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A daring approach to town planning

Roberto Gerundo

Over the past ten years, politicians in Salerno have governed the town and, most importantly, managed the territory, in a way markedly opposed to traditional ways of administrating town planning in Italy and in the Mezzogiorno in particular. This approach has been well received both from the general cultural point of view and by public opinion, as well as producing excellent electoral consensus, especially for the politician (1) who was daring enough to adopt the approach and whose unconventional and winning national image has been built on it. The politician in question had the unusual ability to put under stress the sluggish bureaucracy of the municipality and challenge the totem of redtape poor quality, replacing it with the new practice of supporting the hierarchic relationship between the agencies proposed for governing the area. It is true to say that the new image of the mayor and, for other reasons, that of the President of the Province, has been the true innovation during the last ten years of town-planning administration in Italy. This trend began in 1993 with the reform of the electoral procedures of local authorities; it has seen more bright moments and dark ones and it is hoped that some of its weaknesses can be improved rather than worsened, as emerges from the proposals of certain Government representatives presently in power, for example, that of getting rid of shiftwork. Solutions of this kind tend to encourage further fragmentation of the political framework instead of the consolidation of common interests, and such

consolidation is the only thing that can sustain the processes of governing the territory in any substantial way (2).

The new town government setups, attempting to get rid of any remaining defects by legislating for improvements, have undeniably brought about a social and cultural rebirth of municipalities with consequent revitalization of their territories. The reformed institutional scenario has clearly set the stage for administrative dynamism, resulting in the programming and realisation of a multitude of public works, regulated by the provisions approved in 1994 and devised to ensure the feasibility of interventions that have had the indisputable merit of launching the upgrading of the town fabric.

New mayors, old plans

Salerno, like most Italian towns, had shown little activity for at least twenty years, especially in terms of such extensive and widespread upgrading and rehabilitation. The reconstruction of roads and squares, facilities, green areas and car-parks, services for all, has transformed existing residential areas which were in an advanced state of physical and functional deterioration. The 50s and 60s in this country were the era of post-war reconstruction, the modernisation of infrastructures and urban expansion in large residential areas. The following 70s and 80s had fallen back into the increasing stagnation of urban structures degraded by galloping unauthorized building, by the reluctant construction of the odd underground railway and aimless attempts to work to uninspiring procedures invented for the reconstruction of areas

damaged by natural disasters or to run ambitious cultural, traditional or sports events.

The Salerno issue is, on the whole, typical of this state of affairs. Campania's second most important town also experienced twenty years during which the endemic instability of local government, the possibility of using up public funds for taking on staff and the spread of unacceptable political corruption which led to the outbreak of *Tangentopoli* in the 90s, had the increasing effect of paralysing any organic intervention to revitalise the town.

The first direct elections of mayors helped to alleviate this feeble climate of stagnation; new and positive energies were unleashed, making room for professional and competent action, accelerating the dynamics of cultural growth and social and economic development. Generally speaking, there were basically two kinds of mayor who established themselves following the electoral reform of 1993: exponents of the so-called upper-middle-class society (many) and experienced politicians who were not bowled over by *Tangentopoli* (few). Of the former, those who were incompetent were unable to survive the increasingly bitter confrontation with the realities of local politics, causing the breakup of town councils or rapidly becoming obsolete at the end of their term; others, the best of the group, became able politicians and began to take up other and more prestigious institutional appointments. Some of the latter, however, already had wide experience under previous governments, and managed to get through more than one term of office, leaving an indelible impression on the administration of the

territory. Unlike the exponents of upper-middle-class society (including those who might have done a good job), those mayors with the backing of powerful though out-of-power political parties generally distinguished themselves for their greater dynamism and effectiveness in matters of administration, strong in their knowledge of the mechanisms of consensus-building and experienced in the art of mediation. Salerno had the good fortune, which has proved favourable in many ways, to have a mayor of the second of the two categories, and his energies were mainly directed towards the realisation of public works and the offering of services to citizens on the one hand, and on the other the identification of a model for the social, economic and cultural rebirth of the town. His policies, therefore, concentrated on the short, and ideally long-term objective, setting medium-term objectives aside, of controlling town planning and the structural reorganisation of the town which, though requiring tremendous effort, normally produce political results which are far from satisfying. Territorial planning, looked at in the new light of future urban structures which are synergically coordinated, are, however, the tool for pursuing the desired rebirth. In the absence of a programme, however, this would be deprived of credibility once the effect of such an announcement wore off, and the phase of raising expectations implicit in it. A real period of rebirth, if it is not simply to be reduced to a mass-media stamp, must be based on a medium to long-term period of certainties which is legitimised in a system of agreed actions and regulations of government

