specific knowledge and certified training (Pizzorno, 2013), is not a given, nor is it linear. The former — the role — is settled within the complexity of the decision-making process and, although it is affected by the expertise in the field, it is not determined by it. The awareness of a limited decision-making space and the mutations affecting it suggests *more skills* for urban planners, expertise to be acquired through active participation in the process, taking responsibility for their own choices.

A few conditions seem indispensable for opening a discussion on role and expertise: finding some convergence on the utility of the plan and its form (not a model, but a system that combines vision, projects, and regulations); and recognition of the importance of a technical structure in the administration that guarantees the public function and continuous management. This is followed by acceptance of responsibility as a counterweight to discretion that can never be completely eliminated in urban planning activities (subject to maximum tension by assessment activities). This explicitly questions the idea that bureaucratic activity consists in finalizing political decisions without discussing its assumptions and scope, an idea that ignores the subtle and complicated mechanisms of ‘diffuse power’ (Foucault, 1977). This is also expressed in social relationships and introduces deontology, that set of behaviours, customs, and habits that mark ethics within a specific field of practices. Innovation cannot be produced if it does not entail significant changes in the ganglia of the public administration (Schön, 1983).

Deontology is a system of values referring to expertise, which cannot be defined in an abstract or formal way, but rather is subject to the turbulence of the mutation. Expertise therefore has a multiple, changeable nature, i.e.

a *situational* aspect that develops in action and experience, but subjects it to the assault of delegitimization (Nichols, 2017). I once again propose the considerations I made following such a dense and educational experience as being a councillor (Campos Venuti wrote his most representative book systematizing what he learned by serving as councillor: Campos Venuti, 1967). To have some possibility of affecting the complex and largely unpredictable *decision-making game*, the expertise of a practising urban planner goes beyond certified training or a predetermined role. Useful expertise is measured in its capacity to deal with unexpected events, possibly resistance, and playing for time while waiting for a breach that enables the recovery of more convincing solutions; innovations in discourse on the future of the city and the identification of connections with urban policies, by de-sectorizing them; and attention to demands from different worlds and the conflicts they may generate (Gabellini, 2018).

### *Hope*

Bruno Latour (2022: 94) introduces an interesting distinction between mutation and metamorphosis: ‘We begin to move from *mutation*, rather despairing, we should admit it, to the more promising *metamorphosis*.’ ‘Le mutazioni dell’urbanistica’ [Mutations in Urban Planning] is a book I wrote on the spur of the moment following the end of my administrative experience, having first-hand knowledge of the crumbling of principles, techniques, and skills. In just a few years, a lot of water has passed under the bridge, and I agree with the importance of changing the point of view, as Latour proposes in a reading of Kafka in which he takes the side of Gregor, the protagonist of ‘The Metamorphosis’. While mutation sounds like loss, metamorphosis sounds like possibility. The trigger is the original relationship with nature that should also change the view of technology, understood as one means available to humans to find a different way of inhabiting the *Earth*, sharing our presence with the other living beings, not transforming cities into *cybernetic organisms* undergoing perpetual change.

Latour’s observation is helpful with respect to the doubt expressed by Palermo in his book: whether the image of metamorphosis or eclipse is more appropriate for contemporary urban planning. I believe it relates to a *wager* that introduces an inscrutable propensity to hope and that the two notions are not alternative, if we consider the possibility of a *partial eclipse*. Nevertheless, it seems worthwhile to cultivate the image of metamorphosis and feed the work so that urban planning finds its usefulness without losing the reasons why the discipline took shape. In this sense, the bet on metamor-

phosis is translated into ‘Rieducazione alla speranza’ [A Re-education in Hope] (Ferraro, 1998). It seems that a majority of Italian urban planners have fully absorbed the crisis of the modern era and that their problem lies rather in orienting themselves with respect to the options that cultivate the search for a strong, alternative thought, one that is, on closer inspection, as absolute and reassuring as the modern one.

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## 7. A 'Provincial' View of Planning (Arturo Lanzani)

In this chapter, I formulate several notes to the important considerations made by Pier Carlo Palermo not only in this book, but also in the two previous ones (Palermo, 2022, 2025). I agree with a large part of these reflections, although naturally with a few distinctions and clarifications. Because I do not have the expertise to discuss the significant encyclopaedia of texts he references in detail, I will clearly address the topic in a more limited and marginal fashion, starting mainly with my experiences in research (analysis of territorial transformations) and territorial administration (on the municipal level or even in weaker institutions such as regional or supramunicipal parks). Only a small part of my considerations are based on direct comparison with the planning literature or experiences as a technician and designer involved in territorial plans and projects.

### 7.1 A First 'Knight's Move': Studying Settlement Transformations (in Areas of Widespread Urbanization)

As an architecture student, I had the fortune to follow the teachings of various well-known urban planners within a plan of studies that was still relatively free at the time. One was Silvano Tintori, who reinterpreted experiences with the plans that had developed over a century in Rome and Milan (Tintori, 1985), aware of the role played by various actors and the unique relationships between external history (national and local economics and society) and internal history (the discipline and related know-how). Another was Giorgio Morpurgo (Volpe, 2022), who subjectively interpreted the centrality of politics and the administrative aspect of doing urban planning (in light of Milan's 'Architecture Collective', one of the many original cultural and professional experiences in urban planning in those days). The same issue was approached and highlighted in other forms by Campos Venuti (Campos Venuti, 1967, 1978). There was also Bruno Gabrielli, one of Giovanni Astengo's students but equally influenced by the political/administrative shift that Campos noted before others, and nevertheless critical of a series of practical indications that were too rigid, which were proposed for any context even by Campos' disciples (Gabrielli ironically called it a 'cookbook': Gabrielli, 1993). Finally, and especially, there was Bernardo Secchi, whose important contributions on economic and social territorial analysis I studied with great interest (Secchi, 1974). I followed his teaching starting in the years when, in friendship with Pierluigi Crosta, he was interested in studying the complex multi-actor system of producing urban plans and spatial policies with a focus on the role of technicians,

professionals, administrators, and social parties and forces (Secchi, 1984b; Gabellini, 1988). I followed him through his period of intense reflection on the forms of planning discourse (Secchi, 1984); and finally in his approach to the design-oriented aspect of urban planning (which, when I graduated in the mid-1980s, he developed into the plan for Jesi and as director of *Urbanistica*: Secchi, 1989). Of course, the words of other professors in the department also brought to me echoes of disciplinary paradigms that aspired to become more powerful, such as the directive visions of the modern movement, the systems view of planning according to Brian McLoughlin, or modelling for spatial analysis by the heirs of 'regional science'. These were echoes that did not attract me, due as well to lessons by two planning 'irregulars' such as Pierluigi Crosta and Pier Carlo Palermo (Crosta, 1973, 1984, 1990; Palermo, 1981, 1983, 1992), sociologists such as Antonio Tosi and Alberto Melucci (Tosi, 1979, 1994; Melucci, 1977, 1982, 1994), and economists such as Mario Talamona and Gioacchino Garofoli (Talamona, 1982; Garofoli, 1991, 1992), whose lessons I had the fortune to follow.

### *Interpreting Settlement and Landscape Transformations*

Despite such good hopes, all of my self-teaching starting in the third year went entirely in another direction. This was my first unintentional 'knight's move'. My interests then focused (and would continuously focus in the following years) on interpreting settlement phenomena that had long affected a vast territory outside the main Italian and European cities. These were situations of widespread urbanization, only minimally tied to the constitution of metropolitan areas and too often poorly interpreted on the basis of a North American concept of sprawl that did not really pertain to the Old World (Lanzani, 1991; Boeri, Lanzani, Marini, 1993; Lanzani, 2003; see also Clementi, Dematteis, Palermo, 1996). In this analysis, the most important methodological and substantive references did not pertain to the planning literature, but rather to a few classical schools of historical/geographical research in France (works by Demangeon, Sorre, and Gourou, and in particular those by Desplanques, 1969, who studied the territory of Umbria) and Italy, which analysed anthropic settlements and landscapes (studies developed primarily by Barbieri and Gambi, 1970; Corna Pellegrini, 1977; Gambi, 1964, 1965, 1973, 2008; Farinelli, 1981, 1984; Mioni, 1977, 1978; Quaini, 1973, 1992; Saibene 1974; Sereni, 1961; Turri 1979; contributions are also found in several volumes of *Storia d'Italia* published by Einaudi under the direction and contributions of De Seta and Gambi). Other important threads include several planning and sociogeographical interpretations on settlement transformations in the United States (Jackson, 1970 and 1980; Banham 1973; Venturi, Scott Brown, Izenour, 1972;

Relph, 1987); a few analyses on urban form developed in Italian schools of architecture (Muratori, Aymonino, Rossi, but also and especially, in a less systematic but more methodologically convincing framework, De Carlo, 1966a, 1966b; Quaroni, 1967, 1981; Samonà, 1978; see Lanzani, 1986); finally, a few—original geographical and planning analyses on the spread of urbanized areas in Italy (De Luca, Piccinato, 1983; Dematteis, 1985a, 1988; Zanetto, 1985; Sartore, 1988; Emanuel, 1990; Indovina, 1990). In the background, research contributions on the agricultural economy, sociology, and space economics on the different development models in Italy were also important (Rossi Doria, 1948, 1958, 1989; Bagnasco, 1977, 1994; Fuà and Zacchia, 1983; Fuà, 1991; Becattini, 1987, 1994; Garofoli, 1991, 1992). In the following years, the research extended to interpreting the transformations of agriforest open areas (through interaction with agriforestry (Bocchi, 2015; Agnoletti, 2018) and then environmental history (Bevilacqua, 1989, 1986; Neri Sernieri 2005); more in general, a reflection on the different settlement layouts in Italy, which led me to touch on a few reflections on the nature of the contemporary urban condition (among which I note contributions by Soja, 1989, 2000; Zukin, 2001; Brenner, 2016), recalled by Pier Carlo Palermo in this book (Section 4.1). After my doctorate in spatial planning, with the first steps along my career path, I thus became a convinced researcher in geography (not in urban planning).

#### *Roles and Limits of Planning Practice in Dealing with the Territory*

A comparison of the practices of urban and spatial planning — starting with settlement phenomena, especially in periurban areas and amid widespread urbanization — evidences the lack of coincidence between the production of space and spatial planning, doing so immediately and without any theoretical emphasis (which we still find today in the academic literature). Those settlements were built primarily through sector policies and operational projects (infrastructure, roads, service facilities, or subsidies and regulation of agricultural or production, mining, manufacturing, or commercial settlements), with endogenous or exogenous dynamics which have become common in land use and transformation by families and building companies. Finally, the transformations were only partly influenced by urban planning tools and standards (a dark crowd of development plans and building regulations), which have only conditioned some aspects in limited but specific forms.

With respect to these visions of the territory, the illusion of governmentality on behalf of the planning project, which was adopted by many (but not all) town planners or urbanists in the first half of the 1900s, quickly

disappears. The same is true of any scientific or systemic aspiration of urban planning developed between the 1930s and 1960s. Furthermore, a rather abstract idea of dialogic and communicative planning, which some scholars developed in the last half of the century, quickly sank. However, those studies were also the perfect antidote for the emerging visions that emphasized the role of informal practices or self-organized processes in the same settlements (with limited explanatory power, even in southern situations of unregulated activity). At the time, the main approach was limited to describing the dynamics of those territories, but years later, it would feed an idea of do-it-yourself urbanism with a different, sometimes communitarian, sometimes neoliberal inspiration. Public investments in infrastructure and facilities and a variety of regulatory mechanisms (primarily sector-based) also played a very important role in the evolution of such settlements, far from the most common ideas of physical and social cities.

#### *Developing Different Settlement Contexts*

In this first 'knight's move', my work focused on a territory (not at all marginal) that could not be reduced to more established images and ideas of the city. Of course, Geddes' idea of conurbation, Soria y Mata's linear city, some supramunicipal projects of green networks from the Olmsted's (father and son) study, their revival in Germany, the debates on 'strategic' metropolitan planning in New York in the 1920s, and some experiences with supramunicipal planning in the Ruhr at the same time, provided (with inevitable reconsideration and adaptation to various local contexts and different historical phases) interpretive and governance tools for those situations.

However, more detailed planning knowledge on methods used in different settlement areas was missing, such as know-how capable of orienting the operation of a few supramunicipal institutions (provinces and municipal consortia) and stimulating a few collective actors, intermediate bodies and public service companies then still present in the territory. Important contributions from the 1970s Italian planning culture on protection via regulations for historical fabrics, managing urban expansion by parts, and preparing important social and cultural facilities, as well as reflections then emerging on using urban projects to manage the restoration of areas that were empty or recently decommissioned, could be used only partially in that territory. This was naturally limited to the most compact nodes in a network of medium and small centres encompassed within more open, broader urbanized areas. Aside from this, it was necessary to explore new scenarios: imagining some form of large-scale spatial planning and design

rather different from a purely functional and economic idea, tested or only theorized in the previous 20 years.

*Design Implied by Description (which Can Assume Two Different Inflections)*

What seemed a priority to me was to propose an interpretative description, a dense description of settlement and spatial structures (I hoped, like Geertz, to cite an anthropologist that I was then reading and appreciating), just as with smaller spaces for working and living, the little-known geography of places for social and collective interaction. Thanks to Pier Carlo Palermo's teachings, I understood the limits of quantitative geographical modelling and regional science, with their explanatory claims. I also rediscovered the exploratory value of a descriptive/interpretive approach, aware of the constructive nature of the categories used on different occasions, but also open to the discoveries that the description could enable. My encounter with Giuseppe Dematteis' reflections, first contained in the book *Le metafore della terra* [Metaphors of the Earth] and then in the essay 'Per una geografia poetica' [For a Poetic Geography] (Dematteis, 1985, 1996, 2020), was also decisive. I grew convinced that an interpretative description could guide urban planners in understanding the evolutionary trends of a territory, the possible margins of modification, and eventual, more radical evolutionary bifurcations. For me, the central point was to enhance the planning capability implicit in those interpretations and sometimes, more radically — as Dematteis states in his text for a poetic geography — proposing interpretive images of a territory that go beyond 'common sense', while aspiring to build consensus.

These two perspectives have a common element, but for those in geographical research and even more for urban planners, they are also slightly different. In the first case, the encounter becomes possible with perspectives for action developed in socioeconomic research by Garofoli, Becatini, Trigilia, and others. In the second case, a clear deviation from current trends is observed. This is not only about enhancing the potential and considering the inertia of processes according to cautious possibilism and incrementalism, but also imagining a future in the decision-making arena that should consider specific limits and resources in a context that will certainly differ from the present. It may also mean urban planners better approaching the design-oriented aspect of geographical interpretations and the production of visions and images of the future (the underlying distance between Corsica, conceptualized by Ratzel as a piece of mountain thrown into the Mediterranean, and Markelius' design-oriented image of

the city-archipelago of Stockholm is not that great).

*A Weak but Rigorously Reform-Oriented and not Trivially Adaptive Idea of Urban Planning (Far from Institutional and Political Life in Practice)*

As a geographer (inexpert and never fully recognized), I participated in a few spatial planning experiences. In the subprovincial plan for the Magra Valley by Bernardo Secchi and Paola Viganò (in which I appear undeservingly as a coauthor), this interpretive reading was entirely consistent with the underlying ideas that Secchi was developing (Secchi, 1989, 1994). As in other territories (Lombardy, Marche, Veneto), the emerging settlement configurations that we highlighted in the Magra Valley were entirely consistent with Secchi's most abstract, interpretive/design-oriented vision. It not only expressed upended relationships between urbanized and rural space in many contexts, but also an essential aspect of settlement spread in many European settings (entirely absent in North American sprawl). It reflected the best reuse of a rich and stratified fixed social capital built over the long term, and the incremental transformative action of a range of private citizens (initially also public) in territorial and infrastructure building processes (the same trend has appeared in similar forms for a few decades in numerous Asian or South American countries with more recent development). In the Magra Valley, the result was a 'vision of the future' of the territory that did not negate ongoing dynamics (according to hypotheses of compaction in closed forms of the urbanized space, which would now be unthinkable), but rather aimed to develop the 'minimum rationality' of emerging processes, taking care to avoid a few negative externalities and enhance the positive, undervalued potential of the settlement pattern. In contrast, the analysis of many spaces for working, living, and commerce emerging from those settlement plots urged the recovery of the rich microdesign heritage in town planning, but also more recent contributions from urban design and the experiences of a few landscape designers, whose work we were about to rediscover. The orientation with respect to the places was reformist; not condemnation (as was customary in the planning culture and current media, but a willingness to orient developments to ensure greater liveability and spatial quality while avoiding negative aspects, especially with respect to the landscape and ecology. At the time, an openness to issues of everyday life was actually remarkable and never detached from a reform-oriented demand for change. Attention for ecological and environmental aspects was certainly growing, also because there was a keen interest in public and private open space design, but the issue of the 'vertical' dimension of space was still underestimated (Pileri, 2024). Containing land consumption was not pursued directly with

binding policies, but indirectly by compacting/consolidating new building processes in open spaces within urbanized areas. A reflection on the overall experience shows that the interpretive framework was convincing, as were the two main hypotheses for work. Some perplexity derived from the need to deposit the work in an object, a 'spatial plan' that, in the processing phase, had interacted to a limited degree with social and political actors in the territory; it would, however, have been adopted and applied — with its rich design-oriented indications and very few regulatory elements — by a varied and little-known set of actors (local administrations and public and private subjects). Only sporadic interweaving with a more binding municipal urban plan and interaction/confrontation with an important infrastructure policy (on development of the inland port and the reuse of a few military areas in the Gulf of Genoa) enabled interaction with the actual dynamics of space production and aroused certain public attention for that notable interpretive and design-oriented reflection.

In contrast, I found excessive separation from the administrative and political spheres when working with Alberto Magnaghi at the same time on an area with high environmental risk (Lambro Seveso Olona: Magnaghi, 1995). Magnaghi started from hypotheses that were very different from Secchi's, to some extent assuming the activation of local communities to reconsider a model of ecologically devastating development. The roots of the common work lay in Magnaghi's interest in a nonstereotyped and purely functionalist interpretation of that 'urban region', which I and others had proposed in a work published slightly earlier and which I developed at the time (Boeri, Lanzani, Marini, 1993). Magnaghi's unusual interest in agricultural, hydraulic, and ecological science in interpreting the territory was, for me and the entire working group, a great lesson. He also had a clear awareness of the inefficiency of sector-based and technical solutions in dealing with complex environmental problems in the region, and the need to change the model of development. However, as I anticipated, Magnaghi anchored every hypothesis for reform in that territory to a social/political project that was too demanding and free of an actual grip in local society, theorizing the activation of frankly improbable forms of intermunicipal communities. Perhaps an attempt at intense interaction with a few institutional subjects (from the railways to water consortia to participatory societies, etc.) would have been more fertile? No doubt. But how can such relationships be initiated amid an exercise developed for the IRER (regional research centre) without a true regional commission, with weak political support from the environmental movement? With the most radical demands deemed to be disappointing, the limited but positive legacy of

that work was the inauguration of a period of ‘river contracts’. These pacts were rather weak, but nevertheless guaranteed some implementation for an innovative interpretation of the territory and development consistent with sector-based projects (such as the expansion of the Nosedo water treatment plant south of Milan, and the contextual creation of a territorial park).

In different ways, I basically observed fertile interaction between the implicit planning capability of a renewed geography of the settlements and landscape and a ‘weak’ but never trivially adaptive and always clearly reform-oriented idea of urban planning (the idea contemplated by Bernardo Secchi for the Magra Valley or what I myself had imagined in my conversations with Alberto Magnaghi). What was certainly missing in both cases was closer interaction with players in local politics, sector-based policies, and the world of institutions.

## **7. 2 A Second ‘Knight’s Move’: Managing Urban Planning (in the Italian ‘Province’)**

My second unintentional and fortunate ‘knight’s move’ relates to the way in which I approached urban planning — as a councillor. In 1995, with the scepticism and perhaps the explicit opposition of my masters, I accepted a request to become municipal councillor of a city of 40,000 residents. Maybe I did it out of love for my city, but perhaps also (always with a certain unawareness) due to some dissatisfaction with the planning events that I was involved in (albeit as a secondary player) and the hope of actually affecting territorial transformations with the available tools and technical knowledge (used appropriately, of course).

