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*Angela Barbanente* Urbanistica: differences between languages, focuses and cultures

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**Problems, policies, and research**

Policies and plans for medium sized cities in South Italy

*Giovanni Soda* Urban policies in Cosenza

*Roberto Gerundo* Salerno: a daring approach to town planning

*Paolo La Greca* Programmes and policies of urban regeneration in Catania metropolitan area

*Antonio Pietro Latini* The plan of Catania between the fox and the hedgehog

*Enrico Fontanari, Daniele Rallo* Policies of conservation and revitalization of historic centres. The case of Ortigia (Siracusa)

*Carla Tedesco* Europeanisation and urban policy initiatives in the Italian Mezzogiorno

---

**Projects and implementation**

*Augusto Cagnardi* A fascinating adventure

*Augusto Cagnardi* The new "italian city" for 80,000 inhabitants at Pujiang

---

*Huang Xiang Ming* One City, Nine Towns. Search for ideal suburbia in China

---

**Profiles and practices**

*Ilene Steingut* Ground Zero: construction, reconstruction, participation

---

*Teresa Cannarozzo* Sicily: the interpretation of the territory in the Bourbon land registry of the first half of the XIX century

---

**Methods and tools**

*Stefano Stanghellini* Equalization in the new master plan for Catania

---

*Andrea Di Giovanni* Reviews

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Received books

## The plan of Catania between the fox and the hedgehog

Antonio Pietro Latini

When two texts, two statements, two ideas are set one against the other, to enjoy reconciling them instead of denying one by the other; to recognize two aspects, two subsequent stages of the same event in them, in fact, a convincing reality because complex, human because multiple. (Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoires of Adrian*)

### The hedgehog and the fox

At the beginning of his most famous essay on XIX century Russian literature (1) Isaiah Berlin recalls a fragment by Archilochus which says: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows a big one". Regardless what this statement would actually mean, originally, it lends itself (Berlin maintains) "to indicate one of the deepest differences which divide writers, thinkers and, even human beings in general" (2). Fox and hedgehog represent two opposite mental attitudes, two different ways to relate with reality and to tackle issues: "those, on the one hand, who refer everything to a central vision, to a more or less coherent or articulated system, with rules which lead them to understand, to think and to feel - an inspiring principle, unique and universal the only one able to give meaning to all they are and say -, and those, on the other hand, who pursue many aims, often disjointed and contradictory, perhaps linked only generically, de facto, for some psychological or physiological reason, not unified by a moral or aesthetical principle. People belonging to this second category lead existences, accomplish actions and cultivate ideas which are centrifugal rather than centripetal, and their

thinking is dispersed or diffuse because it moves on different layers, picks the essence of a vast variety of experiences and of issues for what they are per se, without trying, consciously or unconsciously, to insert them in (or to exclude them from) a unitary, immutable, all-including, sometime contradictory and incomplete, sometimes fanatic, vision".

An attempt to apply these two interpretive categories to the contemporary situation of policies and instruments in urbanistics seems useful both to read the present disciplinary condition and, in the specific, to interpret the most recent vicissitudes and of possible development of the new Master Plan of Catania, which has been in production for long and which completion is hoped soon.

So, lately, I got the impression that large part of the plans which have been proposed to the attention of the disciplinary debate, during the last period, I think mostly of general master plans, can some way be referred to the ideal type of the hedgehog. This happens not just because, as it is obvious, plans, by their own nature, are tools which search the sinergic coherence of actions by which the environment gets transformed and, therefore, they cannot but be means to reduce to unity a multiple and controversial reality (actually I believe that, in this moment of uncertainty, this character should be fixed). Rather, because in the default of the present professional practice, often supported by a parallel scientific production, it seems to me that the method of reconducting choices to a strong generating idea, able at the same time to simplify processes and to facilitate legibility and legitimacy of the plan itself, reaches a

progressively stronger emphasis. Moreover, we cannot conceal that choosing an easily recognizable elaboration key helps, on one hand, the participation of the plan as a disciplinary product to the dynamics of the 'discourse' (either by electing areas of attention which are highlighted by the technical and political conjuncture or by concentrating efforts on a specific theme) and, on the other hand, by the immediacy of the connotated message and the visibility not only of the eponymous author but also for the area which is the object of the plan, in order to be a useful help to their marketing strategies.