and governance, which only an overall town-planning scheme is able to offer, however innovative it may be in content and procedure. The formulation of such a system, made even more difficult by the awareness of having to operate in complex and intrinsically non-deterministic circles, was discouraging to politicians of proven experience, including the Mayor of Salerno, who was committed to it. Only a novice mayor of the town would have accepted the challenge without second thoughts, and then find himself trapped with no way out.

The key for interpreting the political/administrative issue of the last ten years, as described here, helps to explain, in terms of governing the territory, the work of many mayors belonging to the category of experienced politicians. The numerous kinds of behaviour of individuals are, of course, sometimes rather different from the profile which has been drawn, but this is the most easily recognisable.

The realisation of public works, apart from offering visibility and creating an image, which are indispensable for a new administrator directly elected by his fellow citizens, was seen by the experienced politicians, including the Mayor of Salerno, as the only way of maintaining employment levels, which are falling especially in the Mezzogiorno because local administrations are unable to enter the labour market by appointing staff from their own ranks, as had happened on a large scale during previous decades. To achieve such objectives, mayors scraped the bottom of the barrel of the opportunities offered in order to obtain financial resources to be had from

the European Union, the State and the Regions for interventions programmed by sectorial laws, and furthermore they drew fully on external resources through the consolidated distributive mechanism of the Deposits and Loans Fund, now given the promising name of the Development Fund, so exposing municipalities to considerable debt.

The experienced political mayors knew full well that such operations would be advantageous in the medium term, with every probability of lasting for the two terms permitted as the longest possible period, while the increasing accumulation of loans and the passive interest attached to them would be clawed back by the consumers in time and in instalments, following the increase in taxation to support the allocation of socially useful services. It is only recently that the right, but tortuous, road has been taken: that of project financing, a road taken after the alarm caused by the growing and no longer sustainable debt borne by the municipalities.

In the field of town planning, Salerno, like most of Italy, has favoured complex town planning or recourse to micro-variants which might be approved quickly. This might have been possible by advance negotiation for the agreement of higher authorities prepared to approve urban acts, but these activities have often been ignored or underestimated by Salerno's municipal administration in the spirit of antagonism we have mentioned. The definitive formulation of a new general town-planning scheme for Salerno would, at best, have been postponed, even if it had been set in motion, and would not have constituted a reason for particular

interest or usefulness in the present management of the territory.

It is not unusual for the formulation of a new general scheme to be considered useful to municipalities simply in terms of raising expectations, whereas town-planning schemes capable of capturing the approval of interested groups could have emerged in the planning stage. At best, at the end of the second term, some mayors, including the Mayor of Naples, adopted the general town-planning scheme, to which they gave the symbolic value of a great turning-point rather than seeing it as an effective instrument of political action; they were careful, however, not to embark on the demanding procedure of making comments, which was full of pitfalls.

Even the specialist staff given the task of planning the urban transformations had to satisfy certain cultural requirements. It was the supporters of the urban project and the reorganisation of the town a little at a time, rather than the planners, who were selected; one of the outstanding planners in Salerno is Oriol Bohigas. The third-term town council, which was set up in 2001 barring postponements due to particular conditions of individual municipalities, and with a five-year mandate, did not have mayors elected twice consecutively, but a new manager of the territory already committed to the drafting and adoption of a new town-planning scheme of overall value, and which could no longer be put off.

What kind of town-planning scheme for Salerno?