### *Searching for Effectiveness, an Openness to Change in an Interactive Context*

Lacking any administrative experience, I found myself facing an array of weighty delegates (urban planning, private building, public works, public building, etc.). It may have been an excessive task, but it was also a great fortune, because I was able (first alone, and then in close coordination with another councillor that I recommended) to test my capability against different means of planning action: a) orienting and reformulating old and new direct public investments (in roads, public green space, collective facilities, municipal housing); b) interpreting the rules of the old plan as president of the building commission; c) addressing projects for urban restoration (and expansion) that had long been halted due to administrative immobilism and a lack of agreement; and d) guiding the construction of a

new plan intended as a frame of reference that could orient such activities. The actions were built in different ways and at different times, although always through continuous interaction with technicians from the administration, professionals, political forces, collective subjects, agencies, and other public subjects.

Some readings, which still seem fertile for us planners, helped me to work within the process. The first was *A Treatise on Efficacy* by François Jullien (Jullien, 1996). The text presented an invitation to orient the current dynamics, drawing on every grip, each possible lever given to us — often in an entirely unexpected form — with an awareness of the uselessness of a project idea that is demanding and heroic, yet beyond the context. Jullien drew this 'possibilism' from Chinese wisdom, which seems consistent with my way of practising geographical research on settlement and landscape processes in implicitly design-oriented forms (which fed into the planning experiences mentioned above). However, his text was also fundamental for the last surprising page (often ignored by people using it in managerial schools and also in our field, it seems to me). After more than 200 pages of continuous invitations to adopt the possibilist and incremental approach of Chinese thought, Jullien asks what we risk losing by assuming that perspective as a whole. We lose the capacity to think about a truly different future or even just — and it is not a minor issue — the capacity to resist the present should it prove to be unacceptable (enough to suggest the possibility of writing a different treatise not on efficacy, but on resistance). How could we forget that page?

Two other readings helped me to understand the entire lesson of Prometheus, while starting with the wisdom of Hue, who avoids any excessive effort and always draws on the potential of a situation (Jullien, 1996). In Bruno Dente's book *In un diverso stato* [In a Different State], I saw a way not only to feel like both an urban planner and administrator, but also to combine tactical action and a desire for change (Dente, 1995). In his book, Dente ridiculed as naive and incorrect an abstract vision in which the definition of political objectives (from administrators) precedes the development of the necessary technical action to realize them (which was proposed by Bassanini's rather questionable administrative reform). Reflecting on the importance of technical councillors or ministers at the time, Dente suggested distinguishing technicians in the administration and administrators with technical skills based on the different forms of knowledge possessed respectively by the two figures: local contextual knowledge tied to established routines (partially or sometimes strongly political); and potentially

innovative knowledge used to question technical/administrative routines. I used the key Dente proposed to interpret and direct not only my role compared to that of managers, but also the functions of and operating methods for external professionals (authors of the plan, planning office, legal consultants, and technical consultants relating to the main public projects) whom I called to work in close contact with internal technical structures.

The other influential reading was the incomplete autobiography of Rossi Doria, a great figure in Italian agricultural economics who dealt with territorial reclamation and planning (Rossi Doria, 1991). Rossi Doria reflected on the evolution in his lifetime of the ‘politics of the profession’ (presented as a way of understanding the Italian territory, society, and economics, along with a set of planning proposals and spatial policies), which he exercised with different roles. He was not only a classical agricultural economist dedicated to reasoning on the relationships between economics, society, and the territory in different agricultural systems, with a radically reform-oriented intent, but also a technician involved in developing and managing a few policies or, for briefer periods, a politician/administrator (tied to a broader political and social project, but always the holder of an implicitly political approach and vision tied to the profession and related know-how).

*Managing Urban and Public Projects, a Need for a Vision of the Future, Constitutional Choices, and Revising the Rules*

The theoretical framework within the discipline that accompanied me throughout those 10 years was essentially based on the influential reflections by Bernardo Secchi and Luigi Mazza, which I continued to deem mutually compatible and in some way translatable into an ordinary and minor process like the one that occupied me. Here I refer to just a few essential topics in their approach, which were essential for me. From Secchi, I gathered the centrality of open space design; addressing areas with minute choices and not just exceptional projects; the distinction between area-project and regulatory area; the desire to reduce the distance between architecture and urban planning; and the effort to reflect on governing the evolution of the territory while recognizing emerging forms and structures (Secchi, 1989, 1994, 2000, 2015). From Mazza, I gathered an invitation to reflect on the varied nature of regulatory, design-oriented, and strategic action, as well as considerations regarding the difficulty of conceiving the three functions in an integrated way within a single act, the plan (Mazza, 1993, 1997, 2004a, 2004b, 2010, 2015). I also gathered the reflection on the role of grids in doing urban planning, which seemed capable of con-

verging with reflections on Secchi's open space design (see Lanzani, 2025, for a reinterpretation of the issue). From that experience, which was forced to make the two approaches interact, I would like to recall some personal acquisitions, which I believe could be publicly discussed and which I have never questioned in subsequent years.

*Acting through projects.* A winning move undoubtedly lay in two ways of prioritizing action. First, by inserting a vast set of public investments in planning practice. These investments were aimed at extensively redesigning open spaces and the space of relationships between objects and subjects (roads, lay-bys and squares, not only in the city centre) and creating rather different green spaces with respect to size (from 1 to 40 hectares) and type (from large urban parks to ecological and landscape infrastructure in the agricultural terrain). Other investments were aimed at renewing and strengthening the system of municipal facilities (later I would say 'everyday infrastructure': schools, sport facilities, library, low-cost and social housing) due to widespread extraordinary maintenance and by increasing the supply. Second, it seemed necessary to immediately initiate a study relating to a 'contractual' procedure on the main areas of transformation promoted by private actors in decommissioned areas. This study always began with a theoretical framework (particularly the design of open spaces in the area) proposed by the administration (rather than design-oriented hypotheses defined independently by the operators), within which (in the most consistent operations) a collective open space (garden, public car park, etc.) or facility (a library in the most important cases, a museum, etc.) was identified for construction with the contribution of private operators, significantly superior to normal urbanization duties. The working group that sat to draft the new plan after a few months (composed of three colleagues: Sandro Balducci, Stefano Boeri, and Franco Infussi), along with a planning office of four younger architects — including Antonio Longo and Antonella Bruzzese, who later became urban planning professors — was asked to orient, guide, and assess the contractual procedures at the same time that they worked with me to build a vision of the future of the city on different scales. A partial variant was drafted in a few months, with project schemes relating to several areas of transformation in which a concerted practice was developed. Some choices were reviewed after 24 months, and the possibility of reformulating normative indications in the implementation phase enabled both the early activation of a few projects and a circular process between specific interventions, a general vision, and direct action by public administration or contractual action by private operators. Following this, I served as a consultant in three experiences to draft urban plans, which

were even more satisfying the more I was able to guide and manage direct and private investments ‘in real time’. In this respect, I wholly agree with Pier Carlo Palermo’s dual invitation for urban planning: its importance lies mainly in the capacity to concretely affect transformative action realized substantially through specific projects. Three clarifications are necessary, however. First, what counts are the many traditional public projects — even minute ones — and not just urban projects. Second, the objective cannot be reached except through collaboration between urban planners that are both external and connected to the administration (a nearly impossible condition today in Italy, except in very partial forms, with the contribution of anomalous councillors/technicians). Finally, continuous creation of visions on different scales is indispensable with respect to the specific area of transformation and its relationships with the overall city layout.

*The undeniable role of spatial visions (to develop in strategic and tactical forms).* In this sense, I believe that efforts by Secchi, Gregotti, and others can be reinterpreted to reintroduce an influential design orientation in the way of doing urban planning. The criticism by Mazza (and others) ‘implicit’ in *progetti-norma* procedures [urban projects imposing binding regulations] in the plan is still pertinent and in some senses definitive. However, that type of design-oriented reflection on the transformation of places more detached from investor interests and more radically cross-scale is still indispensable. Where and how should it be deposited? In two places, I believe. The first is in ‘true projects’ (as De Carlo would say), which should accompany periodic general reconsideration about the territorial governance of a city: projects for public works with urban planning value and urban transformation projects for which contracting and activation can be managed. The second is in a set of urban projects and future visions that, without the binding nature of regulations, can and should be the starting point, the goal of interaction necessary for direct (public) interventions and contracts (public-private) to be defined at later, somewhat foreseeable times. Of course, these should become the shared property of both technical/administrative structures and government coalitions. I believe that the hypothesis is convincing if two requisites hold. The first relates to the disappointing results of managing urban transformation areas on a case-by-case basis in many cities in the last 20 years (management falling in line with demands from operators and the project images they formulated) while the second concerns the very recent decomposed and sometimes deplorable effects of consistent public interventions using NRRP resources (which, in the best cases, answer only to the demands and criteria of sector-based rationality, in forms that are sometimes devastating for spatial

organization). Another factor regards the uselessness and mainly rhetorical function of new forms of the plan — for example, those drafted on the basis of the recent law in the Emilia-Romagna Region. These are generally full of generic objectives and measures but practically silent on the ways to achieve the goals declared for different physical contexts.

*Proposing a few fundamental constitutional choices.* Not all design-oriented reflection and visioning activities should, however, sacrifice a more rigid regulatory translation. I believe that part of them can be fruitfully developed according to the proposals of the planning culture, obviously only if the technical and political conditions exist to achieve the objective. Two important conceptual references are Bernardo Secchi's reflections on open space design extended to the entire territory in question, which operationally and especially became a project for the environmental/landscape system over time, and Mazza's reflections on a few planning choices that could and should become constitutional choices and possibly take the role of a few 'spatial grids'. In my experience as councillor and then planning consultant for a few cities, these choices essentially regarded three aspects. The first is the border (changeable and often better defined on the supramunicipal scale) between urbanized and nonurbanized territories, with the identification of two distinct land regimes. The second is the urban design — not exclusively or merely functionalist — of the road network (where forms of slow mobility and concrete relationships between 'being' and 'moving' are defined without limits on the functional classification and indication of parking and speed limits). Finally, the third is the complex design of the network of green spaces with value for ecology and functional uses, as well as the design of a unitary spatial layout rather than merely a set of 'interiors' in the collective space of community life (associating buildings and collective open spaces in forms that are sometimes pertinent to the context). These large ordering elements favour living quality only if they are stabilized and built over the long term. To define them, the ability to conceive a pertinent vision is only one necessary condition. I recall three more, which are no less necessary: the possibility of becoming shared practice and knowledge in technical/administrative structures (activating the role playing mentioned by Dente); the political capacity (even more than technical capacity) to condition a few sector-based actions according to this perspective; and the need in multiple contexts — especially Italian situations that I have studied the most — to define and develop visions on intermunicipal and territorial scales.

*Working on differentiated rules, which combine elements of rigidity and in-*

*terpretation.* Lastly, in both my experiences with territorial governance and my analysis of settlement phenomena, I developed a deep awareness of the very relevant role of a set of minute and decentralized private transformations in creating the territory and the persistent centrality of regulatory aspects in their possible orientation. In this respect, I may have developed a few convictions relating to the importance of regulation and its forms that do not entirely align with Pier Carlo Palermo's. First, I believe that the rules that urban planning can and should produce must be contextual and differentiated (in this sense, like Mazza, I do not consider urban planning without zoning). Some original knowledge of European technical urban planning and town planning (for example, Wright and Stein's proposals for the American suburbs) and more recent reflections on form-based codes — or else a few differentiated modes through which the objectives of ecological settlement regeneration are pursued — can only be deposited in differentiated rules of transformation for parts of the city. When this practice of regulating widespread urban restoration and regeneration should be anchored in a conservative (customary) vision of changing urban contexts and when it should become a factor of change to guide a new metamorphosis in part of the city are key topics for discussion. On the other hand, regulating functional forms according to zone (if this were possible, even according to real-estate tax regimes) seem to me to be key for managing the complex urban dynamics of gentrification and crises in habitability. In essence, regulatory activity continues to matter. It certainly cannot manage large, complex urban transformation projects, but it is essential for orienting the complex physical, functional, and social metabolism of the city. An awareness that rules do not activate an idea of the city (more or less beautiful, functional or just, as was once said, or smart or green as per the most recent superficial rhetoric) is needed, but the rules certainly and powerfully orient the behaviour of many actors and complex urban metamorphoses. I have recently developed an awareness of many constituent aspects of such regulatory activities (I touch on this point below). I developed two basic convictions serving as an administrator in close interaction with Franco Infussi and municipal workers. First, there is a need to accompany clear categorical standards with a series of guiding norms and suggestions which require a seat where the necessary interpretation and discretion can be developed. Second, there are a few limits relating to complication that the regulatory framework can but should not exceed if its important, although indirect and partial function is to be enhanced.

*Looking Around, the First Doubts*

The administrative experience I have recounted was very intense. Although

I found points of contact and thoughts shared with many urban planners, I had already perceived, with some embarrassment, a growing distance with respect to a few developments in the profession and in research. Abandoning the ambition of a rigid, prescriptive project and being a knowing part of an interactive process: these choices risked being understood as a simple, agnostic composition of interests and willingness in the situation (with surprising cynicism in a few slightly older colleagues, who, having adopted a political orientation in years of radical conflict, now worked shrewdly among real processes, but also with a strongly adaptive spirit, without caring for the effects of their actions). Can we remain in interactive processes with the tactical knowledge and possibilist approach of the sage Yu (as per Jullien) without becoming a pure, indifferent managerial mediator? Without renouncing the role as a carrier of a specific design-oriented intentionality? Without renouncing a desire for effective reform? My impression is that already at that time, many colleagues did not try to redefine the forms of their intentional action in interactive contexts, but simply and entirely renounced the development of a specific and responsible 'politics of the profession', contenting themselves with a role as a notary and bureaucratic facilitator.

On the other hand, faced with attempts by some increasingly rare urban planners to shorten the distance between planning and design and/or maintain that unity characteristic of the Latin tradition of urban planning, most colleagues, first in academia and then in the professional realm, tended to increase that distance. For many years, many Italian planners rightly dealt with a variety of urban policies. Overcoming all-inclusive visions of the plan was appreciable, as was the willingness to address a variety of policies (even if not specifically related to urban transformation or planning). The problem is that many wound up performing such functions without attention to the material effects of public policies (to which, perhaps, as a discipline, we could make an original contribution) or their impact on different territorial, settlement, and environmental layouts. In a different way, this once again means giving up the practice of personal professional politics.

### **7. 3 Building on 20 Years of Successive Territorial Investigations and the Politics of the Profession**

#### *Problematic Transformations in Territories in the Middle*

After my administrative experience, I returned to teaching Urbanistica, but I continued to interpret the socioeconomic and settlement/landscape trans-

formations both in Milan (Farina, Cologna, Lanzani, Breveglieri, 1997; Lanzani, Granata, Novak et al., 2006; Lanzani, 2011) and especially in intermediate territories that do not pertain to either metropolitan areas or more marginal rural areas situated in the mountains or very peripheral areas (Lanzani, 2002, 2011; Lanzani, Pasqui, 2011; Lanzani, Merlini, Zanfi, 2015; Lanzani, Bolocan, Zanfi, 2016). These are ‘territories of an Italy in the middle’ (Lanzani, 2024b), which are nevertheless rather varied. They include medium-sized and small cities, territories with linear, reticular, or widespread forms of urbanization, and rural territories in the plains and foothills with intensive agriculture, often traversed by important bands of infrastructure. From this analysis, I would like to recall a few interpretive elements that seem essential for reasoning on urban policies in a conspicuous part of Italy, but also across Europe (Lanzani, 2024b).

In the first place, the idea of strengthening emerging spatial forms, due mainly to the dynamics of reusing the inherited fixed social capital and the prevalence of incremental processes, experienced a crisis due to some decisive factors. These included increasingly powerful and self-referential sector-based rationales that guided the realization of new infrastructure (especially mobility) and the reorganization of some equipment (health-care above all); and the behaviour of prominent economic actors (the system of emerging companies). Those processes worked on the territory as if it were a *tabula rasa*, fragmenting it and contradicting the structural traces not only of small and medium cities, but also widespread urbanized areas and the countryside (similar dynamics were also highlighted in other studies at the same time, including: Turri, 2000; Munarin, Tosi 2002; Zanfi, 2008; Indovina, 2009; Agnoletto, Guerzoni, 2012; Fabian, Munarin, 2017; Bianchetti, 2019). For that matter, the reform-oriented capacity of municipal government, even in the strongest regions and civic traditions, not only proved to be insufficient for conditioning the ongoing processes (which involved subjects much more powerful than the city), but was unable to consider the future or condition the behaviour of local actors. In some medium-sized cities, the tradition of reform-oriented municipalism, which had provided good proof in urban planning in the past, managed to stand up. This was not true elsewhere, if the municipality was limited to unconditionally accepting and legitimizing any initiative by economic subjects operating in the territory.

Another problem must not be underestimated. In the past, territories in the middle often developed according to an endogenous matrix. Now, in the new phase of the knowledge economy (which entails the centralization of

many functions), these territories are the object of instrumental use and mining practices. This is where imaginary smart and green metropolitan scenarios show their 'dark side', such as forms of industrialized and intensive agriculture and livestock breeding or the invasive infrastructure of mobility and logistics. More recent aspects include data centres and new energy plants (such as when such territories became the site of unhealthy industries or sewage discharge at the beginning of the 1900s, separated from the hygienic/environmental culture that tended to protect the main cities and territories with greater natural connotations, relegating undesired aspects to intermediate territories: Lanzani, 2024b).

In fact, the joint effect of self-referential sector-based political powers and increasingly local and 'defensive/conservation-oriented' municipalism, as well as new relationships between economics and the region, had negative effects on intermediate territories. As a simplification, some cases outlined 'growth without development', which aggravated limitations that had previously emerged. Here we can see the endurance or growth of the population and economy — at times determined by an excellent industrial and agricultural system — although it always and increasingly conflicts with the reasons for living there, with the environment, and with land or landscape protection. Other, more numerous territories, however, have seen degrowth that is not at all virtuous and may even be extremely problematic. New forms of mining are situated next to the scraps and ruins of urbanized areas relating to decommissioned economic activities, while the costs of restoring the residential building stock tend to exceed sales prices. As a result, architectural restoration and energy efficiency become difficult. The risk of slow degradation is exacerbated by filter-down dynamics, with the final result being abandonment. (On the recent evolution in relationships between Italian economics, society, and territory, see Calafati, 2009; Bonomi, 2013; Viesti, 2021; Buciuni, Corò, 2023.)

Both types of territories, however, maintain a significant population and, as a result, an important electoral weight that is often decisive for political aims, even if we must record a deficit of 'representation' as a crisis in the capacity to imagine the future of the economic/social, territorial, and landscape structure of the inhabited area. We proceed while looking in the rear-view mirror, and this orientation makes two emerging issues nearly intractable. The first is the necessary but difficult ecological conversion of the production system, and more specifically of the territory and settlements. Such a conversion would be decisive for those territories, but also for the overall function of the greater surrounding region. The second issue

is the crisis in the most typical social feature: the remarkable presence of the middle class giving way to social polarization in growth, with the formation of shrinking areas that are increasingly fragile and disqualified. The framework becomes even more complicated due to the weakened role of two actors that are essential for building intermunicipal strategies: intermediate bodies and municipal agencies that become participatory agencies, guided today by profits rather than pursuing collective objectives under balanced budget constraints and increasingly orienting local policies and administration rather than being governed.

*Two Lines of Work for Spatial Planning: From Infrastructure Projects to Spatial Projects and from the Centrality of the Built Area to the Centrality of Open Spaces and the Landscape*

Amid the complicated context described above, I have continued to practice the ‘politics of the profession’ in a variety of roles. One was as a designer/consultant for plans and projects (drafting a master plan to revise secondary roads and environmental compensation due to a motorway, planning for green areas, a few municipal and provincial urban plans) and another was as a board member and then chair of different supramunicipal park authorities. Two working hypotheses (in some senses complementary) lay at the centre of this work.

In the first place, aware of the new means of production in the region, I aimed to interpret urban planning by refining the infrastructure projects as urban and territorial projects, assuming a working hypothesis that was advanced clearly by Pier Carlo Palermo and Alberto Clementi in the late 1990s (Clementi 1995, 1999; along the same lines, but with a different orientation, see Dematteis and Governa, 2001). The vision presented connections, albeit circumscribed and partial, with reflections by Secchi and Viganò on open space design in urban and periurban settings, which led to more general and ambitious explorations (Secchi, 2010, 2016; Fabian, Pellegrini, 2012; Viganò, Secchi, Fabian, 2016). With a few colleagues, I therefore tried to contextualize/territorialize infrastructure design, replacing a monofunctional idea of the project with a multipurpose concept of infrastructure, i.e. integrating grey and green infrastructure in a variety of settings: mobility (motorways, railways, etc.), hydraulics (canals, retention ponds, etc.), society and everyday life (healthcare, sports, educational, cultural facilities).