Here they are then the plans of housing for all, of conservation of historical heritage, of variously interpreted sustainability, of morphological control of open spaces, of land preservation, of show architecture... All of them follow in different percentage disciplinary conjunctions and personal paths and beliefs of the authors. Really, these accentuations remain very often expedients for publicity rather than methodological programs; very often, however, they correspond to actual inclinations of the plan that are not justifiable on the base of the specificity of places, but are rather referable to some disciplinary zeitgeist, so that they emphasize some values and/or design criteria and, necessarily, disregard others.

In the best of the hypotheses, efforts which are spent in the direction of a rationalization of the disciplinary object, often end out in a radicalization of prevailing themes (and sometimes more or less meaningful disciplinary advancements) and a certain negligence in the implications of the multiple

character of issues and in the hard search on degrees and modalities of correlations among different thematic ambits involved. So, on one hand, play the diffuse and diffusely felt need to reduce actions to slogans and, on the other hand, the effects of the precarious equilibrium between the results of a tradition in planning which is inclined to distribute good-for-all prescriptions and the perspectives of politics which are attentive to soundings and tied to the consensus of unequal actors.

Therefore, some disciplinary ripenings (and even before commonsense ones), while becoming Maximalist options, risk, in their action of simplification, to disperse a great patrimony of our cities, their multiplicity, and to humiliate the complex reality of different attitudes regarding dwelling, the expectations, the compatible desires of citizens.

### Managing complexity and the use of 'fundamentals'

I believe it is not an oversimplification to say that, in the phase of the resumption of the design activities, at the end of 1999, the plan of Catania tried to recover on the side of multiplicity: in the field, to say so, of the fox. It was unavoidable that this effort is confronting a task of a foreseeable limited success: recognizing the different connotations of a complexity embodied both in its directly urban aspects and in the implications that they activate on realms such as dwelling and social, production and employment, estate and welfare. More than in other cities, in Catania different and heterogeneous circumstances overlay, such as the exceptional dimensions of the historic center, the unusual presence of concentrated

opportunities of urban valorization like the ones of the so called 'resource-areas' (urban undeveloped areas of sometimes large dimension which have remained unused for one reason or another by the dynamics of the transformation of the city), the industrial and employment dynamics which are typical of a metropolis of the South of Italy and the underutilized potentials, the characteristics of a real estate market with a supply that is limited in quantity, quality, and type, the high quality of the natural environment, the deficit in infrastructures, the poverty of the public green areas, the denied relationship with the sea, the seismic threat, the topographic accidents which were generated more than three hundred years ago and that still now condition development...

Managing complexity is an ambitious project, and bound to incompleteness. It makes scientific advancements improbable and, most of all, does not 'pay' in terms of recognizability. In the realm of 'discourse' relationships it takes a passive role: a reconnaissance one. Nevertheless, in the founding of its more recent phase, the new master plan of Catania has followed the path of an obscure pragmatism, being convinced that a project that takes place in an anthropocentric perspective (not in a perspective that is prejudicially ancillary with regard to the disciplinary dynamics towards neither nature nor history, nor technology, nor economics...) could redeem chaos in the sign of multiplicity and inclusion. The plan prefers the imperfection of pluralism rather than the geometric exactitude of the thematic cut: it searches synergies in

a convergence of concurring guide ideas and equilibrium among goals which are tied by regressive relations such as, for example, those, which are recurring in the present metropolitan (not just Catania's) situation, on one hand, of a substantial preservation of the historic fabric, on the other hand, of an aware and thrifty management of land resources, and, on the other hand yet, of the amelioration of the real estate supply and of a control of the inflationary dynamics related to the limitations which are induced by urban policies. In spite of the awareness of the heterogeneous whole of implications, or, perhaps, because of it, in the construction of the choices of the plan, it has emphasized the attention on what exists: especially on the physical body of the city and of the region, on which, from numerous sides today, in this phase of the disciplinary pendulum on elected references, a more careful attitude is requested. It is in fact a particularly frequent inclination during the recent past, among those who deal with different roles and capacities with the production of the plan, to tend to leave on the land the sign of their own beliefs, ideologies, so that some projects of plan tend to become the composite reflex of the histories of those who participate to its production. It frequently happens, in other words, that a plan belongs to those who produce it rather than to the city that is designed. Yet a city, the way it is, has a lot to say: there is a lot to learn from what the various aspects of its structure and of its life propose to us. In these last years, in Catania we tried to put the accent on the fundamentals of the discipline, namely on the composition of its