After a decade, having gone through a considerable number of initiatives in terms of public works and

emergency programmes, the Municipality of Salerno is forced to deal with a new town-planning scheme to which it has tried to give the innovative nature that characterised the previous phases of management of the territory. To this end, what was needed was a specialist capable of deconstructing the canonical approach of town-planning normally used; capable, that is, because of his recognised importance and past experience. The person was identified and the first results were seen in November 1994 when the *Programming document*, to which the administration gave the designation *Preliminary plan*, was presented to the town council.

At a distance of ten years, the general town-planning scheme (abbreviated to Prg in Italian) has now materialised in its final form, and was presented to the town council, but not adopted, in April 2003. The time that has passed illustrates, at least as far as the Salerno issue is concerned, the complex relationship between the new image of the mayor and town-planning administration, which is described above. The conceptual formulation behind the long period of management of the new Prg was clear from the start. It is described in a book of 1993 (3) from which it is worth quoting some passages referring to the above-mentioned Preliminary document. "For some time, there has been a widespread tendency to practise town-planning on paper: year after year of cultural and institutional debates, year after year of town-planning and programming documents, all destined not to be put into practice. It must be clear that no town can wait forever (7-10 years) for the approval of a Prg" (4).

But the Municipality of Salerno itself has taken a decade to draw up a town-planning scheme, and it does not end there, of course, because the stages of adoption, publication and commentary still have to be gone through. This, in any case, is the period of time needed by the part played by the Municipality, while the commentary on the agelong process is a reference to the slowness caused by the red-tape that the local authority has to respect. In the case of Salerno, unfortunately, the time needed to make the choices necessary in considering a town-planning scheme is proving to be 'biblical' compared to the speed with which a myriad of micro-transformations and important urban-scale projects have been implemented. Even Naples, with all the problems deriving from its being the country's third most important town, has been capable of adopting the new Prg by the end of the mayor's second term, dating from the time of electoral reform. Rome, not having achieved this in the same period of time, at least adopted the scheme at the very beginning of the third stage of local government, after a change of mayor. Why, then, has Salerno not been capable of doing the same thing, given that work on the new Prg began in 1991-92, before the mayor's new term of office? The answer to this question is probably that they have decided not to go about it in the same way. "It is clear to Bohigas that today's instrument of urban planning and control is a bundle of projects rather than an overall plan, built on illusions and with no time-scale, made up simply of quantifications and regulations ... We need a town-planning strategy that

can be put into operation with well-chosen concrete points as starting-points which in themselves can bring about transformations from general consequences ... Experience tells us that by beginning from a piazza or from a small garden, from the re-utilisation of a disused building, the demolition of a group of old houses, the whole of the surrounding area changes without need of a new planning intervention. This is positive metastasis, that is the chain-reaction which transforms the surroundings. The distinction between plan and project is not simply one of dimension, nor of major or minor generality; the fundamental difference lies in the way it is managed and realised. A project implies programmed realisation in a set period of time. A project is a reality which, once it has been completed, ceases to exist. But many unrealised planning schemes have upset an area to no purpose because nothing else will ever be done about it. There are urban bonds which have existed for almost a hundred years, forever under threat, whose only effect has been to contribute to the deterioration of the zone by killing off all expectations. It is only that which can be realised in a reasonable period of time that can be devised. So the only thing that can be devised is what can in effect be planned. To be provocative, if it is impossible to plan it is better to leave everything to the lawlessness of the people, with all their ability to create anything and everything. In such cases, careful de-planning is necessary ... This is not to say that a town-planning scheme is totally unnecessary. We have to take on board the obligation to satisfy the needs of the future of the town; as long

as it remains clear that the town-planning scheme is not a suitable tool for formal control of the town, and that we cannot therefore pretend regulations which minimize their impact and maximize functional effectiveness. A land transformation project must produce around it forms of autonomous organisation of use and protection guided and controlled, however, by the overall town-planning scheme. If these forms of autonomous organisation do not exist, widescale planned and realised urban transformations end up in most cases by being upset by the cumulative processes they have themselves brought into being. However, the leading role of the programme, another invaluable tool for intervention, that it has begun to take on since the early 90s, must not be underestimated to take on all the rather complex objectives of town-planning. It is therefore true to say that the value of a town-planning scheme is essentially that it is the expression of a medium-term political and social programme" (5). The ideas quoted here reveal the reason for the non-existence of a well-defined Prg, even after a significantly long period of time has been given to its administrative profiling. Apart from anything else, these ideas clash with all the usual approaches to territory planning, including those which are most critical of the rational understanding of town-planning tools. The peremptory tone of their expression does tend to give them a rigidly ideal-ogical position unable to take on the necessary flexibility and relevance to zones that municipalities are required to govern, in much the same way as the styles and content of traditional

town planning, which is also inadequate.

