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Programmes and policies of urban regeneration in Catania's metropolitan area

Paolo La Greca

Analysing the events of Catania's metropolitan context is particularly useful in closely examining matters regarding the urban policies and the new forms of territorial planning that have marked the last decade. All the main new generation programmes have been tested here: urban retraining programmes, the Pits, the Prusst, district contracts, territorial agreements, integrated programmes, the Eurexcter (1) project, and, in particular, the two following editions of the programmes of community interest (PIC) Urban that have interested a considerable part of Catania's city centre (*Urban I*) and one of the most problematic areas of the metropolitan context corresponding to the large urban dispersion zone of Misterbianco's commune, which borders on the city of Catania (*Urban II*). These last programmes are two of the most significant experiences of urban regeneration programmes and represent interesting practices to be examined in contributing to an outline of the framework of new potential acting spaces and the search for new forms of territorial planning. A profound reflection is needed in order to better understand the acting processes and an awareness that new events do not always represent concrete innovation. The paper presents these two practices, the Urban programmes based on the European planning principles, that were started at a time of profound administrative and political revival of the two cities, where the respective mayors, elected during the

first phase of the local power reformation, enthusiastically took part in the enterprises. A time when, as underlined by the city planning councillor of Bianco's local government, "inside the culture of the city of Catania it is more important to establish the quality of processes than the consequences of general results" (2), and that nowadays seems to have gradually lost that propulsive push while the quality of administrative action seems to have dissolved, weakened by the re-emerging of old practices that denaturalise its more innovative contents. Another interesting point is the analysis of a new slowly evolving phenomenon which is based on a particularly frail context as regards both the results of traditional physical planning and, aboveall, the incapacity of the local government to promote and manage territorial transformation processes which are apt for the role that the city and the metropolitan area have assumed from the 60s onwards. All this is in the face of urban policies which are completely unrelated to a continuous and shared direction of the city and even less unrelated to a true set of relationships with other public policies. Finally, understanding these practices is particularly meaningful as Misterbianco belongs to one of the seven European financed networks, from among 80 candidates, of the new European programme Urbact, with the commune of Siracusa in first place, that aims at increasing transnational experiences among actors, cities and local partners that have taken part in the previous editions of the programme. A high-profile enterprise, coordinated by the French Ministry of Cities and Urban Renovation, that, through the creation of thematic

networks extended to cities of the candidate countries and to nearby and coastal countries, aims at stimulating feedback on European urban policies from local field experiences in the much desired for prospect of urban policy integration within Europe).

Institutional redundancy and inadequacy in territorial government

The area's urban system, centred on the eponymous city, consists of a thick network of towns that constituted the network of the agricultural territory at the foot of Etna, which was subsequently overwhelmed by the building expansion of the last thirty years. The present configuration of the settlements looks dense and congested, most of all along the strip immediately north of Catania, and removes the traces of Etna's residual landscape and enucleates the old towns with the loss of identity of the local communities. The administrative centre keeps its central role as a place of work, commercial pole and supplier of rare services such as university, government, loisir, that create a high request for transport and accessibility. To the complexity of this installed system must be added a condition of territorial government, fundamental to the development of the programmes, characterized by three groups of interrelated problems. In the first place, the urbanistic events of the Municipal Government are marked by the heavy inheritance of a lacking physical planning characterized by large fragmentation of various instruments such as RE, PdF and rudimentary PRG usually drawn up without qualified professional competence which are completely inadequate in

managing the dynamic processes induced by the large urbanization resulting from the migration wave from the late to develop Sicilian territories, from the 60s onwards.

We have seen the consecutive expansion of bordering communes growing closer to its neighbour, with no preventive planning, basing the new settlements on the fixed infrastructural networks inherited from the agricultural system and absolutely unsuitable to deal with the new urbanistic loads.

The city of Catania, in particular, has gone through the urbanistic phase of the 40s of the last century and postwar rebuilding guided by an oversimplified zoning that confirmed the guidelines of the slum clearance and Enlargement Plan of 1888, carried out through heavy infringements in order to comply with the landowners' expectations. The new republican local governments confirm an increase of the edifying expectations, bringing the building ratings to exorbitant values up to 18,15 m³/m². The plan drafted by Piccinato in 1964 was approved in 1969 with substantial changes, so much so that the planner didn't sign it. After almost 40 years, the city still does not have a new urban plan, in spite of a building process that has been going on uninterruptedly for more than 10 years. In the second place, urban culture, both in its conceptual apparatus and in the instrument's operative praxis, seems to be unrelated to the political and administrative life of the city and of the metropolitan communes. The construction of an urban plan has never been considered as a shared process nor as an opportunity to establish consensus for a larger

political goal which is closely related to territorial planning and to public policy building.