physical structure, both as a reference and as a priority realm of control. This is not just because of an underevaluation of the implication of the concurring issues (sociological, economical, management, to quote some of them) or in order to resume a presumed disciplinary autonomy; rather because we are aware that an urban practice that heavily moves on adjoining ambits often leaves uncovered its own tasks, at the mercy of actors not just of limited talent but often of dubious competence. The revision of the plan starts from rereading the fundamentals. A lot can be realized by the configuration of the built parts. One can read the different parts of the city and the related fortunes, the central triangle and, within it, the varied fabric of the oldest center, the frayed areas north of the belt boulevard and those south of the line that runs from the urbanized area under Monte Po to the southern border of San Cristoforo until the sea: Librino and the industrial areas towards the Piana. And within the central triangle one can guess an eastern part, more structured and compact, and the other, to the west, incomplete and indefinite (3). An even expeditious evaluation of the topographical situation gives an account of dynamics and modalities of anthropization of urban land: especially a survey of altimetry and cleavage unfolds the possible fields of action for the update of the urban structure. A lot can be gathered from the rich analytical apparatus, which have been produced in the meantime during the different phases of the construction of the precedent projects of the plan. Among these

materials, a typomorphological building atlas stands out for richness of information. This was produced by the municipal office of the plan, during the first phase of production, under the guidance of Pierluigi Cervellati, and constitutes an important deepening on urbanization modalities and on related dynamics and an essential support both to design produced so far and, hopefully, to the management of the plan itself. Besides being a reference for the direct intervention of transformation on a building unit base, this survey is a reference for an articulation of urban land in areas of prevailing conservation and areas of transformation and for the individuation of special local areas to be transformed by integrated interventions of rehabilitation. In the specific, the survey of building types leads to determine the outline of limitation to building activity, which is spelled out in the Norme tecniche di attuazione (building codes), presently under definition, together with the morphological zoning of fabrics but also with the distribution of urban weights and congestions levels. In this scene of composition of natural and artificial realities, the theme of the modalities of use of the city, shows, in fact a panorama of unbalances which is so worrying as frequent in the metropolitan areas of our Country. In Catania also in certain areas coincide high intensities of use, high densities, solid presence of central functions, low level of transformability, inadequate and hardly developable street network, and fragility of the historic building heritage and preservation opportunities; in other areas one can find low functional and formal characterization, limited

infrastructure, discontinuity and abandonment, marginality.

### Some priority goals of the Plan

From the observation of the existing situation the design principles and some priority goals of the new Master plan the way it appears in this phase derive.

First of all, the richness of the historical heritage of buildings and spaces requires that the attention is driven to individuate a large area to subject to actions of conservation and advancement. This is an area that can be defined *vis-à-vis* a survey of the distribution of buildings, complexes, and urban spaces of historical value and distinguishable inside for the nature of its physical support and vocation. Also the fabric of ancient layout, even when the buildings have been substantially reworked, and the areas with a significant natural and landscape environmental value are included in this category. A modulation of strategies of intervention and a varied selection of techniques, of elements, and of characters to be subjected to preservation correspond to the enlargement of the object of conservation related to the different fields of age, type, and value (4). In the awareness that only an effective strategy of regional equilibrium allows for an adequate policy of conservation of the historic city (this is a concept that, actually, seems to have suffered for a period of worrisome eclipse, lately), the plan supports actions of transferring of urban weights and central functions outside the areas of older creation and of rehabilitation of the outskirts. Historical and more recent dynamics in the development of the city have determined a strong deficit of green open

spaces, which are inadequate in qualitative and quantitative terms. Compared to the need of nearly 700 ha of urban and neighborhood green open spaces, calculated after the parameters of the DI (State Interdepartmental Decree) 2 April 1968, no. 1444 (standards of public services), only 50 ha are available today. It is the ambition of the plan to obtain a substantial reduction of this deficit, by recruiting available areas through negotiation procedures and development of green areas to produce by looking for a synergy between private interests and public benefit. In this sense, the plan confirms the destination of green space for most of the green areas set aside by the Piano Piccinato (5) vows to the same end large part of the urban undeveloped areas (with the exception of those which are utilized in the processes of negotiation aimed to acquire the areas themselves for free) and indicates new areas to be destined to the same use in the peripheral rural areas (also these to be acquired through negotiation at no expenses for the municipality). The production of this consistent endowment of public green mostly, but not exclusively, favors the most deprived urban areas and constitutes a connective among marginal land, while favoring a recentralization of them (like in the emblematic case of the designed production of a Central Park in the unbuilt wedge west of the rehabilitation area around the Palermo Street). In almost all cases, the complementary composition of green areas and built areas for compensation tends to reinforce the synergy by being the green a quality view for the buildings (and therefore factor of value increment)