From theory to proposal

The idea of a town-planning scheme as a programmed political agenda is coherent with the results arrived at by the Salerno Prg. The terms of the relationship between plan and project have been widely discussed in the past twenty years and the clash between them has led to a situation of basic parity between the two. The zone is modified by projects according to sets of regulations which minimize their impact and maximize functional effectiveness. A land transformation project must produce around it forms of autonomous organisation of use and protection guided and controlled, however, by the overall town-planning scheme.

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However, the leading role of the programme, another invaluable tool for intervention, that it has begun to take on since the early 90s, must not be underestimated since it mediates between plan and project.

Beyond the cultural considerations that have been put forward concerning the above-mentioned dualism, in reflecting on the merits of Salerno's new programme, there are three issues that call for immediate attention: normative efficiency, endogenous efficiency and exogenous efficiency. In order to avoid red-tape, a residual status is attributed to conformity with the regulations, which is neglected. The Prg proposal would, in fact, be rejected in

the light of urban legislation in Campania. What then should be the basis of the remaining efficiency controls, since it is clearly impossible to use the set of detailed provisions of the Prg? The first aspect is the choice given to see the organisation of space in the Municipality zone as two distinct macro-sets: the compact town and the expanding town. This approach is acceptable, though it is not entirely original and in some ways even obligatory. Over the past thirty years, the mixed effects of ineffectual action regarding government territory and recourse to repeated health and safety procedures governing unlicensed building have resulted in land covered with widespread built-up areas, mostly residential. The Prg proposes that, in the compact town, spaces should be filled, deteriorating or disused areas should be transformed, partially urbanised areas should be completed, the limits of urbanisation should be extended by using land which is for agricultural use. This strategy is also extended to some small historical areas in the municipality. The profile of such a consolidated town risks a return to the 60s idea of the expanding town. In the present case the expansion, running parallel to the coastline, does not work (again reminiscent of the 60s) only in terms of designated spaces now called ecological networks, but also on the basis of hard settlements. The town is in fact expanding to make room for parks or facilities where there is little building work, but also to provide new residential or industrial areas. And this is the effect of the other weighty component of the Prg, which aims at increasing the

town's inhabitants to 180,000 compared to its present population of 156,000. We shall say nothing here about the feasibility of such an assumption, as long as it can be deduced from an analysis of the present social and economic dynamics. It is enough to re-member that all the macro- and micro-zone parameters suggest that the Salerno area is in a phase of demographic recession, in the absence of any control over the arrival of non-EU communities. Given this fact, the United Nations has estimated a population of Italy for 2030 which is very close to that of 1955. If this scenario should be correct, what would happen to the buildings left over from the post-war period and those which the Prg intends to build? But in aiming at a population growth of 24,000, the Prg does not hide away behind the alchemy of statistics. The hypothesis has not been arrived at by interpretation of the dynamics but by prefiguration of future bonds. A town must have a ratio of town dwellers which cannot be allowed to fall below the demographic threshold of 180,000 inhabitants. There is no point in arguing against this assumption, given the numerous existing studies on the matter which, as is predictable because of the complexity of the issues they wish to solve, suggest quite a different outcome. As an example in point, it is enough to remember certain proposals which pointed to a minimum residential population of 200,000-250,000 (6). But whenever such issues have been raised, reference has been made to so-called simplified economic areas which are usually found in developing countries blessed with the continuity of existing inhabited areas, considerable available