Two experiments were more ambitious. The first was developed in the master plan for integration/compensation works concerning a motorway and

consultation during preparation of a provincial spatial plan. It aimed not only to integrate the infrastructure project with the periurban open space plan, but also to guide the settlement dynamics surrounding new infrastructure on an intermunicipal scale, with respect to reorganizing existing industrial spaces. The idea was to prevent new settlement demands from being managed by municipal contractual urban planning lacking in broader visions or being conditioned by interaction among influential private actors and small or weak municipalities (Lanzani, Longo et al., 2013). The second topic, which developed in a few municipal plans, was to redefine a new 'urban grid' as a unifying pattern in the public and collective space of the city, relating the indoor and outdoor space of a few social, cultural, educational, sports (everyday) facilities with an urban and suburban network of open spaces, roads, and green areas. The goal was to create 'a network of urban features and widespread nature' (Lanzani 2015) following a different reasoning, even if not entirely alternative to the historical diagrams of Clarence Perry's neighbourhood civic centres or, more recently, Carlos Moreno's 15-minutes city. For the experiences I was directly involved in, and similar events I observed in other contexts, the results were partial, very often unsatisfying (particularly attempts to rethink mobility infrastructure and the contextual design of green infrastructure), and in some cases important (particularly the multipurpose design of hydraulic works and the local reworking of open space design and the relationships between differently equipped spaces).

In general, there seem to be some necessary prerequisites for ensuring a positive result for this type of planning action. One internal condition is the creation of a design-oriented representation, an 'implicit project' for the urbanized territories in question. In practice, the action is always local and tactical (even when it entails implementing 'networks of urban features and widespread nature', due to alliances with different types of subjects; however, it becomes important only if inserted within an overall vision. An external condition concerns the capacity of a territorial institution (region, province, park authority, local administration structure) to guide — not purely based on sector rationality — the action of functional autonomies or administrative sectors that should deal with infrastructure design and production. Only when both conditions are met is room created for fertile planning. In my opinion, the first requirement is always less frequent because it lacks reflections on visions of large-scale urban planning (while the media focuses on individual, often episodic actions, according to tactical reasoning that risks remaining ephemeral). The second requirement conflicts with the increasingly self-referential means of action of many

public actors or public administration sectors.

The second topic of interest that I have developed relates to deliberately ‘partial’ and in some senses ‘resistant’ action dealing only with the open space. Such action is designed not only to protect unused land, but to reform/rethink periurban open spaces that are mainly agricultural/natural, as well as lay-bys, car parks, squares, or roads in the urbanized fabric. This line of work, which seems to draw growing attention in planning activities, can lean on the fertile reflections regarding projects for roads, open space, and landscape made by Vittorio Gregotti in *Casabella* (Aa. Vv., 1989, 1991, 1993) and Pierluigi Nicolini in *Lotus* (Aa. Vv., 2003a, 2003b, 2012). It is supported by planning developments in the contemporary landscape architecture culture (Waldheim, 2006; Ganser, 2010; Desvigne, 2009, 2020; Smets, 2015; Belanger, 2016; Latz, 2017; Bava, Picon, 2021; Treib, 2022; Agence Ter, 2009, 2022; De Mulder, Shannon, 2024). It can also rely on more mature urban design contributions relating to open space, public space (Carmona, 2010), and a practical reconsideration of designing the road space based on interpretation (such as Anderson, 1978; Whyte, 1980) or directly design-oriented contributions (such as Appleyard, 1981; Gehl, 1996; Jacobs, Macdonald, Rofé, 2002; Marshall, 2004). This seems to be a relevant, fertile starting point for reconsidering knowledge and expertise in planning practices with respect to a few conditions. The first is the goal of building ‘green grids’ anchored in the topography of the terrain and sections of road among the collective equipment in urbanized territories with different social connotations, while another relates to not letting introverted projects become an opportunity for gentrification and reinforcing sociospatial inequalities. Another condition counters this trend by favouring and developing practices for social and territorial renewal and the related infrastructure (design-oriented considerations in this sense are found in Caravaggi, 2021; Coppola et al., 2021; Laboratorio Standard, 2021; Pileri, Renzoni, Savoldi, 2022; with respect to urban social infrastructure, see: Collettivo dell’economia fondamentale; 2018; Klinenberg, 2019; Barbera, 2023). Underlying this work, however, there must be an ambitious, demanding reflection on the spaces of coexistence and mutual approaches in a society that is extremely varied (Cassano, 1990; Nancy, 1996, 1999; Sennett, 1990, 2018), where perhaps we can no longer imagine reproducing the extraordinary spaces of urban quality that European cities have built over the long term (masterfully explained by Consonni, 1989, 2000, 2024).

In this case as well, the experiences seemed more effective when an overall vision (implicit or explicit, not formalized or created specifically from

some plan) joined concrete actions that showed all citizens the innovative consequences of the new vision. The same was true when the action stemmed from local attention-seeking behaviour, but contributed to modifying the general vision according to a virtuous circular process. If the vision is missing, individual actions risk becoming episodic and ineffective. If action is missing (bottom-up or top-down, depending on the various possible hybrids), the vision may be exercised in generic or rhetorical ways.

I must reiterate the point: planning action is almost always tactical, in the sense that urban planners are not capable of controlling the entire battlefield; without a guiding vision, however, the action can easily be adaptive or remain at the mercy of events. Although the best experiences in Italian periurban parks lack economic resources and prescriptive power, even with respect to passive protection, they nevertheless confirm this assessment. The starting point of the action may be uncontrollable, whether due to unexpected resources provided by a competition call or municipality, as compensation for a project that consumes space, or through green-oriented virtuous reuse of public investments that would be destined otherwise. The action becomes virtuous and not purely episodic if a general idea of the future of the territory is valued and supported by an institution, however light or fragile it may be.

In contrast, direct experience and many indirect observations have led me to deem the efforts of strategic planning in municipalities, provinces, or parks to be fruitless. At round tables for building strategic spatial plans, there has always been a lack of powerful actors or those present have remained silent and distracted (preferring to act in other fields of action). In addition, urban planning and territorial knowledge that favour relational complexity generally lose the challenge compared to the certainty and simplification of economics or management engineering. I fully agree with the reasoned considerations on the absolute lack of conditions for strategic spatial planning expressed early on by Luigi Mazza and amply adopted by Pier Carlo Palermo in this book. More in general, the entire architecture of many tools referring to strategic planning, with their ordered and methodical definition of objectives, measures, and actions, seems a bit unrealistic and rather far from the concrete means of action of the public administration and territorial transformation. Planning is a discipline, or better yet, a field of weak know-how, both of which focus on urban and territorial regulation, programming, or design and a contextual and relational capacity for action. We can and should act, except in exceptionally rare cases, at least with tactical wisdom and innovative visions. In this field, strategic

planning documents risk becoming the inevitable and involuntary rhetorical cover for processes that are very distant from planners' best intentions.

*The Difficulty of Action in the Changing Field of Urban and Territorial Regeneration*

In those same years, urban regeneration practices played a key role in the most compact fabrics of medium-sized cities in intermediate regions and also in large cities and metropolises. In another text (Lanzani 2024a), I took the viewpoint of an observer looking at action and aimed to reconstruct the varied framework of urban regeneration practices, recognizing five large matrices: the urban project; a more traditional combination of direct and regulatory action; integrated programmes; forms of informal action and social self-organization; and a few regional projects. I also noted a few essential questions that regeneration practices cannot avoid: recognizing radically different territorial conditions; the centrality of a few social, infrastructure-related, and ecological topics (which in many cases were only rhetorically recited); the need to build more inclusive means of action (for different subjects and interests); and, finally, the need for a cross-scale design of spatial layouts and a consistently contextual and territorial approach to problems.

At this point, I would like to make just three additional observations. The first regards the difficulty of interacting with the two trends of the disciplinary culture most involved in interpreting these practices. On the one hand are those who have been called 'maximalist', with an ability to understand (in contrast to others) that in radically changed contexts, urban regeneration has often become just a rhetorical veil to support pure real-estate operations resulting in urban gentrification (in this sense, see the activity on the *Eddyburg* website). At the same time, I have found that their efforts to stem such dynamics simply by proposing a return to an orthodox planning approach are decidedly embarrassing. It is an impossible return under the circumstances, and conceptually questionable despite the bounds imposed by the current conditions (due to some structural limits that were already seen in the 'short 20<sup>th</sup> century', as Pier Carlo Palermo has argued extensively). On the other hand, it seems to me that those in urban planning who have become the interpreters of new demands for regeneration — both architects/urbanists and urban planners — ultimately confused real-estate development with the prevailing public interest (in any context). They have pursued a search for urban quality indifferent to the social implications of the transformation. Finally, they have made themselves the champions of green and smart imagery that is, in some senses, a bit

deceitful, with questionable induced effects on the territory (for example, the work of clearly famous architects/urbanists such as Stefano Boeri or Carlo Ratti, but also many INU/Urbanpromo reviews). In general, it does not seem that many authoritative colleagues advocating different forms of urban regeneration — in the various ways that I have already indicated — have fully understood or wanted to understand the implications for their work due to changing external conditions, which today would usually be called 'neoliberalist' (Soja, 2000; Scott, 2008; Zukin, 2001, 2010; Semi, 2015; D'Eramo, 2017; Pinson, 2020). This is especially true the more their work creates 'status symbols' and contributes to feeding inequality tied not only to economic capital, but also to relational and cultural capital (Hirsh, 1976; Bourdieu, 1979). Efforts towards a possible policy to contrast growing inequalities seem to exist (Barca, 2019, 2022), but they are limited and usually focused on important but minor contexts where the logic of integrated programmes can be launched or some forms of active citizenship enhanced (Ostanel, 2010; Cellamare, 2019; Cognetti, Gambino, Faccini, 2020; Coppola et al., 2021).

The second consideration regards my difficulty (and obviously not only mine) in taking positive action. I was able to tackle these dynamics almost exclusively as a consultant in drafting a few urban plans. Drafting regulations that were differentiated according to widespread regeneration settings and rather light forms of *progetti-norma* [urban projects imposing binding regulations] for larger operations seemed insufficient rather than useless. On the one hand, our proposals for regulating widespread regeneration were often frustrated by regional or national provisions (in favour of urban regeneration understood as relating only to buildings, aimed at maximizing operators' earnings and denying the opportunity to work in different ways depending on the context). On the other hand, the eventual definition of any directions in the plan could only serve as a prerequisite for better contract management of the projects. This, however, required other social operating conditions, that is, some form of constant consultation with the administration regarding both technical and political aspects (an opportunity that is more plausible in other national settings, for example, in France: Cremaschi, 2025). In contrast, I do not believe that there are operational margins in favour of real-estate developers in this political/cultural period, at least not to radically negate the best urban-planning tradition. What is more, the urban planning culture has proved to be incapable of demystifying much of the rhetoric on regeneration in the public debate or counteracting a feasible idea of planning.

The third observation relates to the absolute need for the urban-planning culture to be aware that regeneration must be addressed in different forms in different settings (Lanzani, Zanfi, 2017; Rusci, 2017, 2021; Lanzani, 2024; for more information on the building stock in Southern Italy, see, Curci, Formato, Zanfi, 2017; on the stock in medium-sized cities, see Merlini, Zanfi, Zanini, 2025). Simplifying the discourse, significant capital gains can be made in dynamic metropolitan and tourist areas; the protagonists of active citizenship are subjects who have notable cultural and relational capital (sometimes even economic capital). Regeneration tends to have a gentrifying effect, so the objectives must relate to redesigning the quality of open spaces, high ecological/environmental standards, and the consistency of the project with respect to morphology and the urban landscape. It must also address the production of low-cost public housing and the creation of facilities that are really open to all citizens, even those pertaining to the lowest income brackets. In these settings, it is also important to support forms of active citizenship or do-it-yourself urbanism that include weak subjects and know how to contrast or at least mitigate gentrification.

In medium-sized cities, periurban territories, and those with widespread urbanization, where more limited capital gains are possible but the dynamics of land consumption are still intense, it is first necessary to associate a policy to reurbanize brownfields with the effective protection of greenfields. This would involve rules and binding limits on general planning and contractual standards entailing the identification of decommissioned areas that cannot be urbanized if transformations consume land. In addition, the management of regeneration projects should envisage the transfer of areas destined for green infrastructure and projects (in territories that often present environmental criticalities). Another priority is the production of social and cultural infrastructure (which favours the formation of active citizenship). The challenge lies in creating a society and quality environment in contexts that are generally less problematic from the socioeconomic point of view.

In the social periphery of central areas and widespread urbanization, the most plausible hypothesis is a critical reintroduction of experiences — not negative, but certainly worth improving — with integrated programmes (Urban, Neighbourhood Contracts, etc.). Three warnings are necessary, however: less episodic and more structural involvement of subjects active in the local context (which may entail their independence and initial activation, followed by institutional accompaniment); better integration with ordinary policies (social, cultural, educational, but also relating to public

works and similar programmes) that affect those settings; and greater attention to designing the layout of project areas and connections between areas and with the larger context (a programme of physical projects should not be reduced to a sum of works 'piled up' in the context).

Finally, two roads open up in shrinking areas. On the one hand, interventions on urban spaces and the building stock (generally with low economic value) may be useful, if and only if they are integrated with social innovation, new local entrepreneurship (not just economic), and policies for service renewal and economic development (associated with local ecological resources, specific forms of tourism, or incentives for varied residential areas) (De Rossi, 2018). On the other hand, controlled management with nonmarginal effects is needed, along with a reduction in the levels of territorial anthropization and the decommissioning or demolition of buildings and infrastructure. An effective combination of the two intervention strategies would require a more general design of the territorial layout, which is also missing in the best attempts to regenerate remote areas.

*Rules Matter, and in Our Indifference, Others Were (Are) Rewriting Them*  
I believe that we should start paying attention once again to the regulatory framework, which has changed profoundly over the years (amid the indifference of most of the academic planning culture). Many of the most questionable effects of widespread urban regeneration (not only in Milan) relate not to the result of poor urban projects or to bad local planning regulations. Rather, they derive from changes in national and regional rules (Coppola et al., 2024; Urbani, 2024).

In particular, the revision of the Consolidated Text on Building (which radically changed the technical and common language on some types of projects, such as building restoration), numerous regional provisions, and the consolidated text on the order of the day in the Italian Parliament in favour of urban regeneration tenaciously pursued two objectives. The first was to reduce urban regeneration to basic building renovation. What mattered was encouraging building replacement. It abandoned the idea that urban regeneration also implies environmental and social problems connected to the transformation of open and public spaces and the use of new buildings. It even negates the principle that each urban regeneration operation should be considered amid the physical/morphological and social specifics of the context. The second objective is to maximize — in any way and anywhere — profits to increase the attractiveness of investments in such operations. In some contexts, attracting private investments, along with activating new

projects and public investments, may correspond to the public interest and the needs of a territory in crisis. In many other situations, where urban regeneration investments are concentrated, these measures only aim to increase already significant profitability instead of capturing part of it to convert into social and environmental infrastructure. The excellent law in the 1970s on urban planning standards and types of building projects grew out of a fitting negotiation in the ministry among the interests of ANCE [Italian Association of Private Construction Contractors], a reform-oriented political culture, and a planning culture that interpreted social demands raised by the trade union and women's movements. The new consolidated text on building stemmed from a very different social and cultural setting under various political orientations (Letta's and Renzi's centre-left governments, Draghi's technical government, and now probably Meloni's government, which is moving in the same direction). Meanwhile, the academic planning culture continues to overlook the issue. Instead, it prefers to criticize rigid, prescriptive concepts of the discipline that exist only on paper, or to celebrate limited initiatives of tactical urbanism or social innovation. At the same time, the professional culture seems to reject the political responsibility of the profession, often limiting itself to ratifying emerging interests in the real-estate sector.

The revision of sector-based regulatory frameworks, which in fact hinder every demand for reconstructing interests locally, the multipurpose integration of projects, active design, and management of urban and territorial transformations, is not a problem that only regards construction. Particularly in periurban areas and amid widespread urbanization, the territory is broken into pieces and disfigured by a variety of ad hoc regulations to realize special public works, install logistical activities, data centres, and photovoltaic plants. As an example, I offer just one last point. Regulation indifferent to the setting encourages the installation of such plants precisely in periurban open spaces, right where my work has been concentrated for years. Here, proximity to the urbanized space and distribution networks is maximized, facilitating their construction. It is a pity that in these highly populated areas, with exceedingly impermeable surfaces and heat islands, nonurbanized open spaces should be reconsidered to strengthen ecosystem functions. It is also a pity that these areas are rich in urbanized land that would be better disposed for positioning solar panels (due to car parks and the flat roofs of production and commercial buildings), with a slight reduction in developer profits (for a greater cost for surface rights or to purchase an area).

In conclusion, rules count, and other actors (powerful industry lobbies) are rewriting them to their advantage. The impact of regulatory revisions contributes to making the planning culture more marginal and its noble demands increasingly in vain. Planners should be aware of these risks.

*Metamorphosis in Design-Oriented Development and Visioning in the Age of Communication*

I would like to conclude my observations on the most recent events with one last consideration. It might be necessary to realize that building visions of the future, the design of many master plans, and the design-oriented development of a few urban transformations are changing in meaning and function. Perhaps, amid its drama and vulgarity, the video on the reconstruction of Gaza produced by President Trump's entourage reveals a much broader and pervasive reality. The purpose of many design-oriented development projects for areas of intensive transformation, but also the general or specific images evoked by urban planning or by many place-makers and social innovators involved in urban design, has changed. The goal is not to orient the governance of urban and territorial transformations. The purpose is exclusively for communication: the images may serve to build widespread consensus on some directions of development that would otherwise be absent and/or may be useful for collecting financing that would otherwise be directed elsewhere. They do not serve to delineate a future that differs from the present, pursued with capable tactical action (or, exceptionally, with a strategic approach). If anything, they play a pacifying role, hiding problems, critical aspects, and possible development alternatives. They do not explore the evolutionary potential of the context, but delineate easy recipes for presumed good living (with awkward cultural branding).

The tendency obviously cannot avoid leading to growing embarrassment among urban planners. Of course we need images, visions, drawings of the future to orient and give a sense to tactical, plural action, which may wind up being inconclusive. At the same time, the practice of visioning and design, when it forms part of the society of communication, is essentially for marketing and building edifying and instrumental virtual worlds. It is difficult not to be involved in this trend. I see only two possible opportunities and I do not know how decisive they can be. The first is the solid anchoring of these images in the contextual specifics, the material nature of the world, the roughness of the ground and water, the thickness and design of the land, vegetation coverage, the life of things, and artificial objects arranged in the long term. This is what Bernardo Secchi proposed throughout the final phase of his research, as did Alberto Magnaghi, if we free his thought

from the most systematic orientation and from an overly strong intentionality (Secchi, 2015; Magnaghi, 2020). The second reference belongs to the sphere of everyday life of many inhabitants, whether settled or temporary, with their lives, stories, and bodies, according to a logic that evades the most trivial interpretations of everyday urbanism (as urban make-up for neoliberal operations), to enhance less ephemeral approaches that promote forms of spatial coproduction by social actors and institutions. In some measure they may also recall the radicality that references to everyday life had in the 1970s (Pasqui, 2008, 2025; Bianchetti, 2014, 2020).

Perhaps my early and never-betrayed love of the landscape (Lanzani, 1986, 2011), as a cognitive and design-oriented category, has deep roots here, referring not only to the fertile experiences of contemporary landscape designers, from whom I have learned a lot, or increasingly important attention for the vegetation, water, and biological aspects of the territory. We know that the landscape has a duplicity that may oppose resistance to the dictatorship of images. While also being an image, the landscape is something material and also a way of seeing things; it is an image of the world, but also experience of the world; it is ecological relationship between things and not separation between things; it does not disown intentional action by the subject, but relates it to the action of other subjects; it is also a memory of interrupted histories and possible futures that break the linear visions of time (Besse, 2000; Berque, 2008, 2016; Farinelli, 1993, 2003, 2007; Quaini, 2006; Jullien, 2014; Dematteis, 2020).

## **7.4 And if the Maximum of What is Possible Were Less than the Minimum of What is Necessary?**

### *Incrementalism, Possibilism, Reformism*

In a previous work, Pier Carlo Palermo (2022) invited us to adopt and share these cultural horizons. My research experience based on a variety of practices confirms that I have shared and continue to share these outlooks. Incrementalism, possibilism, and the reformist programme account for our 'normal' operating conditions. We cannot work otherwise, although two clarifications are warranted.