and the latter qualifying border (*horismòs*) of the collective space. The layout of green spaces which derives from it is completed by the prevision of some areas with a rural character, with a substantial presence of private green, with a residential or production use, low density and low coverage ratio. Even though it is limited to some fringe areas, this choice should contribute, on one hand, to respond to a considerable demand of the market for this type of residential, a demand that has found so far a supply in the ring municipalities, and, on the other hand, it should be a presidium and an instrument of control in areas otherwise destined to illegality. Similar goals add to a substantial enlargement of the endowment of public green an improvement of the street network. This is foreseen especially, but not only, for the less favored areas at west. A comparison with the topography is a useful reference to understand how the foreseen works would implicate the production of bold structures, the impact of which could be optimized by keeping a special attention to the relation with the surrounding townscape. Therefore, this is an ambitious program and yet essential for an effective policy of rehabilitation and reequilibrium. The importance of completing the street network, especially in the western part of the city, is related not only to its contribution to a better linkage among different parts of the city and to the consequent recentralization of marginalized areas but also to a development of areas that are formally destructured by the introduction of recognizable elements of reference as urban, mostly tree-lined, boulevards. These new

interventions in the urban center are part of the larger street system at the level of the entire municipality with the construction of a more balanced street system, in the middle of which a triangular nucleus is inserted, surrounded by the system of the boulevards along the shore and by the belt boulevards to the north and to the west (to be made in the form of parkway) with the function of distribution collectors. The mobility system entrusts the search for a better efficacy to three rail networks to be built anew or to be improved: first of all the updating of the train railroad which would allow, among other goals, the solution of the old problem of the restoration of the relation between the city and the sea. In this sense, the plan embraces the ambitious but realistic and feasible project to put the rail lines along the shore completely underground, to build a large park along the shore, to transform the train line in metropolitan service also, and the complementary (and subordinated to it) use for commercial buildings of areas now occupied by rail tracks that can be dismissed, close to the main railway stations (Centrale, Acquicella, Europa). This project should, on one hand, provide resources to cover part of the construction costs for infrastructures and, on the other hand, a further element to rationalize commuting in the metropolitan area. Also, the enhancement of the so called 'circumetnea metro line' and the construction of a few trolley lines are planned. A key element in the strategy of the new plan is the development of the large undeveloped areas within urban area. Large parts of them have been indicated by the *Act of the Municipal Council 58/98* as

areas that require a previous urban design. In this Act it was stated that the new plan should follow the innovative path of the standardizing of charges for the landowners involved in the development, in one of the most advanced evolutions (6). This strategy has shown to be essential for both the implementation of policies to gratuitously acquire areas for public services and for an adequate formal control of transformation. For many special local areas to be developed in a coordinated way, namely those that have a specific strategic value or that can be developed in a short period of time, local area design have been produced, in form of guidelines to support the implementation design to be produced by the public but open to private suggestions for enhancement and to be studied in depth in a following phase. These tend to recurring goals after common logical modalities, in the spirit that has been indicated by the Council. Generally, complexes privately produced and managed are foreseen, which generate profits, and, for the majority, rehabilitation works, infrastructures and services for public use at local or urban level. Also the development of the large undeveloped areas follows the logic of the regeneration of poor areas and of the construction or enhancement of new urban centralities, which serve as reference for the local social components. Therefore, the plan assigns in principle a structural role to the quality of urban composition and bets on the added value that can be generated through a finalized management of the urban environment in its formal and functional aspects.