Finally, the peculiar configuration of Catania's metropolitan area has produced the lack of a 'pertinent territory' to which to relate urban planning. The communal borders of urban planning, nowadays, cannot be taken from the relationships among the bordering urban webs. Besides, the provincial reference is too large and extraneous for government legitimation and the metropolitan circuit and the action to be undertaken is based on a law which is obsolete in terms of method and contents.

This is the context in which the new programmes have started and that have, at first, given new roles to unusual actors in the decision processes regarding urban and local choices. Due to changes in national legislative norms, a substantial transformation in the public administration's action had, at first, seemed the condition for the undertaking of successful enterprises. Until then, this action had been characterized by the absolute incapability as regards both the method, bureaucratic action, and people, public officials, who had to meet the demands of an ever increasingly complex society. Nowadays, we have, first of all, to regulate interaction between the public subject at any level of government and the private subject which has become an increasingly important mover of the development process according to a model of urban governance considered as co-operation among government, the market and civil society in the direction of urban processes.

Urban I in Catania: territorial and programing aims

The three main districts that need intervention, coinciding with a considerable portion of the city centre, are characterized by the absolute lack of space and social services but also present considerable elements of morphological, functional and social fragmentation, since they have remained extraneous to any requalifying intervention and have even risked total removal, in conformity with the urban forecasts of the 60s.

These districts are in a state of increasing deterioration, more and more largely populated by non-EEC immigrants occupying crumbling and illegal buildings, in deteriorated situations where the streets and some rare widening are the only public spaces existing.

On the other hand, there is a considerable presence of productive handicraft enterprises which are deeply integrated with the residential function and a strong social identity, in contrast to what happens in the new residential districts, aboveall those of public housing.

The programme's general aims are requalification and economic relaunching of a considerable portion of the city centre through integrated intervention guidelines to be obtained through applying specific measures:

- promotion and development of employment by increasing the handicraft enterprises (a measure that has demanded 23% of the total budget);
- junior school abandonment recovery by preventing conditions of deviancy and juvenile uneasiness (14%);
- increasing of open public equipped spaces, expansion of public places

and development and improvement of urban mobility (almost 60%).

The Urban plan has been promoted by the communal government that has played an exclusive part, transferring, however, the planning to an external structure that is not, however, very aware of how a public administration works. The subsequent direction of the programme has been assigned to a internal structure of the administration: the Urban Office, passing from the economic development councillorship to the city-planning councillorship. As regards both the carrying out and the directing of planned measures, an important role has been played by the University, the real privileged partner of the enterprise.

Trade associations, particularly artisans, have been hardly involved in planning and completely absent in the executive phase. The most important territorial authorities have had an institutional involvement. A different approach, which has been lacking in these kinds of institutions, would have allowed for a dealing of the plans in a more constructive way by pointing out any possible problems beforehand.

Urban II's context and aims in Misterbianco

Misterbianco's programme target area belongs to that part of the metropolitan area where there is more widespread territorial dispersion or diffusion. The system of urban settlement has had a very recent beginning and was started by a set of concomitant factors in the 1960s and continued uninterrupted during the 70s. There are many important elements: the large migration of labour force expelled from the country; the approval of the Piccinato plan, that,

restricting the building areas and considerably lowering the building rates in the administrative centre, reduced spaces for building speculators; the concomitant inadequacy of the local building programme which was unable to manage the development of a reality with profoudly modified urban characteristics. In this context, a mainly unlawful urban settlement heavily lacking in system connections with consolidated urban centres and, more generally, a system of mobility was developed. The installation structure points out some of Catania's metropolitan system more relevant characteristics, such as: the building location along old intercity thorough-fares, the irregularity of road network and a dispersed territorial structure.

The set of planned interventions aims to achieve material and non-material re-sults, the effectiveness of which will be estimable in a medium-long period to recover the relationships among suburban areas and the city centre; to re-organize the suburban districts' social fabric and, more generally speaking, a general improvement of the quality of life. The programme promotes equal opportunities most of all in reference to work and training in order to allow women to better administrate their personal activities through developing services which allow the reconsiliation of the pace of living and working hours. The Urban II enterprise is starting because the Administration aims to take part in the announcement of the Ministry of Public Works. The positive intervention of Misterbianco's mayor, a brave reformist administrator, the protagonist of the social

revival of one of Catania's Municipal Administration guiding communes, has been determinant in involving, in addition to the writer, the other two external advisers, that have been nominated to start the initiative. In fact, externalising the assembling phase seemed the only way to warrant the needed quickness and determination in planning the program.

The institutional involvement has been carried out both with the Province through verifying the actions organisation and with the Prefecture in drafting a legal protocol which views the problem of urban safety as one of the most relevant matters. We have tried to involve third sector associations that operate inside the area, from the district parish priests to the training boards. The traders associations that operate in the commercial area of regional importance, which is the commune's main activity, have shown considerable interest in the plan.