These principles should not be understood as essential objectives of our action. In this case, reformism risks becoming moderation, possibilism eternal confirmation of the present, and incrementalism passive adaptation to the dominant orientations in sociospatial processes. Since the end of the 1980s, when the conditions changed profoundly with respect to both

the years when planning knowledge was first codified in the late 1800s and early 1900s and the 'short 20<sup>th</sup> century', during which urban planning reached its maximum development, the risk of a reductive or conservative interpretation, if you will, of the three principles has become increasingly serious and real. Faced with increasingly radical social and sociospatial inequalities and an increasingly dramatic ecological crisis, it seems to me that today, it is not sufficient to look to obtain 'the maximum of what is possible' in the territorial governance and planning we are involved in. In too many cases, the result risks falling dramatically far from what would be 'the minimum of what is necessary'. Furthermore, in my opinion, 'the maximum of what is possible' today would not even be consistent with the most classical objectives of 20<sup>th</sup> century town and country planning, such as the search for renewed forms of a new urban quality in a less cohesive and more pluralistic society, or care for the environment in rural areas, where agriculture tends to underestimate problems related to reproducing the quality of the land.

Possibilism, incrementalism, and the reformist programme become fertile principles and practices if they are associated with a demand for a profound metamorphosis in what exists, in the specifics and different spatial contexts in which we live and operate; if they enable the development of an adequate vision of the evolutionary possibilities of each particular context; if they are able to guide but also limit the current incremental effects of egocentric and irresponsible individualism (with respect to the reasons of coexistence and nature); in sum, if the reformist programme respects radical values and principles. This does not seem to be the perspective of many planning experiences of colleagues of my generation or the one that immediately follows, who operate as consultants or directly as administrators.

*Being in the Conflict and/or Practising a Propositional Action, albeit Interstitial and Resistant*

I have the impression that today, in the framework of existing social, political, economic, and territorial conditions, it is essential for the planning culture to recognize the importance of and need for conflict. However, we should do so with a different posture with respect to critical geography and sociology. We are certainly indebted to those disciplinary fields for a clearer understanding of contemporary sociospatial processes. From our point of view, however, such literature shows two limits.

The first is that the more these studies approach the specific transformation dynamics underlying their criticism, the more they become, so to say,

‘defocused’; they do not reveal devices, design-oriented practices, standards, or local forms of interaction with which the processes are solidified. Instead, I believe that the current critical analysis of many specific urban transformation processes should be at the centre of our activities. I draw a few examples from a particular situation which was recently the focus of discussion in Italy. To what extent are the unsatisfactory results of urban planning in Milan the consequence of inadequate local, regional, or national regulations? How much do they depend on evading a few local norms? Or on forms of contracting reserved only for interactions between administrators and operators, with the exclusion of other collective players from the negotiating table? How much of an effect does the absence of a general vision of the future have and how much real or only supposed asymmetry of power is there among the multiple actors? How much are the practices conditioned by a trivial interpretation of tactical urbanism and everyday urbanism, or the space allowed for place-makers and do-it-yourself urbanism, which do not consider the nature of the subjects that manage to be activated? At the same time, in a difficult political, social, and cultural time phase (marked by triumphant neoliberal approaches and pacifying visions of growth), can we recognize a nontrivial rather than just passive adaptation to prevailing trends in the practices in Milan? Has a minimum capacity for resistance emerged, one that can leave any tangible testable trace of a different possible future? To assume these responsibilities, we need a technically pertinent approach, which is lacking in many critical contributions; we need to develop them in more suitable forms.

Critical knowledge is not generally bound to a proposal for action, a demand for transformation appropriate for urban planners. In this phase, it is difficult for reform-oriented proposals to be implemented, but the risk does not excuse the duty to formulate more adequate projects. Based on what I have claimed, they cannot consist of a generic and ineffective call to any traditional forms of general planning or the simple reintroduction of urban design practices. We need devices that ensure that sector-based interventions are multipurpose and pertinent to the context; forms of cooperation that are less opaque and do not favour investors; place-making practices capable of activating subjects with little capital — not only economic, but especially relational and cultural; and, finally, area projects, albeit limited and low cost, that can contribute positively to a more general layout design. In sum, urban planners should be able to act in situations of conflict, formulating technically pertinent proposals to transform the context. In the best cases, developing proposals may be intertwined with activating a few social subjects and critical thought in other fields, contributing to creating

new controversies of collective interest, and ensuring the material sense of reform-oriented demands which would otherwise risk being reduced to a trivial adaptation to existing conditions.

The ministerial decree on the standards and clear definition of types of building interventions that are under attack today clearly developed in the midst of social conflict, but also due to the capacity of the technical culture to play a key role within that conflict (Laboratorio Standard, 2021). Ecological thought and knowledge have interpreted a role that is both conflicting and propositional in independent forms, without being able to rely on the support of more relevant social and political subjects. The possibilities of limiting the most destructive growth dynamics substantially depend on the way in which technicians will be able to operate in the public sphere through confrontation, disputes, conflicts, and mediation.

It is realistic to assume that at this stage, proposals by urban planners can only support resistance (regarding current transformations that cannot be reformed) or interstitial action (in the sense that it may affect only some territories and aspects of the problem). This includes, for example, a few projects on the urban public space pertaining to tactical or everyday urbanism, such as the redesign of 'school squares' that recreate places for socializing, perhaps improve water collection, and break down heat islands; a few virtuous food policies that improve urban metabolism, enhancing agricultural land; various projects and interventions in periurban parks; and a variety of forms of temporary or low-cost resettlement in the building stock in 'territories in the middle', where property values are close to or greater than the restoration costs. All of these are possible forms of interstitial action. Unfortunately, they are often accompanied by ambiguous or unsupportable rhetoric that tends to conceal other real, rather more destructive dynamics with serious effects on these sorts of territories in particular. In sum, interstitial action makes sense only if it is aware of its limits and if it is accompanied by resistance, or sometimes even open conflict, with respect to ongoing transformations.

#### *Continuity and Renewal of the 'Politics of the Profession'*

This, I believe, is the principal way of consistently practising the 'politics of the planning profession' that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, albeit with an appropriateness adapted to the changing conditions. However, we should not liquidate an important part of our know-how. This includes not only techniques to regulate land use, procedures to support urban markets, and ways of coordinating sector-based interventions, but also

an extraordinary effort to produce and integrate everyday infrastructure in the urban space, build urban quality in society with increasingly diverse individuals and increasingly fragmented things, and reintroduce care for the land when unlimited urban growth and increasingly industrialized agriculture marked their end.

Renewed critical attention to the neoliberal revision of regulatory frameworks (and a capacity to propose solid alternatives); anchoring visions of the future in the material nature of the contexts and daily experience of differentiated inhabitants, avoiding a trend in communication marketing; more critical attention to subjects included and excluded by decision-making processes that lead to important urban and territorial changes, with a propositional effort to redefine decision-making as much as possible: these are, in my opinion, the fundamental connections in the discourse on urban and spatial planning that aims to be nonadaptive in practice. Perhaps it is along these lines that an increasingly narrow dialogue with ecological knowledge and issues is developed (Nebbia, 2002; Butera, 2021; Bonneau, Fresso, 2016) with a radical practice of reuse (Viale, 2010), which was actually understood early on and then not fully developed in Italian *urbanistica*, precisely when the report on the limits of development was produced. It falls rather far from the empty, pacifying rhetoric of sustainability and assessment, but has deep roots in the ‘terrestrial’ dimension of living (Latour, 2017, 2022); with a ‘relational’ perspective that was already our way of existing in the past and should always be so in the future amid the construction of the territory and its changing forms of governance.

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## 8. Urban Planning in Practice (Gabriele Pasqui)

### 8.1 Starting with the Work by Pier Carlo Palermo

‘Urban planning has certainly changed in the last 30 years, and the transformations across a variety of contexts have been substantial.’ With this statement begins the text by Pier Carlo Palermo that I am preparing to discuss. To do so, I have chosen the notions of mutation and weakness—or perhaps even eclipse—as lenses through which to interpret the discipline, adopting the point of view of practice—or better yet, practices, in the plural. This interpretive approach runs continuously throughout Palermo’s work, allowing me to appreciate the extraordinary critical mapping he develops in this text, as well as in his previous writings (Palermo, 2022, 2025), without engaging with it too directly here. I will therefore focus on the underlying theses of the book, beginning with the attention it gives to *urban planning in practice*—that is, to the complex ensemble of institutions, regulations, procedures, stakeholders, interests, conflicts, discourses, knowledges, and techniques that together shape everyday urban planning.

In their last and remarkable book, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write: ‘The question ‘What is philosophy?’ can perhaps be posed only late in life, with the arrival of old age and the time for speaking concretely’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1996: IX). In the time available to us, under our current circumstances, and in full recognition of the established frameworks from which our words emerge, the act of speaking concretely feels especially urgent. For my part—and perhaps this observation might also extend to Pier Carlo Palermo himself, though his experience and knowledge of the discipline are incomparably richer—my position in this discourse is that of a scholar in urban policies: an academic with relatively little experience in operational planning. But what, then, does it mean to speak concretely? What is urban planning in practice?

I have sought to articulate these ideas on multiple occasions. Urban planning constitutes a field of practices, where the notion of ‘field’ refers to a dynamic, structured assemblage of diverse activities—technical and cognitive, institutional and administrative, political and economic (Pasqui, 2017, 2018). This field takes on changing forms depending on the configurations and relationships that vary across contexts, and through space and time. The spatial dimension, in particular, must not be forgotten: planning today operates on a massive scale, generating powerful effects that sometimes reproduce models inherited from our Western and colonial past

across many parts of the world—from China to the Far East, the Indian subcontinent, South America, and Africa. In this sense, urban planning functions as a strong material and institutional infrastructure, shaped by specific inflections and tied to forms of settlement development that are often neither designed nor planned, within contexts where urbanization remains pervasive and settlement growth continues to link spatial organization with social processes (Ren, 2020; Boano and Di Campi, 2022). At the same time, even within Western—and especially European—cities, the particular assemblage of practices that defines, yet never fully contains, the perimeter of planning action is in constant flux, evolving through internal dynamics. Moreover, external forces traverse this field, reorganizing the conditions of agency for various stakeholders, constraining possibilities, and subverting established meanings.

This is not the place to better explain the notion of ‘practice’ that I use in my definition of ‘planning practices’. It is sufficient to recall the pragmatic line running from Peirce to Dewey, which Palermo recognizes and also seems to assume in his work: the notion of ‘field’ and ‘practice’ à la Bourdieu; and the thinking by the Italian philosopher Carlo Sini (Calcaterra et al., 2015; Bourdieu, 2003; Sini, 2012). These somewhat diverse references allow us to identify the set of planning practices as a *structured field* in which discourse becomes possible within specific relationships of power and knowledge, starting from declarative conditions that are as internal as they are external to the order of discourse and which, to join Foucault (1971), emphasize that not everything can be said all the time.

I believe, therefore, that any discourse claiming to understand urban planning in practice must acknowledge a continuous and intricate interweaving—one that is not always easy to decode—between the internal history of disciplinary knowledge, which Palermo reconstructs in his most recent works (Palermo, 2022, 2025), and the production and effectiveness of that knowledge, which help us better grasp the reasons for the aforementioned mutation and eclipse. Internal and external histories: each constitutes a complex field, and discourse both in and about urban planning emerges as a multidimensional practice. It consists not only of statements voiced by a relatively anonymous multitude—urban planners, public administrators, real estate developers, politicians, citizens, and even university professors—but also of procedures and processes shaped by institutions, regulations, and prevailing atmospheres.

Ultimately, there exists both an *internal* and an *external history*. Yet even

the external history is itself layered—composed of multiple strata, each with its own temporality, rhythm, and distinct connections to other layers. The external history that defines the conditions for possible discourses and practices in urban planning is therefore a political, social, economic, and institutional one, but also a history of knowledge, of grand frameworks, and of discursive drifts with which the discipline and planning practice have continuously interacted. This point must be emphasized. The difficulties inherent to urban planning—as a practical and hybrid form of knowledge—are certainly specific; yet they cannot be detached from broader transformations in the modes of knowledge as a whole: their characteristic forms of production and reproduction, accreditation, stratification, and the disciplinary regimes that govern them. Nor can they be divorced from the institutions—beginning with the university—that delineate boundaries and perspectives. In particular, understanding what occurs in the field of urban planning knowledge and discourse requires interpreting the processes of *specialization and hetero-direction* that have radically altered, and often destabilized, the humanities and social sciences within the corpus of Western knowledge (Pasqui, 2023; Montedoro and Pasqui, 2020).

Acknowledging both the importance of internal and external histories does not, however, entail any abdication of *responsibility* on the part of those who speak about (and concretely practice) urban planning. The degeneration of discourse on the city—its regulation and governance—stems in large part from the profound *impoverishment of the public sphere*, whether conceived in Arendtian or Habermasian terms. This situation compels us to care more for discourse itself, while also recognizing the limits that our speech and knowledge display within a field of power and knowledge that largely dominates us—where our words are shaped by a web of ‘invisible powers’ (Sini, 2016, 2021). Much of the current crisis in urban planning, if we may still use that term, derives precisely from deep transformations in our capacity to articulate practices that, over the past two centuries, have sought—with results not always beyond reproach—to construct the rules and visions through which cities and territories are governed and transformed.

Ultimately, the discussion I intend to pursue regarding Pier Carlo Palermo’s book aims to identify the elements that constitute the changing conditions of actual planning practice—within specific spatial (Europe) and temporal (the past 25 years, following the profound shifts of the 1980s and 1990s) boundaries—while also outlining certain elements for reconstructing an *agenda* for planning action. It is an agenda, not a programme: a provisional

delineation of the terrain and priorities that might be shared more broadly. As we shall see, this agenda largely intersects with the themes developed by Palermo, though my focus remains on the concrete realities of planning practice rather than on the language of and about urban planning.

A final caveat: I do not subscribe to the apocalyptic or prophetic tone that sometimes characterizes our disciplinary debates, nor to the Titanism that tempts us into offering a complete and definitive judgment on reality and the discourses that traverse it. Responsibility also implies an awareness of both individual and collective limits—the recognition of the situated nature of our discourse—and the acceptance, to borrow the title of one of Palermo’s works, of the limits of what is possible (Palermo, 2009).

## 8.2 ‘The Conditions Have Changed’: Aspects of the Transition

When Bernardo Secchi wrote his essay ‘Le condizioni sono cambiate’ [The Conditions Have Changed], the political, economic, and institutional context that had served as the cultural foundation for many 20<sup>th</sup> century planning experiences was already beginning to fade (Secchi, 1984). It is unnecessary to recall in detail the structural conditions that, throughout the turbulent first half of the twentieth century, gave rise to the post World War II ‘twenty glorious years’ and, with them, to an exceptional effort in planning practice, technical know-how, and discourse aimed at governing urban transformation. This history has been told many times (Hall, 1988; Taylor, 1998; Secchi, 2005), and it is evident that the language, discourse, and rhetoric that animated that period continue to inhabit our discipline—often with a nostalgic inflection.

More than forty years have passed since 1984, during which everything has changed and 20<sup>th</sup> century has definitively come to an end (Bianchetti, 2010). Over these decades—and this is the first fact that cannot be ignored—there has been a profound shift in power, resources, and cultural hegemony *from the public to the private sphere*, and from the State to the market. The forms of social regulation upon which welfare advocates had long grounded public action have become concentrated almost exclusively in the poietic and self-regulating capacity of the market. As scholars such as Stefano Moroni have emphasized for years, the prevailing cultural matrix in politics and society today places little trust in centralized regulation (Moroni, 2010)—particularly through plans, which for decades constituted the dominant narrative of planning knowledge, alongside ambiguous notions such as ‘public interest’ or ‘collective interest’.

The consequences of this great transformation have been immense, extending to a loss of social consensus around the ‘morality of welfare’ (Pennacchi, 2008) and the forms of urban planning that were integral to it. Above all, there has been a collapse in the shared belief that spatial planning could serve not only as a mechanism of market regulation but also as an instrument for the social and spatial redistribution of both material and immaterial resources. This has dramatically *reduced the feasibility of regulatory tools*—such as the taxation of first-home income or the expropriation of land for public services, to cite two Italian examples—whose social legitimacy has eroded to the point of becoming almost unspeakable. Many similar examples could be quoted, but the broader picture is clear: the general conditions for regulating the economy, and with it the resources that long defined the structural dimension of social and spatial rights and material welfare, have become increasingly difficult to sustain.

This progressive narrowing of the margins of public action—and the growing discredit that now attaches to the very idea of the ‘public’ across Western countries—has gradually shifted the governance and regulation of cities and territories from regulation to contracts, with increasing emphasis on cooperation and negotiation between public and private actors. This process, of course, is not entirely new. In many respects, planning has always been ‘contractual’ (Gaeta, 2021); it could hardly be otherwise in complex societies where, following Polanyi’s model, diverse regulatory principles coexist. The essential point, however, is that today public contracting takes place under conditions of *weakness*—characterized by limited resources, diminished authority, and cognitive fragility.

Many of the analyses developed by Palermo in his book—particularly regarding the waning relevance of the strategic dimension and the production of shared visions in spatial planning, as well as the emergence of roles and approaches that renounce regulation and even governance in favour of loosely defined, neo communitarian stances aligned with civil society—must be understood against this background. Urban planning is weak *because the public is weak*. In many European countries, local administrations face dwindling financial resources and staffing, ineffective legislative instruments (as seen, for example, in the difficulties experienced by cities overwhelmed by global tourism in managing the negative externalities of overtourism), and a limited capacity to understand and control processes such as the unchecked financialization of urban real estate markets. Naturally, national and local contexts differ: planning systems vary in their effectiveness and in the resources available to public authorities. Nonethe-

less, the crisis of public action and local governance is widely acknowledged. Political science and sociology have long shown that the notion of governability must be reconsidered under radically altered power conditions compared to those of the past (Pennacchi, 2012; Busetti et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, we should avoid naivety—and resist being seduced by the rhetoric that often pervades the self-declared critical literature, which portrays neoliberal culture as a cage to be shattered, while frequently falling into what Hegel once called ‘the night in which all cows are black.’ It is insufficient to speak of a ‘crisis of the public sphere’ or to invoke the dominance of ‘capitalist realism’ à la Fisher (2017) if we fail to recognize the *internal limits* of planning cultures and practices—both during the ‘glorious’ welfare phase of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the subsequent, increasingly desperate defense of the plan and its values. As Palermo masterfully demonstrates in Chapter 4 of this book, we cannot overlook the numerous failures of plan-based practices that characterized 20<sup>th</sup> century urban planning. These failures stemmed variously from excessive ambition, inadequate capacity to interpret the urban transformations they sought to govern, or insufficient attention to the concrete and temporally deferred effects of regulations embedded in plans. Yet we must also remember that in various European cities—and even in Italy—some plans did provide effective platforms for improving urban quality, controlling development, enhancing public services, and redistributing resources across spatial and social divides.

The profound crisis of the public realm in the West—what we might call, without rhetorical exaggeration, the victory of globalized capitalism and the defeat of both the workers’ movement and the broader demand for freedom and progress—does not, in itself, coincide with a questioning of planning’s role and limits. The theoretical critique of planning predates this crisis, rooted not only in Hayek’s liberal perspective but also in the radical critiques that emerged in the 1960s from both Marxist traditions (which analysed the capitalist use of territory) and anarchist or libertarian ones, which denounced the ideological use of planning as an instrument of social control and bureaucratic government. Today, fifty years later, we cannot disregard the critical reflections on comprehensive and regulatory approaches and the ‘administrative theory of needs’ (Crosta, 1990; Tosi, 1994). The first challenge I see in the changing conditions of planning lies in our position on a precarious ridge: between the urgent need for a strong return of the public sphere—as a space of governance, control, and negotiation with private interests—and the persistent critique of a planning

practice constrained by regulations and often incapable of addressing the volatility of market dynamics or the lived realities of territorial use.

I will return to the question of the plan later; for now, it is enough to emphasize the decisive relationship between public action, its resources, and its limits. This connection is all the more crucial today, in the aftermath of the pandemic, which has renewed attention to the centrality of institutions in responding to events marked by *ontological uncertainty* and has prompted an unprecedented effort—at both national and supranational levels—to initiate a new phase of deferred public investment (Pasqui, 2022a). The current geopolitical landscape—further destabilized since Donald Trump’s election in the United States—and the limited success, not only in Italy, of initiatives such as Next Generation EU, reveal the deep difficulties confronting any social-democratic or reformist perspective. These difficulties risk being eclipsed by two decades of warfare and the growing spread of neo populism.