### Pluralism and coherence

Those who saw the movie *Il portaborse* would probably remember the great ability of the main character (Moretti) to gather the effective suggestions of his assistant (Orlando) and to use them to opposite ends, twisting their meaning. An urbanist should, somehow, consider that sense skidding of some key concept, distilled through significant research efforts and vowed to become common knowledge, could affect urban practice. I do not believe that those who support a flexible, multiple, pluralist plan have in their mind a *laissez-faire* policy. However, to that end, a specific effort is required. A sensible consensus seems to grow on some fundamental criteria of planning practice. Among the goals that an urban plan should carry the most important one should be the one of going towards the needs, the expectations of people or, to say it with Louis I. Kahn, their desires. If it is true that people desires are different, as many as the individuals who nourish them, a plan should try to welcome an enough large number of them and to maximize their compatibility and their possible synergies, with the perspective to favor the construction of a city as plural as possible. In this sense, a plan with a high level of flexibility should allow, with time, besides conjuncture strategic needs, the reception of different individual instances. For at least forty years, our discipline has struggled toward the overcoming of the rigid plan and the dilution of planning choices. During these very days (August 2003) a few articles appeared for the commemoration of the death of Cedric Price. The memory of the *Non-plan* (1969) (7), which tried to indicate a few rules only for

the transformation of the city, is intertwined to the memory of the structure plan which was suggested by the PAG Report in 1965 and evokes the debate in our Country, during these most recent years. From this, the stimulus derives to meditate about the most suitable limits of flexibility, i.e. about the difficult balance between pluralism and coherence: an issue that can be only mentioned here but on which, I believe, the next future of the plan of Catania is played.

On this issue, a brief digression may help. It seems that the first philosopher who used the term pluralism in a modern sense, as "that way of thinking according to which one does not embrace in his own I the whole world, but one considers himself and behaves just as citizens of the world" was a not very famous German scholar: Christian Wolff. He is the author, since the beginning of the XVIII C., of *Rational Thoughts* (8). The history of philosophy attributes to Wolff the merit to "have considered the need of a rational method": the genesis of the so-called method of the foundation (*Grund*, equivalent of the Latin *ratio*) which certainly has had an important role in the production by Kant and to which Abbagnano attributes a value of a topical subject as the "method from which philosophy may still expect a defense from arbitrariness". It is impossible in this circumstance to go in depth on this coincidence. By now, it is enough to meditate on the fact that the apparent opposition between pluralism and rational method has no ground. Actually, there is no real guarantee of pluralism without a technically solid and aware 'affirmative action' in this direction. The plan of Catania, but I

believe it is not a specificity of this plan, should be ready to exercise on flexibility, to keep on welcoming updates from down up, to face the rationale of the individual actions, of various works, of the ongoing variations: in other words, to accept the modalities of a process in progress, both in the last phases of completion and in the subsequent phases, during which choices and governance actions are precised. Likewise, I believe that it should confirm itself as an instrument of guarantee of technical correctness and of that coherence that is "rather more than a simple compatibility among the elements of a system: it carries, in fact, not only the absence of contradiction, but also the presence of positive connections which establish harmony among the elements of the system" (9). This should be even if it shows itself, though unwillingly, as a hedgehogplan, because a plan without technical correctness, without coherence, is a mere, careless, administrative accomplishment: it is the denial of the plan.

### Notes

1. See I. Berlin, *Il riccio e la volpe e altri saggi*, Adelphi, Milano, (1948) 1998.
2. These two rhetorical characters, which are borrowed by the essay by Berlin, have already been used by disciplinary research. See C. Rowe, F. Koetter, *Collage City*, Il Saggiatore, Milano, (1973) 1981, p. 143 e ss. e C. Rowe, "Ideas, Talent, Poetics: A Problem of Manifesto" (1987), printed in a reduced version in *Lotus International* n. 62, 1989.
3. This partition evokes, even though with different geometries the division of buildable areas after the decision of the municipal

Senate, after the earthquake of 1693.

4. Both for the definition of the sub-areas and for the indication of the criteria for direct intervention, during the elaboration of the plan, it seemed to be useful to apply practices of synergy and coplanning with the institutions in charge of conservation. The implementation of this collaboration was not feasible, however, in spite of the willingness of the parts which should be involved for a few, unavoidable, administrative stickiness.

5. It is the plan which was produced during the 1960s and that is still in force.

6. See the essay by S. Stanghellini, *infra*.

7. See S. Boeri, "Una voliera di idee", *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 24 August 2003, p. 24.

8. See N. Abbagnano, *Dizionario di filosofia*, Tea-Utet, Torino, 2001, "pluralismo" e L. Boni (a cura di), voce "Wolff, Christian", in *Enciclopedia Garzanti di filosofia*, Milano.

9. See N. Abbagnano, *Dizionario di filosofia*, Tea-Utet, Torino, 2001, "coerenza".