

AN OPPORTUNITY TO REFLECT ON URBAN POLICIES

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Despite the limited dimensions and a number of contingent difficulties, the URBAN programme has led in Italy to noteworthy experiments that can contribute to a renewal of the ways of governing urban transformations in our country. I would state that the developments of the first URBAN programme in Italy have usefully contributed towards clarifying opportunities and limits of an action “by project”, thanks to an original experimentation that has addressed two particular themes: the construction of projects for *crisis areas*, and the will to act simultaneously on the *physical city* and on the *social city*.

The advantages and the limits of “programming by project” are by now clear. The central question is the *capacity of action*: as treatment of a problematic situation able to determine, in properly defined times, a modification in the state of things, thanks to the coordinated mobilisation of a multiplicity of resources. From this point of view, the conception of the functions and forms of government cannot be limited to defining *rules* or formulating *guidelines*. What is of interest is “government in action”: the capacity to construct a programme by means of concrete selective agreements with respect to existing conditions and possible opportunities. In the last decade interest has increased also in our country in the instruments and the practices of “negotiated programming”. However, the conception of urban government seems to propose once more a number of traditions typical of “town planning by regulation”, whose topicality seems uncertain. This orientation seems confirmed by the most recent projects to reform the regional town planning laws, which again foresee a complex hierarchy of plans, relating to many different levels and functions. And when the way of “strategic planning” is attempted, the experiments appear mostly reductive. The consequence is an objective delay with respect to the “programming by project” method, which in any case is bound to succeed, in the framework of global relations. Many current difficulties in our participation in international competitions regarding project financing stem from this inherited inertia.

A partial exception, in this context, is constituted by the experiments with “complex programmes” which were developed also in Italy in the ‘90s. The URBAN programme has clear affinities with these experiments which have certainly contributed to the formation, in local contexts, of a new project capacity. The “complexity” of the programmes is documented by a number of common requisites: the *integrated* character of the measures; the need for new *cooperative relations* between various public institutions and emergent private interests; recourse to *competitive* procedures for the allocation of resources; the orientation of the action within a *delimited spatial and time* horizon; and the orientation of the project according to assessment criteria of both local impacts and ones on a vaster scale, which have to allow for many different dimensions. The scope of the measures - the *treatment* and the *relaunching of weak areas* - and the *guiding role* assigned to the *public* actors have probably helped to dissipate the diffidence still widespread in our country with regard to the method of “urban projects” and to facilitate the formation of consensus and the very course of the processes. In view of the conditions of the context, it could not be imagined that difficulties would not arise, but it is important that a positive trend is becoming asserted. The experiments of the URBAN programme may in many aspects be regarded as exemplary.

Considering such programmes as these, a number of questions are spontaneous. It seems natural to wonder whether and to what extent the project drawn up can take on a *strategic* value with respect to urban regeneration or whether instead it amounts to just an *additional* contribution to the variety of urban policies. Another question concerns the possible dilemma between a relatively *strong and clearly visible* strategic project, and the opportunity to start up a *multiplicity of separate actions*, to reduce risks, distribute potential benefits and probably increase consensus. A theme of general interest is the relation between this *targeted programmatic* measure and the structures and rules that *normally govern* territorial transformations: an ambiguous relation as the URBAN programme can certainly make use of

existing forecasts and instruments, while at the same time it can come up against impediments or difficulties in certain current rules. Another family of questions regards the *organisational models* which may be more or less *autonomous* with relation to exogenous relations. In particular, a theme of strategic interest is the possible promotion of *cooperative relations* between public and private actors regarding the conception and carrying out of the project. Another very important theme is the effective *multidimensional* nature of the project, i.e. the joint presence of many different fields of action and types of actors, with reasonably balanced weights and functions. A very complex question that results from this regards the degree of *integration* of the project. Actually, integration seems to be a *rare* condition, or at least a *guiding idea* towards which it is always right to tend, but which can hardly be guaranteed in contingent situations. It would perhaps be more opportune to take the trouble first and foremost to verify the possible congruence of a variety of reasonable actions, as the prior condition necessary for all and any effort of integration. In conclusion, a last group of questions can turn on the project's potential *impact*. From this standpoint, too, it seems indispensable to respect the *multidimensional* nature of the measure, taking into account a variety of impacts which belong traditionally to different practices and worlds of meaning, and which ought now to be assessed together. This complex of questions emerges from an empirical reflection on the first generation URBAN experiments, but we could agree that it is a suitable check-list for discussing the main forms of projects and of urban policies of current interest. The initial experiments seem to indicate that there are no univocal models, to which a normative value may be attributed. There are many matrices and paths of development in relation to the contexts, and this could be a ground for confidence in the possibility of reaching significant results even in such a variety of conditions. Certainly the opportunities seem to increase when the project is already included in the *programme of a charismatic mayor* (in Salerno and Cosenza, for example) with respect to which it has a strategic function, of clear visibility. But interesting cases have emerged in which it is the *municipal administrative structure* that has undertaken, progressively, the development of the project (in Cagliari, for example, or Reggio Calabria, with a more intense dialogue with local society). And also in other situations, where at the outset the role of *private promoters* has been prevalent, during the course of the experiment a *public jurisdictions* unit was formed and should be able to exercise a positive influence on the subsequent developments of local project implementation. Generally speaking, they have not been "major projects", but a weakly structured network of *separate initiatives*. This is a point on which it seems appropriate to reflect. Where it has been sought, with particular commitment, to construct a unitary project (in Venice for example), difficulties have arisen which are in part insuperable. It seems more reasonable, in an early phase of experimentation, to rely on a more prudent *incremental* logic. There is no doubt that in general the proposals are not wholly *innovative*: the possibility of resuming here objectives and projects already delineated is generally a condition of success. It is not by chance that many problem areas (in Bari, Trieste and Siracusa) have already been selected as the place for an *executive town-planning instrument*. Regarding the subjects of the measures, there is an evident imbalance between *actions on the physical city* (which absorb the major part of the resources, and even more when drawing up the balance sheet) and *economic and social actions*, with respect to which the municipal administrations have less competence and autonomy. More disappointing, to the letter, are the results in terms of *partnership*: some form of cooperation can be recognised between *public* actors, but cooperative relations are more rare with *private* actors, who, moreover, are traditionally little inclined to operate in crisis areas with aims of regeneration and treatment. Also in this case it seems necessary for confidence and interest to be able to grow gradually, together with the *credibility of public action* in this field. Results seem fairly traditional also regarding *impacts*. As physical actions are mostly concerned, the widespread attention given to problems of the *urban form is not surprising*. Less evident is the interest in *environmental quality*, as quality of living, and interpretations and forecasts of the effects of the measure on local society are still vague. But the tendency and the need to be able to wait for hitherto mostly unexperimented processes to come to maturity are

important also from this point of view. Empirical observation seems to indicate that important processes of “learning from experience” are under way. I believe that in perspective, these experiences could be very useful: not only for the second generation URBAN programmes, but more radically as a significant contribution to the formation in our country of a more adequate culture of planning urban policies.