In this geopolitical context, the role of the city as both an economic and political actor is also transforming. Since the 1990s, this shift has provided a crucial backdrop to reflections on changing mechanisms of urban governance and on the rise of competitive dynamics among urban systems seeking to attract investment, events, and human capital (Le Galès, 2006). The rhetoric of competitiveness and attractiveness has hardly disappeared—as exemplified by Milan and its narratives—but the decline of that paradigm has taken on new forms through evolving assemblages of national and urban policies, as well as through the growing inability of local governments to steer competitive processes. Today, financialization and tourismification—to cite just two phenomena—have become the battlegrounds where municipal governments struggle, often powerlessly, to manage their impacts. The era of strategic plans as marketing devices designed to boost attractiveness and competitiveness now seems, fortunately, to be fading.

If the crisis of public action remains the key to understanding the transformations and limitations of planning practice, two further factors are essential for imagining a realistic yet ambitious agenda for the future of planning: the *ecological crisis* and the profound mutation of urban economies, accompanied by *growing inequalities*. Only by considering these two dimensions together—the ecological crisis and the intensifying social fragmentation of cities and territories—can we grasp the extent to which the urban planning agenda requires radical reconsideration, closely tied to the activation of a new phase of urban and territorial policy at the European

scale.

Pier Carlo Palermo addresses the theme of the ideas and forms of the city effectively at the beginning of Chapter 4, writing incisively that ‘new challenges in the urban area ... do not seem to open comforting perspectives for the discipline.’ I would like to articulate and qualify this observation in my own way. For many years now, Italy—and Europe more broadly—has experienced a profound crisis of meaning and direction, amid *radical transformations in global geopolitical balances*, as well as in culture, technology, and forms of coexistence (Colombo, 2025). Some have referred to these as ‘polycrises’ (Moloney et al., 2025), evoking the interference and interdependence among different processes. Among these crises, we must at least note the increasingly dramatic consequences of climate change; the accelerating inequalities among individuals, social groups, and territories—both within Europe and globally; and the gradual loss of centrality in European economies, tied to a sharp decline in productivity and innovative capacity. This situation is compounded by the weakening of institutions and of democratic participation at all levels, within a context where new forms of localism—often rooted in populism and sovereigntist impulses (Revelli, 2017; Ronchi, 2024)—have gained strength across much of Europe and the wider world.

In the Italian case, the condition of our cities appears to be a crucial variable within this framework. Over the past two decades, we have come to understand ever more clearly that the problems of *territorial imbalance* and lack of cohesion among different parts of the country concern not only the enduring and dramatic divide between North and South, but also the growing disparity between dynamic areas and marginal ones—beginning with the so-called ‘inner areas’ (Balducci et al., 2017). We also know, as several scholars have argued, that there exists an ‘Italy in the middle’ struggling to define new paths toward sustainable development (Lanzani, 2024a). At the same time, the complex and diverse urban condition—spanning small and medium-sized cities, relatively well-connected metropolitan areas, and highly differentiated urban contexts—shows that any new perspective for development must once again pass through the cities, across environmental, economic, social, and demographic dimensions. Within this framework, urban planning can still serve as a crucial platform for orienting development models—provided it can jointly address the ecological crisis and the struggle against deepening inequality, which together produce what Balducci (2023) calls the ‘invisible city.’

Beyond both green rhetoric and the apocalyptic narratives whose risk of depoliticization must be recognized (Ciccarelli, 2022; Petrillo, 2025), the perspective of urban planning today must be understood as either *ecological*, or it will fail to confront the decisive questions about the future of our cities and territories. During the long cycle of growth in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, urban development was accompanied by social and territorial convergence. Today, however, environmental and social crises expose the dangers of an increasingly polarized urban system, in which only a small fraction of the population improves its conditions, while large segments face growing fragility and real impoverishment. To consider the ecological crisis and the growth of inequality together, therefore, means to advance an approach of political ecology (McManus, 2009), one that acknowledges the interrelation between the dramatic consequences of the climate crisis and the worsening material conditions of the most vulnerable social groups.

The environmental crisis is not ‘natural’ at all. Addressing it requires recognizing both its causes and its political and social consequences. For this reason, urban and territorial policies today must be grounded in projects and actions that courageously confront the need for a *radical transformation of the urban development model* that has shaped our cities, while also tackling inequality, poverty, and social fragility, and expanding opportunities for all. An urban planning policy for cities cannot be reduced to a strategy focused solely on the cultures, issues, or needs of the richest social groups.

The first condition under which we must act is the recognition that the climate crisis constitutes the essential and inescapable priority for public action. The European Union has indeed been partially mobilized on this front—through the European Green Deal and, following the pandemic, the introduction of the Next Generation EU programme (though the latter revealed severe limits during its implementation). Yet this remains far from sufficient. The economic and political forces resisting change—and effectively blocking the *ecological transition* of cities and territories—remain powerful and deeply entrenched within both national and European systems of governance. New priorities in energy and defence, intensified by the dramatic geopolitical situation along Europe’s borders, risk undermining these efforts and diverting crucial investments.

In facing the climate crisis, urban planning cannot act in isolation, nor can it assume a self-referential role as the sole coordinating instrument for gov-

erning cities and territories. Instead, planning must be tested and redefined as one dimension within a broader ecological policy—contributing to a coherent ensemble of actions and programmes aimed at drastically reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, radically renewing the built environment through energy efficiency, experimenting with sustainable technologies, reintegrating nature into the circular economy through bold urban forestation, protecting land and countering land consumption, advancing innovative energy policies and circular economies, and promoting sustainable mobility in all forms. This includes not only reducing emissions but also the total number of vehicles in cities, through decisive support for local public transport. This does not mean—as has too often occurred in the past—simply financing short-term or fragmented programmes. Rather, it requires redirecting the overall development model, recognizing the climate emergency and the ecological transformation of urban economies as the true priorities. Such a reorientation also implies that these investments must be understood not as costs but as opportunities to generate *new forms of economy and decent, high-quality employment*.

To achieve this—and here we reach the second facet of the same issue—urban planning must grasp how contemporary urban economies function, and act to counter the negative effects of profit-driven logics. Whereas planning once played a central role in regulating urban economies—controlling land use and, at least in part, land rent (Camagni, 1993)—today the structural evolution of economies calls for tools and approaches very different from those of the past. This is not the place to examine in detail the functioning of urban economies in European cities. I will simply note that much of the critical literature (in geography as well as in planning) tends to describe urban economic processes—such as financialization—as abstract mechanisms of domination by global capital. Yet such perspectives often remain too detached from the concrete urban practices and governance processes to offer meaningful guidance for action.

It is therefore insufficient merely to invoke the perversity of neoliberalism or the forces of globalized capital. What is required is a precise and situated understanding of the *relationships among space, economy, labour, and production* within cities and territories—to identify regulatory mechanisms capable of promoting urban development through an ecological and redistributive lens. From this standpoint, the capacity to confront the central issue of *real estate income* (Rusci, 2017; Pizzo, 2023) becomes the essential condition for building an ecological and socially just urban policy. In many respects, real estate income continues to be a major engine

of unbalanced urban growth. At the same time, its contemporary forms—particularly those linked to the financialization of urban markets—demand new instruments of governance and control.

This question is especially critical in the Italian context. In a country with a strong *patrimonialization*, where both the tax regime and regulatory framework tend to favour speculation over production, governing real estate income is a fundamental task of the public agenda. The consequences of income-driven urban growth—from the explosion of short-term rentals to the Disneyfication of historic centres, from gentrification to the revaluation of major public and private assets—are profound. We should also recall that both speculative real estate and financial dynamics, as well as a broad and entrenched social bloc, continue to derive their strength from the economy of real estate income. Moreover, the construction sector itself is often associated with precarious employment and the spread of poor labour, amid a growing erosion of workers' protections.

If we accept, therefore, that the link between ecology and inequality is the decisive nexus emerging from the transformation of cities and territories, this calls for a courageous shift in the distribution of advantages and disadvantages in the use of resources—redirecting investments toward productive and socially generative urban economies. It means penalizing real estate income where it exacerbates market distortions and social divides, while supporting economic activities and social processes that generate broader public value. In this perspective, national fiscal policy represents a crucial lever for rebalancing the situation. Yet action is also possible at the local scale: through urban planning instruments capable of making speculative, short-term exploitation of the built heritage less profitable, and of reinforcing long-term, equitable, and sustainable urban development.

### **8.3 Reconstructing an Agenda for Urban Planning: Four Conceptual Issues**

In the last quarter century, amid the swing of Hirschman's pendulum towards the private sector and following the triumph of globalized and financialized capitalism, 'the conditions have changed' along at least three decisive fault lines. These are: the radical crisis in public action and local democracy; the ecological emergency as an unavoidable and dramatic backdrop for urban planning that at least intends to correspond to the needs of future generations; and the mutation of urban economies and the powerful return of old and new real estate income economies. Through which

issues can planning practice think of corresponding to these injunctions and changes in paradigm? According to which priorities? Below, in a necessarily elliptical way, I indicate four *conceptual issues* that seem decisive for reconsidering planning action.

*The Climate Challenge and Socio-Spatial Inequalities*

As Pier Carlo Palermo writes, ‘urban planning developed to design the future, but over time its horizon has become ever shorter, its scenarios uncertain, and its prescriptions weak’. We might add that climate change profoundly challenges our very sense of temporality—reshaping what we consider possible and rendering credible scenarios in which life in cities and territories, along with their characteristic diversity and biodiversity, are at risk. Palermo’s detailed review of the content of major international journals in planning and urban design (Palermo, 2025) confirms that environmental concerns—across their multiple dimensions—now occupy an increasingly pervasive and cross-cutting position. They also intersect ever more closely with themes centred on the role (and often presumed salvific power) of new technologies. As I have already emphasized, urban planning is destined to complete its parabola and lose disciplinary relevance if it cannot meaningfully confront key environmental issues through its own methods, projects, and tools. Even without embracing the tenets of deep or dark ecology (Dalla Casa, 2011; Morton, 2016)—which raise understandable doubts concerning the attribution of agency to ‘non-human actants’—urban planning must grapple with the fundamental questions of environmental sustainability: limiting the ecological footprint of human settlement, transforming cities and territories to protect biodiversity, and confronting the most dramatic effects of climate change worldwide (Viganò, 2023). Today, the interplay among regulatory practices, urban design, and the growing body of scientific knowledge—from ecology, botany, and agriculture to hydrology, material engineering, and digital technologies for analysing and managing urban phenomena—is extraordinary. The availability of massive and heterogeneous data sources further intensifies this convergence.

This process is irreversible, and it is reshaping the agenda and direction of both research and academic work. From my own partial but meaningful vantage point—serving for the past year and a half on the national Evaluation committee for professorial qualifications in the field of urban planning in Italy—I can confirm the growing centrality of environmental topics. A large and increasing share of publications, particularly from younger scholars, now address issues such as ecosystem services, green and blue

infrastructures, urban parks and forestation, climate mitigation and adaptation, slow mobility, circular urban economies, and energy innovation. This trend should hardly surprise us: the importance of these themes is evident, even if still underestimated or inconsistently recognized in politics. Moreover, both European and national research funding are strongly oriented in this direction.

What is more troubling, however, is the form that much of this research has taken. On one hand, it increasingly relies on the authority of the ‘hard sciences’, seeking legitimacy through technical knowledge—yet often sliding into *scientism* and a renewed fascination with modelling, whose rhetoric and implicit assumptions Pier Carlo Palermo had so persuasively deconstructed in the 1980s (Palermo, 1983). On the other hand, the operational uptake of these issues in planning practice tends to reproduce a logic of regulation ‘by plans’—sectoral or territorial, across different scales—for which greater coordination and efficiency are repeatedly invoked yet rarely achieved. In this process, the lessons of the late 1970s—when planning began to be reimagined as an incremental and interactive social process, drawing on thinkers such as Hirschman and Lindblom—have been largely misunderstood or forgotten (Pasqui, 2022b).

In my view, the only way to restore the relevance and vitality of environmental and climate concerns within a pluralist and incremental understanding of planning is to think together about the climate challenge and the reduction of inequality (Piketty, 2015). This entails more than acknowledging the inherently conflictual nature of environmental issues, as highlighted by the tradition of *political ecology*—too often diluted today into the neutral rhetoric of ‘sustainability’ or the ritual invocation of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. More radically, it means identifying the concrete mechanisms through which plans, projects, programmes, and policies addressing climate change, pollution, congestion, energy transition, and biodiversity loss can explicitly assess and respond to their distributive effects—across individuals, territories, and social groups (Ernstson and Swyngedouw, 2018).

As Palermo convincingly shows in this book, both the current trends of *tactical or temporary urbanism*—which often reject the very idea of a long-term vision—and the ‘smart urbanism’ paradigm (Picon and Ratti, 2023; Batty, 2024), which relies on technological fixes for urban problems, converge in a profound depoliticization of planning practices. I would add that, in different ways, both tactical and smart approaches overlook the

crucial connection between ecological transformation and the radical restructuring of the development model—thereby avoiding the fundamental political questions of power and interests that such transformation entails. In some cases, as the trajectory of tactical urbanism illustrates, these practices even risk producing an image of urban quality reserved for the wealthier social groups—those endowed not only with greater economic capital but also with denser networks of relationships and higher levels of education.

For these reasons, treating ecological and environmental issues in urban planning as inherently social and distributive questions becomes essential. Only by foregrounding the distributive impacts of every urban project and policy can planning hope to confront the challenges of climate change within the framework of ordinary practice—relinking ecology, equity, and politics at the heart of urban transformation.

#### *Welfare and Multiple Forms of Life*

The question of the public—or better yet, of *publicness*—was at the centre of the most recent conference of the Società Italiana degli Urbanisti [Italian Society of Urbanists], and it remains a traditional terrain of reflection for urban planning (Bianchetti, 2008; Gabellini, 2018). Born and developed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century alongside the expansion of the public sphere and its resources, urban planning today operates within a context of public contraction. This contraction, as discussed above, forms the tragic and inescapable backdrop for the regulation and design of contemporary cities and territories. In this context, it is crucial to imagine a deep yet renewed connection between *urban planning and the public sphere*. Deep, because as a field of practice, urban planning cannot exist without being anchored in its public dimension—its institutional action and administrative structures. Architecture, urban design, landscape architecture, transport planning, and infrastructure engineering may assume many of the functions that planning has historically performed. Yet, only urban planning maintains the essential link between spatial design, government and governance. It is only as a governing practice, a field where interests and political conflicts converge within the public sphere, that urban planning can define an autonomous and necessary role.

Reconsidering this connection also means rethinking the relationship between *planning and welfare*—not only because, in practice, the preparation and approval of local plans still play a decisive, often exclusive, role in producing urban public services, but also because societal and spatial

transformations have long undermined traditional notions of public service provision, beginning with the ambiguous concept of ‘standards’.

This is not the place to develop that reflection fully, though it has been at the centre of important research efforts in Italy (Laboratorio Standard, 2021). Here, it suffices to note that social transformation—particularly in European cities—radically challenges any reworking of the traditional, ‘universal’ model of urban services and material welfare. As I have written elsewhere, our cities and territories are characterized not only by a multiplicity of values and interests, but, more fundamentally, by a *pluralization of forms of life* (Pasqui, 2018). In this light, it is crucial to acknowledge the ongoing demographic transition across Europe, defined by two parallel trends: the aging of the native population and the profound changes brought by relentless migration—changes that are destined to intensify in the coming decades. A society of elderly citizens, accompanied by shrinking family structures and the arrival of new populations from across the world, generates unprecedented challenges for urban governance and planning. How can we equip our cities to respond to this demographic divide and the pluralization of lifestyles? How can we guarantee a universal level of material welfare while valuing what Carlo Donolo called ‘variety’ (Donolo, 2005)?

These are pressing questions, crucial not only for reaffirming the role of urban planning as an institutional technology of market regulation, but also for recognizing it as an institutional infrastructure for the new social practices rooted in space that characterize contemporary cities and territories. It seems essential to address these issues directly, exploring how planning tools can create conditions for coexistence that do not rely on community homogeneity, but rather embrace copresence in urban space—the shared distance that both connects and differentiates us (Nancy, 1990; Pasqui, 2025). This reintroduces a renewed understanding and practice of what is public.

Consequently, this implies the need to imagine spaces capable of accommodating diverse practices and forms of life — balancing flexibility and openness, as discussed elsewhere (Sini and Pasqui, 2020)—and to rebuild the mechanisms, including financial ones, that can sustain a new public city through extraordinary maintenance of Europe’s material welfare infrastructure. Perhaps this represents the first genuine New Green Deal that Europe requires. Experiments along these lines, already emerging in various European cities, demonstrate that planning can provide a vital platform for rethinking urban welfare—recognizing both the multiplication of

forms of life and the universal value of a few fundamental rights of citizenship. This is the direction in which we must persist: renewing planning as a practice that sustains coexistence, diversity, and the public life of cities.

### *Design and Structural Dimension of Urban Planning*

In my view, the third key issue in an agenda for urban planning concerns the role of tools and the complex relationship between *design and structural planning*. Pier Carlo Palermo has reflected on this topic from multiple perspectives, emphasizing that plan-making can no longer be regarded as the central activity of urban planners. He also underscores the importance of incremental and contextual forms of knowledge that, when embedded in contemporary modes of governance, test what he calls a ‘planning idea of the urban project’. This approach can be articulated through two main dimensions: first, the care for the relationships between project and context—understood in terms of form, environment, and functional compatibility—and second, the idea of design as an open process.

I would like to revisit these points from my own perspective. What does concrete planning practice tell us about the current situation in Italy and across Europe? First, the design of spatial strategies has been progressively replaced by *images* (often labelled ‘visions’). A notable example is the case of the design proposals for Milan’s system of railway areas, commissioned in 2017 by the Italian railway company Ferrovie dello Stato to five internationally renowned architects. These evocative, image-based visions, while striking, were entirely detached from the instruments and mechanisms required for implementation. It is no coincidence that such proposals are advanced by architects rather than planners, and promoted by private developers rather than public administrations, in a context where communication and marketing play a decisive role. Conversely, a conception of urban planning that engages with the structural orientations of cities and territories—encompassing large-scale infrastructure, environmental frameworks, and settlement strategies that define axes or areas of concentrated development—depends critically on the planner’s capacity to intervene in the governance, programming, design, and realization of the identified spatial strategies (Bonfantini, 2017; Lanzani, 2017).

Moreover, tools that spatially guide and define development must operate on scales that are not fixed once and for all, but vary according to the context and planning system. In highly rigid institutional frameworks, such as Italy’s, the municipal scale is often inadequate for dealing with structural issues. The governance of strategic choices—such as mobility infrastruc-

ture (especially rail), large-scale public services, logistics and distribution networks, or systems of parks and urban greenery—is now largely shaped by sectoral logics, actors, and investments. These rarely intersect with the spatial and design intentions of urban planning in a meaningful way.

The risk, therefore, in any attempt—however generous—to reassert urban planning as a project of territorial structure lies in failing to confront the real constellation of actors and interests at play. For this reason, plans and planning instruments often appear *marginal to crucial decisions*, which are instead structured through other, multilevel governance arrangements. In my opinion, this is precisely why it is essential to reconsider planning tools through design-oriented experimentation: the only approach capable of rendering the procedural terrain described by Palermo truly operational, by actively engaging with contextual relations and multi-scalar coherence.

There is no single path toward this goal. The interaction between spatial structure and local design should not depend on an abstract ‘consistency’ between plan levels, but rather be realized through *experimental, design-oriented approaches* that pay close attention to the broader consequences of local interventions. A limited but instructive example of this approach—one with which I was directly involved as then-director of the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies at the Politecnico di Milano—was the preparation of the Strategic Vision Document for the Railway Areas on behalf of the City of Milan in 2017, following the approval of the Programme Agreements (Comune di Milano, 2017). The document articulated a comprehensive reading of scales within Milan and identified a set of requirements—relating to facilities, performance, and spatial structure—that were intended to unify the planning and design of each area. Although the document was tentatively innovative, it was ultimately disregarded by the municipal administration and played no significant role in implementing the Programme Agreements. Nevertheless, it pointed to a crucial direction: linking project-based transformations with the definition of spatial and structural requirements at the appropriate scale (Carmona and Punter, 1997).