As regards urban choices, the programme is based upon intentionally simple suppositions that define an integrated system of actions at a local level. Through an articulated system of strategic interventions, the task of starting up change in urban settlement, devising new strategies for widespread retraining in various contexts in a suitable directional model aimed at bringing about the interventions necessary to change this degraded suburb into a city, is being dealt with.

Fragmented parts are reconnected by expanding and requalifying a provincial road that divides the various parts of the settlement area and supports and connects the new centralised system. These have been individualised and localized in areas that the PRG has

destined to services and equipment, in order to constitute a system that could support activities and functions that can make the transition from the suburbs to the city start through rebalancing the prevailing centrifugal traffic flows in a set of strong functions. The choice to continue the action started by the Administration, to moderate interstitial open spaces in order to improve suburban conditions, is carried out through redevising interventions that aim at solving recurring problems like the creation of equipped open spaces, the qualitative new defining of the road axes such as paving, lighting and decoration, searching original action that brings together public and private interests. These interventions that reconnect and redefine fringe areas, together with the new centralities, by introducing new values and qualities in widespread settlement, contribute towards consolidating an amorphous social fabric.

Social promotion is actualised through the creation of district structures that will constitute, together with the City Laboratory, the axis around which will rotate the city's cultural and social initiatives and specific public open spaces will rotate. The programme promotes local development policies, creating a technical structure, the Urban Development Agency, for territorial management, in order to set up instruments for correct research, analysis and planning. The innovative nature of the programme's strategy, considering territorial development as systemic integration, is that of urban governance that is the capability to start a shared meaning frame, that can involve the main characters of the process of construction of strategic public policy in order to

reach conditions of integrated development and supportable life styles.

Learning from practices

The programmes here presented have in common an 'outlook' that catalyses the interventions' basic actions. Catania's City Centre re-qualifying project consists of a set of qualifying functional insertions, as in the case of university instunents, whereas by realizing the new central urban system in Misterbianco, the dispersed tissues will be consolidated. However, a first evaluation of the experiences, almost concluded in Catania and just beginning in Misterbianco, allows us to notice that this substantial 'territorial view' is not sufficient in making the proposed policies more effective. For instance, the actions of the 'infrastructures and environment' measure of Catania's programme, and in particular the insertion of university functions in contexts characterized by large pockets of deterioration and strong intensities of directional use, beyond the apparently agreeable contents of the intervention, have elements that have contributed to the general weakening of the action. Having introduced the Faculty of Law lecture halls into the Purity complex, by twisting the interpretation of the PRG in force, revealed itself to be a 'weak point' that has provoked a strong reaction from the district residents who have interpreted the project as another step towards the 'gentrification' process which already characterizes some city centre areas.

This episode is a significant sign that the planned approaches have not solved some of the main problems in assembling such complex programmes. In other words, they are solutions

that do not question the 'control variables' of the processes, but just start mechanisms, effective sometimes attaining brief-period aims, but that do not substantially effect the problem setting phase, remarkably reducing the real capacity to start organizing learning processes.

Therefore, first of all, it seems indispensable that these innovative practices become part of public administration's officials taking on responsibility for their actions.

It is a matter of creating, inside the administrations, a kind of 'project nucleus' to which has to be delegated enough operating authority. It must be provided with an articulated set of process skills, but at the same time, be open enough to external supplies. The 'tactical' attitude that simply creates structures to put into action under contingencies, such as preparing financing requests that will be forgotten at the end of the process, or under the push of political contingencies as has happened in the examined contexts with a wrong interpretation of 'spoiling system', is absolutely inadequate. Moreover, the two practices confirmed the PRG's limits in its more traditional forms that Sicilian laws keep unchanged.

Finally, the absolute need of a territorial government aware of the metropolitan dimension that could accept the challenge of defining a comprehensive strategy that could reconcile the reasons of "legitimacy and those of efficacy in an overall picture of coherent and shared development prospects" emerged from these experiences. It is necessary to establish a strategy for the city and its metropolitan area starting from a 'development forum' where the main actors could take on and share together with

the administration, according to a partner logic, precise responsibilities. This is precisely one of the priorities proposed by Urbact that we referred to at the beginning. In fact, the programme has privileged a working method that aims at reaching better social cohesion of the urban regeneration areas through an integrated approach and a partnership structured together with residents, the private sector and general interest services. The strong point of the programme headed by Siracusa, whose financing contract was signed during the European Cities Forum in Milan, has been recognized in the aim of making the level of local sustainable development measurable, development that can be reached according to the established integration level.

Notes

1. It's a programme that has favoured a network of activities to get the 'territorial excellence' to be pursued through actions of support of the local development to be carried out through partner processes based on social dialogue and participation. The enterprise has involved several European regional areas of five countries: France, Spain, Ireland, Germany and Italy, where it has been promoted and coordinated by Sandra Bonfiglioli.
2. See the interview with A. Scuderi in *d'A/MAD'E*, n. 22, January 2000.

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