Ultimately, structural planning and design are not opposing principles but complementary dimensions of planning. Their integration—through *multiple, coordinated tools*—can sustain both the identification of structural orientations and the use of design-oriented experimentation as a means to test and refine projects within broader spatial and governance contexts.

### *Regulation and Governance*

Regulation is an unavoidable component of what Pier Carlo Palermo calls ‘planning in action’. In his book, this theme is addressed from two complementary perspectives. In Section 3.5, meaningfully titled ‘Regulation Hanging in the Balance’, Palermo concludes that ‘it seems natural to recognize—and accept without too many problems—the increasingly contingent, adaptive, incremental, and tactical dimensions of ordinary urban practices (overlooking their weaknesses and related risks)’. On the other hand, nostalgia remains for the certainties that have disappeared from the discipline, also because ‘the market dislikes discretion unless it serves its interests’. Later, in Chapter 4 (Section 4.4: ‘Beyond the Regulation Approach’), Palermo returns to the issue through a discussion of Giancarlo De Carlo, writing that ‘planning culture should take responsibility for current models of governance, which always imply discretionary choices [and] a capacity to learn from experience’.

I agree with this conception of regulation as a dialectical and incremental process, yet I believe it encounters significant obstacles in practice. First, the regulatory dimension of urban planning—in Italy and elsewhere—is only partly under planners’ control. Although planning systems vary widely between countries with common-law traditions and those with national or regional frameworks, legal culture remains deeply intertwined with the production, interpretation, and enforcement of planning rules. Administrators, lawyers, and judges all participate in shaping and applying these regulations. As a result, the relationship between planning instruments and legal norms is complex and often depends on mechanisms introduced by legal professionals operating across multiple regulatory levels. The recent debates surrounding urban planning in Milan are emblematic of this condition: the difficulty of sustaining a technical and political discussion around the city’s planning choices is due in part to the dense and fragmented ‘regulatory forest’ that governs urban transformation.

This does not mean, in my view, that we should once again call for a new national planning law or a unitary regulatory framework for urban regeneration—an idea repeatedly invoked over the past fifty years, yet still distant. Rather, it means recognizing that without engaging seriously with the regulatory dimension, planning cannot exist at all. *Regulation* is not simply a legal constraint; it is a complex, layered field that shapes ordinary planning practice, defining rights, limits, procedures, and processes. For this reason, urban planning must avoid being flattened into mere legalism—especially through the recurring, quasi-utopian hope of a single comprehensive law—but instead should approach regulation more attentively and competently,

viewing norms as tools for design. This requires a different mindset from that of traditional legal culture.

Although I do not claim expertise in such topics, I share Palermo's concern that reflection on regulation in planning remains too limited and abstract (Moroni, 1999). In what direction, then, should we move? I believe the decisive step is to recognize that planning practice unfolds within a *multiplicity of overlapping regulatory contexts*. This includes not only the formal regulations embedded in plans themselves, but also building codes, which play a crucial role in shaping everyday transformations and so-called 'widespread regeneration.' Moreover, a wide range of non-planning regulations—fiscal, environmental, safety-related—exerts a powerful influence on what can be done in urban projects. We therefore need to study, concretely and comparatively, how these regulatory devices operate: what effects they produce on the form of the city, on transformation processes and procedures, and on the behaviour of different actors.

Once again, we find ourselves on a narrow ridge. On one side lies recognition of the *changing mechanisms* that now produce urban and territorial transformation, coupled with an awareness of the weakening of the public sphere and the limited capacity for negotiation and control in individual projects—what Palermo calls going 'beyond regulation.' On the other side, we must acknowledge that overly centralized or confusing supralocal regulations can become ineffective, even distortive, when applied locally.

The difficult but necessary path lies between these two extremes. It requires, first, targeted analysis of the *impacts of regulation*—both *ex ante* and *ex post* (Alexander, 2012)—and second, the redefinition of regulatory processes in closer relation to the design of urban projects. Building on such analyses, planners can work to identify a set of adaptable regulatory tools suited to specific contexts, capable of enabling more effective control over the often chaotic dynamics of change. This is not merely about simplifying the existing 'regulatory forest,' which frustrates practitioners while paralysing public oversight, but about defining transparent and flexible processes in which discretion operates within a clearly articulated and temporarily binding framework.

These orientations must, of course, be adapted through a political lens, given the diversity of competing interests and values involved. Yet careful, design-oriented work on regulation—of the kind outlined here—could make a significant contribution to the public debate on the governance of urban transformation. Such work cannot rely only on declarations or ap-

peals to principle; it must be tested within specific projects, spaces, rules and procedural settings.

## 8.4 Two Experimental Fields

If the agenda I have summarized makes sense, it should identify concrete terrain for work efforts. Attention to practices — concrete planning practice — necessarily implies a capacity to recognize *experimental work sites* for conducting tests. Below, I indicate two of many possibilities, solely to exemplify the course of work that I believe would be useful, both for scholars and for practitioners of ‘everyday’ urban planning. It is unnecessary to emphasize that the choice of topics depends on my specific interests and skills. For each issue, I simply indicate and recognize the topic, as well as note a few aspects for a path of possible investigation.

### *Governing Widespread Regeneration*

In his book on *regeneration*, Arturo Lanzani highlights the polysemic nature of the concept and its multiple uses (Lanzani, 2024b). In this volume, Pier Carlo Palermo emphasizes how urban regeneration lends itself to ambiguous and sometimes contradictory interpretations. I adopt a more specific focus: *widespread urban regeneration*. Here, urban change is not seen through large-scale transformation projects but through molecular mutations—changes in use, building restorations (sometimes involving significant volume increases, demolition and reconstruction, or adaptive reuse)—occurring in relatively dense areas where buildings and spaces often host obsolete or declining economic activities (Montedoro and Pasqui, 2018).

The pervasive role of these processes in shaping European cities is undeniable, often operating outside the formal logic and rules of urban plans. Urban regeneration is a social and material process at the intersection of space and society (Roberts et al., 2016). It emerges under certain conditions from the actions of individuals, families, companies, and private organizations, rather than as a direct result of public intervention or design-oriented projects. Similar to gentrification (Semi, 2015), widespread regeneration often represents a *composite effect of multiple actors’ actions*, rather than a single intentional strategy.

Urban regeneration can thus be understood first as an economic process, offering a spatial platform for redefining urban economies and socio-spatial organization—a process that began in the 1970s and continues today. Accordingly, literature on regeneration emphasizes understanding transformations in the material city and their impact on urban economic struc-

tures. Regeneration reshapes how urban economies are organized in space.

Because widespread regeneration is closely tied to urban economies—especially economic activity in the building sector—it often occurs independently of plans or projects, resulting from the collective actions of society as it modifies, reuses, and transforms urban spaces (Leary and McCarty, 2013). This dual nature underscores two points. First, it highlights the limits of governance: spontaneous processes are difficult to steer, particularly when governance is understood as the ability to anticipate and guide economic and social dynamics. Second, it signals a potential demand for oversight and control of these widespread transformations.

Recent events in Milan illustrate the delicacy of this terrain, emphasizing the need for a profound reconsideration of forms of action and public administrative authority, which are often difficult to ensure. One possible approach for governing widespread regeneration is to combine strong public oversight with techniques and tools that can orient multiple, localized transformations over the long term. This could involve identifying uniform urban areas according to their transformative pressures and morphological characteristics, anticipating desirable land-use solutions, and reinforcing networks of public spaces. It also implies defining essential performance standards and service provisions while establishing a consistent framework of settlement invariants that align with building regulations but remain resilient to market pressures.

In other words, governance of widespread urban regeneration should be *rooted in planning* more than in building codes and regulations, avoiding rigid, overly prescriptive regulation while providing flexible reference frameworks, guidelines, and urban planning instruments. These devices could be embedded within the general plan, at least experimentally, while serving as operational tools for ongoing management. Key features of such regulatory tools should include clarity, flexibility, and operational usability (Carmona, 2010; Montedoro, 2018). Governance processes should provide clear guidance for stakeholders, ensure urban quality and *performance*, and introduce intermediate mechanisms between the general plan and project-level actions. They should define critical invariants—such as alignments, grids, and maximum heights—while allowing adaptability to local circumstances and uncertainties.

Operational experimentation could focus on creating agile guidelines that interpret context, set desired performance standards, offer indications for project design, and establish simple rules—limitations, incentives,

and mechanisms—to facilitate built-environment interventions. Crucially, these measures must be embedded in process management, including resource allocation (e.g., a dedicated basket of fees for essential public works) and active involvement of inhabitants and users. In this way, management, implementation, and control of spatial transformations through urban design can find in the urban planning framework an effective platform for coordination, guidance, and public engagement.

*Understanding and Regulating the Market: The Challenge of Financialization*

The second issue I want to discuss concerns a topic that Pier Carlo Palermo touches on only briefly, yet which is crucial for a contemporary understanding of urban planning: the effects of *financialization on planning practices*. This subject has recently received extensive attention in international literature at the intersection of planning and critical geography (Van der Zwan, 2013; Aalbers, 2020; Hyotylainen and Beauregard, 2022; Volpi, 2024).

The significance of real estate income is well established across planning traditions in Italy and globally, both from reform-oriented and critical perspectives. *Capturing real estate income*—used to finance urban spaces and public services—has long been a source of technical and political debate central to urban planning (Campos Venuti, 1993; Tocci, 2009; Camagni, 2020). What distinguishes financialization from traditional reliance on the market or financial intermediaries is its complexity and multidimensionality. Unlike conventional investment in private or public urban projects, financialization reflects broader transformations in global capitalism, reshaping urban markets in ways that are not fully captured by ideological interpretations in much of the literature. Such accounts often overlook the operational mechanisms and rationalities through which actors engage in urban transformation.

Focusing on private urban transformation and heritage, financialization can be roughly divided into three key areas. First, the creation of financial management tools for *large-scale development projects*, often using special purpose vehicles (SPVs), which secure contracts and leverage investment flows. SPVs acquire financing or other financial assets from banks or intermediaries and issue negotiable titles on the market (Tasan-Kok, 2010). Second, closed investment funds *finance social housing*. These funds pool capital from qualified investors for projects providing controlled-rent housing. Unlike open funds, they have fixed durations, and payments are not

negotiable during the investment period (Science Po, 2023). Third, the acquisition of *luxury real estate* through investment funds—both retail funds open to all investors and reserved funds for qualified partners—has accelerated. Investors increasingly target high-end properties for price stability, reappraisal potential, and business development opportunities. These phenomena are uneven across Europe, affecting both major globalized metropolitan areas and peripheral contexts (for example, Italy’s western Lake Como shore). Their effects on urban practice vary according to national or supranational regulations, including tax regimes. Understanding financialization’s impact on urban market dynamics—and the potential to regulate it—is essential if urban planning is to maintain a role in capturing real estate income for public purposes.

In large-scale projects, contract-securing mechanisms compel developers to decompose transformations into units that can be valued independently in financial markets. These shifts interest away from holistic project delivery and toward temporal, investment-driven considerations detached from territorial outcomes. Traditional public-private negotiation and cooperation must therefore adapt. Urban planning’s capacity to capture at least part of financial gains is limited by national and international tax frameworks.

Financialization in social housing has expanded notably in Italy, particularly in student and ‘special’ residences. Closed funds accelerate returns, often diverting housing supply away from lower-income needs (Tosi, 2017). Effective governance here depends on conventions and project management mechanisms that mitigate risks associated with extensive financialization. Finally, the financialization of prestigious heritage has exacerbated residential displacement in historic centers, intensifying touristification and ‘Disneyfication,’ and reshaping urban markets and property values. Addressing this requires precise mapping and analysis, alongside policies that incentivize alternative uses of valuable heritage without decommissioning it.

These challenges are formidable. Accurate, non-ideological knowledge of urban market financialization remains limited, and regulatory control cannot rely solely on local administrations but depends on national and supranational frameworks. Furthermore, the *stakeholder* network has transformed: large international developers and sovereign funds operate very differently from traditional property developers. Understanding these actors and identifying tools to capture part of the financial gains for public benefit is difficult but crucial for the future role of urban planning.

## 8.5 Principles for Action

In the two fields that I have described, we can see the grounds for important work for urban planning ‘in practice’. However, Pier Carlo Palermo insists on the need for an overall framework, a vision of the discipline that can rest on both an ambitious and pragmatic attitude, which he proposes as ‘doing urban planning in the era of contingency’. The paradigm he proposes is summarized in this way (Section 5.3): ‘In my opinion, urban planning must be understood as an administrative practice that assumes politically relevant content, but also the responsibility to realize concrete and sustainable projects. It requires a pragmatic approach, although one that is critical and reflexive; the capacity to adapt to contingencies and learn from processes that are always exercised with a sense of responsibility; and attention and care for what is possible to be explored with critical realism and a reform-oriented drive’. We could not possibly disagree, although with two caveats.

The first caveat is that abandoning the unitary, palingenetic, largely rhetorical perspective (communicative and participatory trends, nostalgia for the unitary framework of reference through ‘regulatory’ plans or vague ‘strategic’ perspectives, echoes of science in smart and sustainable variations that Palermo repeatedly denounces) should also regard the attitude to confronting the ‘theory’. I do not believe we can aspire to a new ‘great theory’, given the general state of knowledge, in which specialization and uniformity coexist in models based on ‘hard’ sciences, but also other-directed mechanisms for building research agendas. This means relying on — in a *contingent, selective, and prudent* way — paths and authors within and outside the discipline that help us to reflect, to situate what we do and say in a perspective that truly considers — as Palermo writes in multiple passages — that the conditions of urban planning in practice have changed significantly.

The second caveat is this: more than a systematic demolition of ‘written’ urban planning, which Palermo pursues in his works, we need to better understand the ‘act’ of urban planning, i.e. what is done in municipal technical offices, architecture offices or engineering companies, the project design offices of large developers, legal debates and courtrooms, public discussion that is frighteningly weak, and also, obviously, scholars’ writings. To concern ourselves with urban planning ‘in practice’, we need to observe the practice *starting from the effects and not the intentions*. This pragmatic

rule, which Pier Carlo Palermo certainly shares, also requires attention to the evaluation practice. From what position, from which point of view, can we judge a rule or project? In whose name do we assess the relatively ‘urban’ nature — or better yet, the ‘urban quality’ — of a project? What is the underlying criterion for saying and writing, for example, that the project for Porta Nuova is unacceptable or a failure? I believe that part of our ‘pragmatic’ responsibility lies precisely in recognizing the perimeter and limits of our judgements. We need to clearly indicate the technically relevant criteria that we retain should be used, even letting ourselves be guided by forms of life and the way that multiple individuals, social groups, and populations use the space, city, and territory every day. We need not reject a technically pertinent perspective, nor should we forget the settled nature of that perspective, which is, at heart, one of many in a society that is increasingly diverse and fragmented.

Starting with the basic paradigm proposed by Palermo, but also the two caveats that I used as footnotes to his horizon, I would like to summarize and use headings to indicate seven *principles for action* that I believe constitute unavoidable assumptions for recognizing the way and direction in which ‘the conditions have changed’. I offer possible moves for reconstructing an agenda that is at least partially shared and the way research and design sites can be implemented around a few essential nodes. Once again, these are principles for action, guidelines, and partial, selective orientations based on the assumption that each should be tested through concrete, contingent, and settled action.

### *Seven Principles*

First principle: *building alliances, because urban planning cannot save itself alone*. In our current national and international conjuncture, it is essential to recognize the concrete limits and possibilities of planning action. There are implementation plans that guarantee the quality of projects. There are general plans for cities that define an alternative development model capable of addressing the climate crisis and its consequences. There are diagrams, even well-drawn ones, within planning regulations that ensure an adequate supply of affordable housing, defined as a rented or purchased home costing less than a quarter of the income of the person who needs it (Bricocoli and Peverini, 2024). Urban planning is not useless. In practice, it can provide an important platform for urban and territorial political action, beginning with the features of its tools and techniques. However, it must act in concert with others from at least three perspectives. First, it must connect effectively to policies at different scales, op-

erating on specific, point-like assemblages of planning and policy tools. Issues such as residential discomfort or the impacts of climate change can only be addressed through operational integration between urban planning and sectoral policy tools on appropriate territorial scales. Second, urban planning must reconnect and redefine alliances with other fields of knowledge—particularly the natural and earth sciences, but also the humanities, social sciences, and architecture. This new alliance must avoid scientism and equip urban planning to tackle the essential problems emerging from the continuous mutation of society and territories. Third, urban planning cannot function without politics: action rooted in a field of interests and conflicts that must first be understood and recognized. Without politics, urban planning risks being swept along by scientific, technocratic, or bureaucratic tendencies, reducing it to a rhetorical function that merely accompanies externally driven processes.

Second principle: *repoliticizing urban planning, because urban planning is politics*. This entails looking beyond ideological noise to understand what this means in practice. Recognizing the political nature of urban planning requires bringing it into the sphere of public choice: informed discussion of the city's and territory's future. The poverty of technical and political debate—often crushed by media sensationalism or social gossip—undermines the credibility and authority of urban planning and the voice of planners. It demands experimenting with citizen and stakeholder involvement, listening, deliberation, and participation, while also valuing political representation, even within increasingly strained local democracies. Above all, it requires reconnecting urban planning with the building of the public in a pluralist context, fully aware of the power relations in which it operates.

Third principle: *working on tools without obsession, from an experimental and pragmatic perspective*. The discussion of planning tools in practice is far from useless, provided it begins with a concrete analysis of current tools, their relationships with other devices and regulatory frameworks, and their effects on social form and relationships. The example of governing widespread regeneration shows that this is not about hypostatizing the tool, but understanding it in relation to specific situations and problems. The same applies to general plans, the most widespread tool for regulation and governance in Europe, despite differences in models and inflections. Experimentalism, rather than waiting for the palingenesis of a 'great law,' must measure itself against the concrete problems of specific contexts.

Fourth principle: *taking care of institutions*. Urban planning, as an insti-

tutional practice, must contribute to strengthening institutions. Practically, this means reversing the trend of resource impoverishment—financial, cognitive, and personnel-based—that constrains the management of urban planning in local institutions, activating the ‘intelligence of institutions’ described by Carlo Donolo (1997). Academic knowledge has a crucial role here, both in preparing training programs adequate for change and as a partner in planning action carried out by public administrations. The emphasis should be on interinstitutional cooperation rather than consultation, which is often mistakenly treated as a strategy of legitimation.

Fifth principle: *leaving scientism to fate and cultivating project culture*. As Palermo demonstrates, urban planning risks oscillating between a ‘scientist’ approach—often adorned with rhetoric of smartness or sustainability—and abstract critical perspectives detached from concrete governance and material living conditions. The greater risk lies in urban planning aspiring to become part of a broader ‘urban science,’ a depoliticized discourse that obscures its inherently political role. Theoretical discussion can help reveal hidden paradoxes and rhetoric, but project culture must remain central: an attitude oriented toward testing spatial choices and their social effects, measuring the impact of rules and projects on space and bodies. Project culture is fully compatible with the recognition of planning as a procedural and interactive practice, reinforcing the link between urban planning and urban design (Montedoro and Russo, 2022).

Sixth principle: *remaining close to practice, without abandoning theory or reflection*. My engagement with Palermo’s book emphasizes an attitude that values practices as what planners and observers do, and how meaning is assigned over time to their work (Crosta, 2010). This stance counters pragmatism that disregards theoretical reflection. It assumes a posture that suspends blind trust in one’s own work, whether as an operational planner or as someone who observes and questions planning practices. It entails reconstructing conditions and limits of action, contending with the uncertain, tentative, and experimental nature of projects (Infussi, 2007), and recognizing the specificity of planning discourses as well as their interactions with a multitude of other discourses, knowledge, and techniques. This reflexive attitude avoids modernist, rationalist, or Enlightenment temptations, aligning closely with Hirschman’s possibilism.

Seventh principle: *anchoring urban planning in practice and daily life*. Palermo rightly emphasizes the significance of everyday, tactical, or temporary urbanism. This does not imply avoiding long-term issues, which are

often considered intractable under market-driven logics. Instead, it means starting from the structural effects of public choices to understand the impact of planning decisions on everyday life—not only for those with voice, but for all users of urban space. Everyday urban planning is the ‘reverse side’ of structure planning, which acknowledges diverse forms of life while identifying nodes of transformation and the distributive and redistributive effects they generate. It acts upon values and bodies (Bianchetti, 2020) and their capacities to act in the urban environment. It involves introducing proposals for practical change, while treating everyday practices of living and using space as decisive terrain for an ‘ecology of effects’, essential for constructing a new urban planning agenda for the future.

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## 9. The Responsibilities of Urban Planners (Afterword)

Rereading this book together with the contributions from my three coauthors, I see doubts and concerns that apparently have no solution. Why are the relationships between the reality of planning practice and attempts to re-establish the discipline so weak (tiring, eclectic, always incomplete)? Why is the public debate in the area so sparse, as if the conflict of interpretations or at least the variety of visions were no longer a problem worth attention? Why is it so difficult to disperse a few shadows that have too long continued to affect the world of urban planning with respect to crucial issues such as the heritage of tradition, imagining the future, the quality of urban development, or the idea of nature in the city? Is it possible instead to trace some positive element? Where, how, and from which perspectives? The reflections by Gabellini, Lanzani, and Pasqui confirm that a series of problems subsists (even if reporting on them may take less bitter and intransigent forms compared to mine), but they also highlight a few paths for eventually restarting the discipline, however complicated or improbable this may be. I would like to dedicate some considerations to each of these topics.

### 9.1 If Urban Planning Is a 'Practice of Practices'

As different (I might also say complementary) as the profiles of the three authors of the contributions are, given their backgrounds, interests, and experiences, a few positions are undoubtedly shared. Urban planning should be understood as a practice, or better yet, as a field of action and interaction, where a variety of practices intertwine and should find a challenging and provisional point of equilibrium. The configured process shows a high degree of complexity that is difficult to represent, let alone govern. What ultimately matters is the actual impact on urban and social conditions and the capacity to remedy, at least in part, the critical problems that have long loomed over us. The political dimension of urban planning is a constituent characteristic that cannot be ignored or underestimated. Because the context, demands, and challenges have changed noticeably in space and over time, there is an emerging need to renew the tools and means of action, but a notable uncertainty remains regarding the directions and means of the change. Across a great variety of territorial and social situations, urban planning problems tend to take rather different (even incomparable) forms, which require unequal approaches and tools. Arturo Lanzani's analysis

(Coppola, Lanzani et al., 2021; Lanzani, 2024) confirms that a substantial part of the Italian territory is not transformed due to more traditional tools. Perhaps only a fifth of the territory, where about a third of the population is concentrated (metropolitan areas, dynamic medium-sized cities, tourist districts) regularly rely on the urban plan or at least a set of urban projects for developing or regenerating actual forms of settlement. There is, however, a vast ‘land in the middle’ (which covers about 40% of the territory and affects nearly half of the population) where the same processes follow more spontaneous and individualistic logic based on local demands. Finally, there is a likewise vast, but less populated territory containing inner or marginal areas (which hosts only about 15% of the Italian population), where development processes are rarer and less consistent. The conclusion, which is not intuitive, is that the canonical tools celebrated by tradition have a rather limited impact on real situations. In addition, in even the most dynamic and complex settings, there are many growing elements of uncertainty. Only on paper does the traditional plan still represent the decisive tool. In truth, experimentation with complementary (in theory) or alternative (in fact) tools are multiplying, such as the ‘urban project’ or a variety of special programmes conceived with respect to different policies, institutional levels, functions, and contents. It is a surprising and varied framework worth reflection.

Recognizing the dominance of the practical dimension does not mean negating the need for discussion on principles and tools (this is one of the guiding criteria that Pasqui presents to the reader at the end of his chapter). I also agree on this point. In fact, I assumed ‘discursive urban planning’ as the essential topic of my investigation, a topic that, in my opinion, has not received the necessary attention. This is because I believe that the current discursive forms have now largely become an obstacle to the possibility of realizing good practices; perhaps a diversion or an alibi for technicians, administrators, and politicians with respect to the conditions and responsibilities of action. The great complexity of planning practice depends on the objective difficulty of a few technical problems, the strength and competition of directly implicated interests (social, economic, political), and also the looming burden of ‘external history’, i.e. a varied series of contextual factors that evolve over time, affecting the possibility for planning action (Pasqui rightly calls attention to these factors in Section 8.1). The idea of governing this complexity only through a few mechanisms of ‘public command and control’ was mere ideology, which was celebrated in exasperated forms in a simplifying disclosure (the way in which the ‘modern project’ is discussed, as Patrizia Gabellini observes in Section 6.2, is often reductive

with respect to the complexity of the original positions and proposals). The fact remains that urban planning language is often extremely inadequate. And yet, due to reluctance or apparent convenience, (self-)critical analysis is rather rare. For example, in Italy, I have rarely found explicit recognition in the literature of the objective limits of the reform-oriented programme of the 1990s, which led the Emilia-Romagna Region to make a radical shift in 2017, reintroducing the idea of a single municipal planning tool; the same line was confirmed by INU [National Institute of Urbanism] (2024) in developing a new project to reform the national law. Gabellini's contribution addresses the issue critically (Section 6.3), but it is almost an exception. I believe that the responsibility for a critical review cannot be avoided in the interests of the country and the discipline itself. We need to understand the fate of canonical models in a world that has changed profoundly. It is necessary to organize and clearly legitimize the variety of tools being used increasingly in practice, in contingent or informal ways (as occurs, moreover, in different fields of politics: Roger, 2020). In the resulting framework, I do not share the choices made by planning ideologues limited to simply proposing a strong vision and public guide based on defined, prescriptive rules as a possible remedy for all emerging problems. A responsible discipline should recognize that such a model rarely works in practice; it risks becoming ever less compatible with the changing world, and experts are given the burden of proving how and why more satisfactory results may be found. The discourse of urban planners on these connections, however, generally remains elusive. I consider this to be wrong and damaging.

## 9.2 If Urban Planning still Needs Unique Profiles

If the problems and processes in question have different characteristics depending on the context and phase, the selection and development of mature, functional technical knowledge may prove to be a complicated objective. In effect, the discipline does not present convincing or actually useful contributions when it tries to formalize standard methods or models. Experimentation in the field, in a variety of real situations, is much more interesting and seems to require the original capacity to interpret and intervene, and may be favoured by the interaction of cultures, techniques, and pioneering experiences. The situation is not unprecedented.

The urban planning that I discovered in Italy in the early 1970s was not a unitary, solid, legitimized academic institution, nor was it a well-defined variety of competing schools. The impression — widely confirmed in subsequent years — was that of an 'inoperative community' (to adopt an im-

age by Jean-Luc Nancy, 1986), i.e. an unstructured and even less cohesive domain where a vast range of interests, visions, and projects was limited to coexisting along different or even independent lines of development. It was possible to recognize a main strand professionally dedicated to producing urban plans, although it did not seem able to express or share a single paradigm validated by experience. Theoretical uncertainties and conflicts of interest still mark relationships among urban planners, who are always in search of a fleeting independence, and the more developed professional traditions of architecture and engineering. The reform-oriented movement inspired by Campos Venuti became the most influential reference in the last two decades of the century, but could not free itself from nontrivial ambiguities and dilemmas. This is because Campos' vision since the 1960s was truly innovative, but the author never wanted to renounce a debt of appreciation and continuity with respect to the masters Piccinato and Astengo, so he relegated to the shadows the substantial differences between the respective disciplinary ideas and practices. In the meantime, two great long-term problems remained: the relationship with architecture, the object in the 1990s of intense, audacious, but brief experimentation, due to figures such as Gregotti and Secchi (without convincing results, moreover); and the idea of territorial governance that the 'maximalist' component would have conceived according to more rigid and binding forms of public regulation, which rarely worked in any part of the world. It would be appropriate to recognize that ambiguities and perhaps confusion were a recurring feature of the disciplinary developments in Italy in the late 1900s. For example, I find it surprising that Astengo decided to republish Luigi Piccinato's *Progettazione urbanistica* (edited in 1947) in 1988. After vainly attempting to establish the discipline again as a knowledge-based, well-developed science, Astengo wanted to draw attention, without any critical revision, to a dated scholastic text that was limited to divulging the most influential visions in Europe in the early 1900s. He did not bother to discuss the coherence or compatibility of the positions — German, French, or British — that were diligently represented (from land use regulation to the analysis, design, and development of urban forms on various scales). The main thread of Italian urban planning, therefore, also took on fragmentary, eclectic forms that were not always coherent and were uncritical in general.

Fragmentation according to unique experimental profiles — given their contingent intertwining of occasional factors, subjective orientations, conceptual explorations, and particular experiments — grew in the latter decades of the century due to the development, inconspicuous in quantita-

tive terms but intense and rich with suggestions, of a series of pioneering figures and experiences. In contrast to what occurred in other contexts (in the United States above all), Italy has never adopted institutional forms of alternative concepts of planning (such as the varied, distinct theories I depicted in Section 3.2). Only a few unique figures have emerged, trained through contingency, subjectivity, research, and experimentation with original paths related to a set of unresolved problems raised by the planning culture to ensure better interpretations and justifications of traditional town planning practices, although without finding truly convincing solutions in the long term. The academic bureaucracy collected such figures in a specific disciplinary section (then called ‘territorial analysis and planning’), which has become a nonuniform container. It may have included the heirs of applied Taylorism as experts in rational analysis and decision-making; specialists in the economic/spatial planning of large areas (in line with the tradition of *aménagement du territoire*); but also heterodox profiles that were difficult to distinguish from ‘active geography’ (i.e. oriented around territorial governance actions) or ‘public policy analysis’. Starting in the 1970s, those pioneering experiences became significant and influential especially in some schools of architecture (Venice, Milan, Florence, Turin), contributing to forming original, sometimes unique profiles that were nevertheless diverse and evolving.

That matrix certainly influenced the training of my younger collaborators. Patrizia Gabellini legitimately pertains to the main strand of urban planning, but her profile contains original characteristics because it developed through learning and cooperation with two masters as authoritative as they are different: Campos Venuti and Bernardo Secchi (who in my eyes represent the ‘latest visions of Italian urban planning’: Palermo, 2022a). That dense training process did not generate a new ‘author’s vision’, but rather a civic idea of urban planners as public servants, a practice aimed at responding to concrete needs in the city, politics, and administration. This view was based on a patient, tenacious commitment and rigorous respect for current regulation, a clear sense of the limits of planning, but also an inexhaustible willingness to test everything possible and bring innovation to the discipline. (The ‘design-oriented’ concept of structure plans in the first decade of this century come to mind, as does the interpretation/exploration of new forms of the plan configured by the recent reform in Emilia-Romagna.) Nor has Patrizia ever lacked an effort to draw elements for reflection and teaching on the meaning and tools of the discipline. Her concept of the practice and profession is dense and fertile.

Arturo Lanzani's profile has classical characteristics that are unusual today. He combines a passion for understanding the forms of the territory (spatial, environmental, social) — as diverse, changing, and surprising as they are — with civil, political, and technical engagement, conceiving and realizing territorial transformations that are as just, sustainable, and functional as possible. He therefore reconciles a capacity for analysis with a design-oriented commitment when he sees the conditions for open and edifying experimentation. This means assuming responsibility on different, complex fronts, a rare condition and talent. His path would help us to understand that two challenges are essential. First, how can we 'do urban planning' without an adequate understanding of the mechanisms and (coevolutionary) processes that were or still do underlie actual territorial transformations (Section 7.1)? Second, the function of 'critical urban studies' risks remaining academic if several effectively innovative practices are not implemented (Section 7.4). One of the reasons for interest in his contribution here is the possibility of concretely observing the ways in which a meaningful and multidimensional — interpretational, design-oriented, administrative — experience is integrated with the world of disciplinary theories: which contributions are selected (a few particular ones); the reasons for the choices; and the effective use of theoretical suggestions in real practice (Section 7.2). The vision that emerges is original because it knows how to combine responsible pragmatism, rigorous technical commitment (which interweaves problems of interpreting the territory and urban design), and choices regarding value (which determine a few mandatory conditions for planning action). The resulting image of urban planning is exciting as a generally complicated, sometimes exhausting social practice that rarely attains the expected results, although it may leave some fertile traces if a few conditions are met. The political and social dimensions are crucial for ongoing processes that are nearly always contingent and incremental; however, the responsibilities of the profession and technical content remain specific and difficult. The essential tools — rules, visions, or projects — require more demanding interpretations than those (simplifying, often trivial) suggested by fashionable rhetoric (Section 7.3).

Gabriele Pasqui is perhaps one of the last representatives of a truly unique trend. In other times, urban planning knew how to attract subjects with various backgrounds who consciously decided to adhere to that field of ideas and practices. Gabriele was trained as a brilliant economist and philosopher. He could have worked successfully in other sectors, but he chose urban planning. Like other subjects with similar experiences (as is also true in my case), he risks remaining in perennial limbo. In other countries,

his interests would normally be representative of a geographer (economic/urban) or a policy analyst. In Italy, a state of ambiguity remains because urban planning has still not formally legitimized the orientations of public policies and economic/territorial investigation. If the discipline were willing to officially recognize the mutation that I have described in this volume, Pasqui's profile would be entirely legitimate; instead, it will continue to be perceived by the most orthodox exponents as an outsider or pioneering figure. There remains a visioning capacity that is original for many traditional operators. He configures hypotheses and means of using the political, strategic, and design tools that cannot be reduced to simplifications or begging the question in the standard management culture. The interest in a few economic and social questions — a salient point in the new planning practices — is developed with technical expertise that is not common in the most orthodox schools (see Section 8.4). The singularity, therefore, may be fertile. A doubt arises, however: Can a disciplinary field continue to rely on objectively eccentric figures as privileged witnesses or guides? In effect, the area long ago lost its original capacity of attraction, experimentation, and innovation while few canonical positions have strengthened. Are we sure that the mainstream being delineated is able to address inherited or emerging challenges? The gradually acquired normality involves some risk: the capacity to address the 'wicked problems' on the agenda seems weaker, and a tendency to simplify/ritualize roles and responsibilities seems to prevail. Perhaps we should regret the creative disorder of times long past.

### **9.3 Limits or Errors that the Discipline Should not Repeat, due to Conformism, Illusions, or Mystifications**

In the meantime, urban planning as a discipline continues to present embarrassing limits, although the area largely tends to avoid dilemmas and risks that have long been clear. Albeit justly recognized, the dominance of practices cannot justify this indifference because an inadequate theory is not only useless, but also damaging. I would like to reiterate at least five large families of issues I introduced to my contributors, which in my opinion do not receive adequate attention.

#### *1) Academia: Weak and Marginal*

Professionals that distrust theories are not wrong. Academic developments in urban planning are unconvincing and not very relevant. Disciplinary academics developed to improve the substance and quality of the original town planning practices. Many paths were explored over the long term, but

the most ambitious attempts wound up being arbitrary or inconclusive. I am referring to four essential strands that were explored in vain on several occasions over more than a century: a rationalist and scientific concept inspired by the Taylorism culture in the early 1900s; a radical alternative with a critical orientation; the neomodernist dream of communicative/collaborative theories of planning; and the modern project dissolved according to various post-structuralist trends. Nevertheless, the outcome is not positive. Critical thought struggles to become effective action. Scientism and communicative rationality have proved to be illusory and unsustainable visions. In the post-truth world, the claim to ensure a scientific basis of knowledge has proved to be in vain (Hannon and Woodward, 2025), as has conceiving the construction of reality as a process that is not social but purely communicative (Knoblauch, 2020). It is true that the two topics have animated a large amount of academic literature, but these are mostly self-referential contributions that are not very relevant for planning practices (I recall *The Glass Bead Game* by Hermann Hesse, 1943). Even more arbitrary and insignificant are the most recent intellectual exercises in post-structuralist orientation, which (to cite a contribution from Hesse's time) might recall a '*fumisterie intellectuelle*' [intellectual nonsense] (Bertrand Russell, 1943; here I mention the French version, 2013, because the title of the original work, published in the United States, was even harsher: 'An Outline of Intellectual Rubbish'). Moreover, criticism is a responsibility that cannot be avoided (Spencer, 2016, Conclusion; 2021, Foreword). The fact remains that more than a century of theoretical digression has led to a paradoxical result: the general revival of urban design in forms that are not too different from the original ones. The orientation now needs to coexist with another form of revival, which is surprising in certain respects. The theory or ideology most suggestive today in the planning world once again presents the systemic visions of the mid-1900s in enormously more powerful technological forms. The urban planning of our future may be the smart planning anticipated by Carlo Ratti. It is a pity that his 'senseable city' (Chapter 3) erased contact with both the *ville*, the physical city, and the *cit *, human/urban society (Sennett, 2018). The idea of community or socio-spatial organization (Section 4.2) has been replaced by an anonymous crowd of individual subjects and behaviours (Recwitz, 2020; Appleton, 2024); technocracy stands as a surrogate of democratic processes (Bertsou and Caramani, 2020), seemingly capable of producing the necessary knowledge according to standard, purely inductive procedures (Raco and Savini, 2019). This seems to be a very elementary or regressive vision. Shannon Mattern (Princeton) emphasizes that 'a city is not a computer' (Mattern,

2021): planners would need other forms of urban intelligence. A paradigm shift might be implied: rethinking the future of the city as a coevolutionary process based on the principles and technical means of ‘collective (artificial/swarm) intelligence’ (Malone and Bernstein, 2015; Seebacher and Legat, 2024). Such a radical turn, however, should be publicly declared and justified! In the meantime, ordinary practices adopt increasingly more contingent or informal characteristics incompatible with the modern tradition, but also with systemic ambitions, whether old or new. I believe that the current trend is worth at least as much critical attention as what is reserved for the failure of 20<sup>th</sup> century theories, and I am surprised by the lack of discussion on the topic. Some dispute arises among competing professional interests (a bitter debate between the supporters of new urbanism and landscape urbanism is memorable: Palermo, 2025, Chapter 11). The fact remains that critical objections to the paradigmatic positions of Friedmann, Faludi, Innes, and Healey (in the late 1900s), Carlo Ratti (today), or other famous authors (Luigi Piccinato in Italy, for example) are rare in the specialized literature. It is as if criticism implied a lack of respect towards authoritative figures and not as worthy recognition of the interest in taking positions as audacious as they are questionable. True academia knows it can grow due to intellectual confrontation — frank or bitter as is necessary — between rival positions.

Patrizia Gabellini proposes a convincing explanation of the limits of the discussion from the perspective of someone working in the field (Section 6.1). Practitioners must face a variety of problems: knowledge, interaction, design, assessment, and more. We understand that they instrumentally search for a frame of reference and orientation in a theory relating to each individual topic, without worrying too much about the mutual consistency of the sources they adopt (perhaps by choice, perhaps due to some contingent factor). This process may explain the eclecticism of the overall vision. However, the same justification cannot be valid for academic professionals. There are no reasons that can justify the proposal of past paradigms (such as the great theories that I cited at the beginning of the section) or the eclectic combination of incompatible visions. To try to break this vicious cycle, there is only one road, I believe: recognizing — as Lanzani suggests in Section 7.2 — that a stronger and less marginal academia should assume more important responsibilities with respect to understanding not only real ongoing phenomena, but also the design of physical transformations (even if the assumption is not sufficient for guaranteeing a capacity to intervene that is certainly more effective: Section 7.4).

2) *The Planning Tradition: Sacredness, Nostalgia, Inertia*

True academia would refute the ‘crystallized’ idea of tradition, not limiting itself to celebrating its masters and models of thought and action evoked with nostalgia and absolute loyalty. Instead, it would be the object of continuous historical and critical reflection. Often with embarrassment amid everyday reality, the planning culture cannot find refuge in the greatness of a few eminent figures of the past, something that has seemed undeniable in other periods, but should always be verified at the new juncture. It seems reasonable to suppose that the most innovative contributions were historically correlated with the contextual conditions and the ideas of culture and politics that were more influential in that phase, and yet a critical review of the visions and experiences of the masters remains surprisingly uncommon, despite the radical changes that have affected society and the territory. Relevance in a period and context does not imply perennial topicality. The discipline cannot limit itself to proclaiming the glories of the past (as still occurs in Novarina, 2023; Gaeta, 2024; positions that I criticized in Palermo, 2025a), without questioning their coherence with the problems and demands of the present. In Italy, for example, I find few traces of this need in recent reflections by the INU on a few important biographies of urban planners (Fini, ed., 2022). The contributions reveal great respect and widespread nostalgia, but real critical judgement is still lacking as to the topicality or, more in general, the heritage of those ideas of urban planning under current conditions or in a future that may be even more unsettling. What is the real legacy of Piccinato’s or Salzano’s urban planning? The question is largely avoided (one partial exception is Chiara Merlini’s contribution on Piccinato, in Fini, 2022) or worse, it takes the form of an immobile and ambiguous celebration. A greater willingness and capacity to ‘profane sacred texts’ (Agamben, 2005) would probably be useful and opportune.

3) *Vision of the Future: Traditional, Elusive*

True academia and a responsible institution should propose an idea of the future that cannot be reduced to reiterating traditional models in a world that has changed significantly. I have noted (Chapter 3) the embarrassing gap in the United States between increasingly contingent and adaptive practice and academia and a profession that still celebrates the rites of the ‘comprehensive plan’. Likewise embarrassing, in France as in Great Britain, is the continuous claim of an influential disciplinary role, although the need to ‘reinvent urban planning’ has long been proclaimed without indicating truly concrete and effective solutions.

In my opinion, the objection is also valid for Italy. The INU recently developed a new reform platform aimed at legitimizing a weaker form of urban planning (INU, 2024). However, there is little critical discussion of the limits and risks of the proposed approach, as if the urban plan were still the decisive or even self-sufficient tool for governing territorial transformations. It is not enough to invoke the principles of consistency and usefulness of the new plan (Galuzzi et al., 2024) without recognizing that a judgement on the quality of transformation governance can be determined only by the concrete developments of urban policies and projects, which have specific characteristics depending on the context. Even less convincing is the position of planning ideologues limited to replicating the need for a strong vision and public regulation each time there is a crisis in the urban area and in urban planning without feeling the need to clarify the necessary innovations with respect to the widespread failures of the past. It seems difficult to imagine and build a new future without taking clearer and more meaningful responsibility in the field of actual practice. Some dilemma must arise. Gabellini is disposed to work tenaciously to reintroduce the plan as a renewed and influential tool. Lanzani probably shares the same sentiment, at least in an experimental setting, if not as a general hope for reform. Pasqui believes in orientating and nudging public programming with respect to ongoing processes that are very intense and widespread, such as urban regeneration stemming from spontaneous initiatives by local subjects (Section 8.4). I recognize the legitimacy and interest of these topics, but I do not overestimate the functions of the new ‘strategic’ plan or the innumerable guidelines that the administration can develop. These are weak tools that need robust complements. Gabellini herself does not conceal the limits of the new plans (Section 6.3). The reform-oriented arrangement in the 1990s among rules, visions, and projects in too many cases led to the undue independence of the individual components, as if the vision were the exclusive matter of politics, the project of developers, and rules of the administration. Reinventing the single plan in recent years has not solved the problems. In fact, Gabellini (*ibid.*) reveals that the strategic vision is not always rooted in the territorial context, but tends to echo stereotyped and conforming diagrams, while the most qualifying choices are postponed to later phases of the process. Lanzani (Section 7.3) reiterates justified doubts on the pertinence of strategic models proposed by the managerial culture and now adopted by urban planning itself. On the other hand, the limits of in-depth study and scepticism as to the relevance of ‘indicative planning’ are known. I doubt that guidelines or strategic visions can be crucial. There are other, more salient elements: the need to interpret

transformations by parts in a dignified manner, conceiving each part as a coevolutionary element of a common vision; the need to find acceptable mediation among multiple interacting interests; the growing flexibility of the rules; and the inevitable discretion of public actors.

If this exercise is based on a clear political mandate and conducted transparently and responsibly, I have nothing to object, in contrast to the ideologues of prescriptive urban planning. But is the disciplinary culture, politics itself, or public opinion ready to accept a vision and practice that introduces a crisis in the most accredited traditions? This would be a true metamorphosis! It is not reasonable to underestimate the difficulties, as Pasqui observes (Section 8.3), as they tend to be aggravated due to the crisis in the public sphere, the growing variety of forms of life and the resulting deficit, disorder, and possible negative effects of current regulatory frameworks (complicated, redundant, partially concurrent). However, the space of formal powers and public responsibility has not changed. The problem is the weakness of political will, territorial culture, and reform-oriented hopes, but civic commitment may enable some progress on those fronts. Meanwhile, urban planning, as an institution, should assume its responsibilities. It cannot work alone, as Pasqui observes (Section 8.5); it must certainly do its part, above all by bringing clarity to its motives, functions, possibilities for action, and specific performance. It cannot negate the crisis in traditional models, but rather adopt the metamorphosis as an emerging possibility and challenge, to find a meaningful and useful role in new forms, without erasing the original reasons (Gabellini: Section 6.4).

#### *4) Quality of Urban Transformations: Stereotypes and Missed Opportunities*

In the framework outlined above, the quality of the transformations is an essential problem that remains largely avoided or addressed in misleading ways. In my opinion, the judgement is valid due to the successful trends of ‘transnational urbanism’ (Ponzini, 2020), which have left a negative mark in many settings, even prestigious ones with a capacity for attraction. Several recent events in Milan are probably a minor version of the same trend. Serious doubts have emerged regarding the legality of several planning acts and the behaviour of the public administration in constructing and managing city transformation processes. Here, the topic of interest is another one: the modest quality of the resulting operations. It is a crucial question that remains in the shadows or tends to be falsified. The opinion is widespread that in this field, the ‘Milan model’ has created ‘growth and beauty’, as most of the media maintains, while relying on methods and procedures that are perhaps not always acceptable. Instead, I believe that the quality of the

operations is a crucial aspect and that the embarrassing limits of ongoing transformations are a logical and foreseeable consequence of the excessive dominance given to market interests and visions, and the unresponsive and uninfluential role played by public actors. As I have maintained for years, recent urban transformations that have most attracted media attention — City Life and Porta Nuova, for example — do not live up to expectations or opportunities. It is true that, as a provincial city, Milan seems to be satisfied with ‘new [designer] skyscrapers’ (even if these are, in reality, just towers that are often poor copies of ideas or works tested elsewhere in the past). However, it would be enough to compare the current results with the original competition calls or emphatic proclamations from developers (who promote ‘a new way of experiencing the city’) to objectively realize that the assessment cannot be positive. There is no trace of an ‘urban project’. These are just extemporaneous and generally insignificant collections of individual buildings. Open space design is irrelevant. Buildings are occasional and mutually indifferent. Urban functions are elementary. Green areas remain a residual component. Collateral effects are completely overlooked in the urban context and market. Urban planning should be charged with addressing these topics. Their systematic avoidance confirms that the role of the discipline in such experiences was entirely marginal. They are essentially building operations conceived independently according to goals and processes in which public interest plays a secondary role. I believe that events in Milan in the last two decades should be discussed, not only due to doubts relating to formal legality or behavioural style, but due to the modest results and wasted opportunities. As a remedy, it is not sufficient to refer to regulation. Political will, a design culture, and responsible discretion are needed to ensure the quality of urban projects in local transformations and a strategic vision for the city based on the evolution of a few great projects and their relationships within the context.

##### *5) Nature in the City: Ideologies and Instrumentality*

In this framework, the appeal to the environment risks becoming an ideological diversion or mere tool available to market interests. For decades, the planning culture has laboriously explored complex issues such as sustainability (environmental, but also economic and social: Munasinghe, 2019) or the creation of a new ‘eco-city’ (Wong and Yuen, 2011; Tang, 2013; Hagan, 2015). Gabellini, Lanzani, and Pasqui readily recognize the centrality of these issues under current conditions, and place the right emphasis on the connections between environmental questions and new social and urban questions. For some time, however, the discourse and resulting practice have been greatly simplified: today, ‘greening the city’ seems to

be the main mission due to partial interventions that may be valid only for individual areas or buildings (Devuyst, 2001; Brantz and Dümpelmann, 2011). These measures should guarantee effective enhancement of land-based and real-estate operations, but perhaps this is the primary scope today. The result is that while greenwashing ideologies are expanding, a subjugated idea of ‘nature in the city’ is increasingly common (Blom, 2023); not intended as a value in itself, but rather as a mere tool for embellishment (of market products) or mitigation (of a few environmental criticalities). Let’s be clear: a reasonable principle of utility can justify an instrumental use of environmental goods to improve the conditions of urban life. For example, in very dense areas without any greenery, even creating a type of ‘green zoo’ by planting vegetation on roofs or balconies may be justified. However, I do not share any claim of generalization of that model, which is costly and unnatural. The paradox, in Milan, for example, would be finding a ‘vertical forest’ around what should have been an urban park. Language also becomes the indicator of several problems. I once thought that the forest was a varied, open, rhizomatic space. Today, the attribution of this name to a collection of cement vases that hold greenery at various heights does not arouse concern, but rather satisfaction. It is yet another small sign of growing artificialization of the world (and social relationships), which seems rather incompatible with a planning culture that aims to affront problems of the *ville* and *cit  *. Today, the environment lies at the centre of bitter controversies. In France, for example, reports against ‘*le peril vert*’ [the green danger] (Perri, 2021), ‘*l’imposture ecologique*’ [the ecological hoax] (Laurut, 2011), ‘*l’imposture climatique*’ [the climate hoax] (All  gre, 2010; Gervais, 2018) are multiplying, clearly reflecting market or at least conservative interests (which are probably as widespread in Italy, but do not take such explicit forms). Fears of a presumed ‘green Leviathan’ (Coeckelberg, 2021) are growing. I find it surprising that there is little attention for the coeval phenomenon of ‘subjugated nature’, which may mark growing harmony between the current visions of some urban planners and the instrumental interests of developers. What follows is a concept of nature as a ‘free gift’ (Battistoni, 2025) that is unsustainable, but familiar to capitalist culture. Rediscovering and sharing ‘the truth about nature’ (B  scher, 2021) is a responsibility that the experts cannot avoid.

I do not see a dignified or influential future for the discipline if critical situations such as those I have quickly delineated are not addressed. I believe that Gabellini, Lanzani, and Pasqui share some specific arguments (which also appear in their chapters). Perhaps they do not feel the need today to turn these considerations into a critical manifesto that would force

the entire discipline to take a stand on the whole set of these problems. Pasqui makes an appeal to a few founding topics and principles of good governance. The scenario is irreproachable, but how plausible is it and under what conditions? Greater critical awareness is undeniable, but is the assumption sufficient? Gabellini recognizes that the discipline is undergoing a metamorphosis; the tendency is inevitable, but it must find support in the reflection on the long course of completed experiences. The fact remains that a large part of the discipline does not seem ready to accept the necessary discontinuities relating not only to tradition, but also to the reform-oriented programmes of the late 1900s. In contrast, Lanzani admits that principles and orientations such as reformism, possibilism, and even incrementalism have become decisive for current planning practices; however, he does not exclude the possibility that the best intentions may fail. In this case, urban planners would be left with roles of resistance and interstitial opportunities. Here, I limit myself to reiterating a preliminary assumption that seems essential. To deal with real practices, it is useful and even necessary to revisit a few common places and omissions/distortions that have long impoverished the disciplinary narrative, with all the risks of 'idle chattering', as Susan Fainstein would say (Section 3.2). Also because a commitment of this type should be measured with objectively adverse and complicated conditions.

#### **9.4 Conditions and Commitments for Renewal (Difficult, but Necessary)**

An essential reflection should recognize at least two great priorities. In my opinion, rethinking the sense and methods of urban action has become a binding commitment because traditional models cannot be considered adequate. If we intend to make some attempt in this sense, a second need draws the attention: questioning the current language, which is often inadequate or misleading. Action and word, therefore: the concept of disciplinary language and effective practices are two essential issues to face.

In the long term, the evolution of the 'urban planning tale' is a symptom that cannot be overlooked. Reform-oriented urban planning assumed a rigorous diagnosis of open problems, with the resulting proposal of possible solutions. Politics was tasked with the responsibility of choosing a few critical topics as a priority to address in the programming horizon, and the commitment to guarantee some effective improvement in urban conditions in reasonable times. Critical diagnoses and concrete commitments are increasingly rare in recent planning experiences. More general forms

of discourse were adopted, based on great objectives and generic promises (quality of life and economic enhancement). Perhaps there is a fear that a more explicit call to unresolved criticalities and concrete goals to reach in given times could lead to damage (for responsible authorities) in terms of image, reputation, and political consent (while I think that many citizens would prefer a more frank, concrete, responsible form of discourse). The consequences are not irrelevant.

Current discourse on urban planning too often adopts a marketing style. ‘Selling places’ becomes the priority (Ward, 1998; Angotti, 2008) not only for market operators, but also for a part of the discipline, which even accepts the idea that public policies would also be market goods to sell successfully (*Selling Public Policy*: Drew, 2023). Routine communication becomes not only instrumental, but exhortative, illusory, stereotyped, and even sometimes frankly ridiculous. And yet that style seems to have become normal; it rarely arouses objections or reactions. In the specific area, it may actually represent the current orientation of a new means of communication typical of the neoliberal society, as Alain Bihl (2007) reports, following in the steps of George Orwell (Palermo, 2025, Chapter 12). Questioning these inappropriate habits would be an obvious commitment for the last urban planners. I recall the principle of reality (versus any form of ‘idle chattering’), a need to re-establish and share a few minimum truths on the diagnoses and possibilities, and an appeal to pragmatism and openness to what is possible, but always in critical and responsible forms (Palermo, 2022, Chapter 8). I have to recognize, however, that the conditions of the context may seem unfavourable, given the evident decline of the ‘public sphere’ (Lipotevsky, 1989; McKee, 2005; Goode, 2005) and the spread of a ‘post-truth condition’ (Kattumana and Truwand, 2024; Lynch, 2025). ‘Speaking truth to power’ was already Aaron Wildavsky’s appeal nearly half a century ago (Wildavsky, 1979). Today exercising this responsibility seems more difficult for experts, because those in power (or their ‘strategists’) may generate post-truths. Justifiably, Truwand (in the text edited with Kattumana, Chapter 1) evoked the figure of the ‘bull-shitter’ (defined by Harry Frankfurt, 2005, but the first version dates to 1986; Bergstrom and West, 2020), which seems to correspond perfectly to the profile of a few authorities of our times. However, another obstacle also emerges and cannot be underestimated: the availability of increasingly vast parts of the population to echo (and therefore multiply the effects) of post-truths circulating among the media. This is that phenomenon of ‘bad parrhesia’ anticipated by Foucault in the late 1970s (Emily Zakin, in Kattumana and Truwand, 2024, Chapter 4) and which risks making the neoenlightened

will of experts unsubstantiated. Nevertheless, I do not believe that the discipline can elude these responsibilities.

The second crucial topic regards the means of doing urban planning. My three contributors are right to assume the concept of ‘practice’ as a key principle of urban planning, legitimizing a vision that only a few authors sustained strongly and continuously in the past (Pierluigi Crosta and Ernst Alexander led the way). The discipline cannot rely only on the technical knowledge of town planners, that also seems subject to dated, insuperable limits. Their functions currently cannot be limited to the traditional tasks of regulation and visioning. Urban planning has always been — and must be so more than ever today — ‘social action’ which requires responsibility and adequate expertise. A pragmatic orientation is certainly desirable (albeit extraneous to orthodox tradition); however, it would be an illusion to suppose that some vague reference to philosophical or methodological principles of pragmatism could be valid as a paradigmatic guide. It would also be naive and misleading to rely only on the managerial culture, especially if intended in the rational-style ‘problem-solving’ versions (the emerging strand of ‘scenario planning’ and the revival of the ‘systems view’ are the most recent suggestions of that tendency). Urban planning must face complex management problems, but the references I have noted here are not sufficient. It seems necessary to bring into play the sociological idea of ‘practice’ and the normative principles of ‘practical reason’. Pasqui (Section 8.1) recalls the teachings of Pierre Bourdieu, who effectively inspired a few lines of innovation in urban studies (Susen and Turner, 2011; Wacquant, 2018, 2023). Every urban fact, each event develops in a field of forces and interests, which must be recognized and investigated to understand what has and what may occur following the initiatives of some party actors (Bourdieu, 1994; Hilgers and Mangez, 2015). The reference seems justified in a world where the concept of events tends to be instantaneous and ephemeral. This does not mean adopting a principle of causality, thereby interpreting each specific event as the direct consequence of some structural factor. Bourdieu’s vision does not exclude this possibility (Bourdieu, 2004; Robbins, 2019), which is why he also received some criticism (even from his colleague/friend Jean-Claude Passeron, 2003). In the world of urban planning, it would be a mistake to overlook the importance of social action under historically decisive conditions according to a new perspective à la Weber that introduces a crisis in any hypothesis of preconceived structural order. It would be another error, however, to conceive of the action only according to the principles of instrumental rationality, as occurs with vast strands of the managerial culture.

As Bent Flyvbjerg wisely argued many years ago (Flyvbjerg, 2004; et al., 2012), planning practices raise decisive problems of ‘practical reason’ (even if the perspective was not significantly developed afterwards). It is right and appropriate to account for the values and scopes that orient the practices. The reasons that may explain actions and guide behaviour should be justified in the phase and context. The capacity to reformulate a ‘wicked problem’ such that it can be addressed, and suggesting an approach that can lead to some operational result despite the difficulties is more important as a resource than the pure suitability to solve any standard problem (Schwartz e Sharpe, 2010; Sylvan and Chang, 2021). This does not mean forgetting the limits of the technician’s role, imagining some improper and unlikely substitute for political or administrative responsibility. However, an idea of urban planners as pure technicians dealing with drawings and measurements would be reductive, without the need to understand the real field of action and evolutionary path of great choices. Urban planners are not asked to become philosophers, sociologists, or social/environmental geographers (even though Auturo Lanzani shows the interest of blending in that sense, which was more familiar to the fathers of modern urban planning). The question is simple: How can planners work technically without an adequate awareness of the actual nature of the problems in play? The doubt is crucial if and where the concept of urban planning tends to be visionary and strategic. Once again, a (minimal) need for truth emerges, which does not seem to be answered adequately in current communications or in current educational structures.

In my opinion, integrating technical knowledge, a vision of the world, and exercises in practical reason is an unresolved problem in urban planning training programmes. Thirty years ago, I founded an undergraduate and master programme in this field in Milan by relying on a very interesting faculty. However, I do not consider the results to be satisfying, nor do I see signs of the necessary renewal (the catalyst for change is weak and the direction itself seems very uncertain). However, I believe the challenge is essential if urban planning wants a future: regenerating the common language because the current terms are often unacceptable; understanding and trying to renew actual practices, which no longer fit traditional models; updating technical functions (concerning both public design and new challenges in self-organized systems and ‘swarm intelligence’: Boucher et al., 2023; Marques et al., 2025); taking a stand with respect to the reasons and effects of current transformations, which often require critical judgement; not being resigned to playing a purely formal or — even worse — procedural role in a post-planning world; addressing these needs with a constant

reform-oriented spirit, which will probably find contingent, incremental orientations according to the possibilities of the phase and context. The results may be inadequate, inferior to the ‘minimum necessary’ conditions, as Lanzani admonishes (Section 7.4). The risk is real. It is important that urban planners are aware of this and, if so, assume the responsibilities they feel up to (instead of contenting themselves with evasive or mystifying rhetoric). This is the somewhat fervent recommendation that I allow myself to make to those who still have the possibility of working in the field.

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Pier Carlo Palermo  
**Mutation.  
Metamorphosis or An Eclipse  
in Contemporary Urban Planning**

Contributions by  
Patrizia Gabellini, Arturo Lanzani, and Gabriele Pasqui

Urban Planning has changed radically in the long term as both a practice and a discipline. Developed for urban regulation and social control, it has become a flexible, adaptive, contingent, tactical, even informal practice. These properties are not new, but they were once confined backstage. The difference today is that a broad section of the discipline is willing to accept such conditions as normal requirements. Can we acknowledge this transformation without needing to justify it or clarify its technical and social implications? According to tradition, planning was focused on producing rules and visions, but the interpretation of these two functions has weakened over time and the tendency seems to negatively affect the reputation and social importance of the discipline. Would it be useful and appropriate to focus more meaningfully on effective actions, i.e. planning policies and urban projects that actually transform the city?

This book discusses these two questions, which the author believes are essential for giving the discipline a more dignified public and social function once again. The argument is based on extensive international literature as a framework underlying a comparative analysis of current trends and the possibility for change. The author thanks Patrizia Gabellini, Arturo Lanzani, and Gabriele Pasqui for agreeing to write critical comments on the vision and topics presented in the book.

Pier Carlo Palermo is Professor Emeritus of Urbanistica at the Politecnico di Milano, where he directed the Department of Architecture and Planning and was Dean of the School of Architecture and Society. He has recently published: *Innovation in planning*, Actar, Barcelona, 2006; *I limiti del possibile*, Donzelli, Rome, 2009; *Spatial Planning and Urban Development*, Springer, Dordrecht, 2010; *Place-Making and Urban Development*, Routledge, London, 2015 (with Davide Ponzini); *Il futuro dell'urbanistica post-riformista*, Carocci, Rome, 2022; and *Roots and Frontiers. Figures and Cultures in Contemporary Urban Planning*, Planum Publisher, Rome-Milan, 2025.



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