space and negligible territorial fragility. In developed countries, such a strategy could be adopted only after the kind of lethal local economic recession that would lead to an advanced stage of depopulation in a city, a situation which was in one way or another experienced in the post-war period after the industrial city crisis, though these were rarely mono-functional and not administrative, cultural or in any other sense capitals. The Salerno area, including the capital of the Province and the municipalities immediately surrounding it, which account for about forty of the total, is suffering from widespread hydrogeological instability, there is no free sloping land; there is a high level of physical proximity, there being no continuity between urban fabrics; there is a wide spread of inhabited areas; its economy and production are not in depression, in fact it shows a certain vivacity, for example, the port of Salerno, the university site of Fisciano-Baronissi, the ASI conglomerations, the summer tourist activity, etc. Over the last thirty years, the municipalities of the Salerno area have spread out as a result of the population explosion due, in times of demographic growth, to overflow of the provincial capital, causing damage to surrounding areas which, to the advantage of certain groups of property owners, speculation has in its turn damaged the land which, until then, was the main balance of the municipality's territory. In the following decades, the municipalities made great efforts to upgrade those areas which had been invaded by house-building, areas where services did not exist. Is it possible to imagine a Prg capable of bringing about a turnaround

of this complete and consolidated process? Should that part of the population that migrated out return to the municipality of Salerno? If not, how would the extra 24,000 be made up? By people immigrating from other parts of Italy, attracted by new possibilities of employment created by the Prg? But if this should come about, would the crowds of unemployed locals or the unemployed in the Salerno area see any benefit without producing great mobility, if the conditions of commuting from home to work were bearable? Perhaps the new inhabitants would be unskilled non-EU community workers, who would welcome jobs usually rejected by Italians. But how could this be reconciled with the upp-middle-class residents whom the Prg expects to have in a town aiming, among other things, at the tourist economy? In conclusion, without going into detailed analysis, it is difficult to put one's finger on the reasons for making a choice which is not simply a search for an urban character believed to be an improvement on the present one. A further point on which the Salerno Prg's urban strategy is based is the creation of urban and territorial attractions, that is places offering full facilities, able to determine imbalances in the functional setup which would reinforce the poles, so creating the conditions for pre-eminence but at the same time encouraging their emulation in such a way as to generate new competitiveness between parts of the town and between the provincial capital and its hinterland. One way in which the Prg allows for such a strategy is in providing important facilities: not only law courts, a maritime station, a sports stadium, which are

some of the works that will attract attention, but also a second tourist port with new hotels to go with it. All of this is located within the customs and excise area, which also includes an extensive industrial conglomeration from the time of ASI and which is not subject to municipal town-planning schemes. In this way, the Prg provides for its establishment as a services and production area, usefully located within its territory.

The idea, then, of a new need to increase the ratio of city dwellers, an objective so strongly stated in the Prg that it appears to be its logo, is to be achieved by increasing service facilities on municipal territory; while the most significant territorial transformation in the Salerno area in the past 30 years, characterised by quality as well as quantity of physical dimensions (the university complex of Fisciano-Baronissi) has gone in the direction of redressing territorial balance by locating all university activity outside the boundaries of the provincial capital.

It may be pointed out that all this was in effect the outcome of political debate between Christian Democrats, who have roots in the Avellino area, and the Italian Socialist Party, whose electorate are concentrated in the Salerno area, and that the very aim of such debate was the location of the new infrastructure in a 'barycentre'.

The outcome, however, benefited the zone it now occupies, without notable difficulty, and that outcome is now the eleventh university of Italy, with nearly 50,000 students; it is a kind of urban irradiation, with a town-effect. Its development is still far from satisfactory, but it is well on the way to becoming so. In setting its choices, the

Prg completely ignores the problems of dealing with the vastness of the area, and even interrelationships with its closest neighbour; this is not due to cultural considerations, but to strategic decisions.

Of course, what should have been overcome were the rituals by which individual municipalities, which have no formal or substantial competence, debated the reorganisation of extramunicipal territory, while the real problem was to credibly simulate the effects of putting into practice the choice of plan for areas in the immediate vicinity. These are matters which the Salerno Prg does not even contemplate, as it has no belief in the role of the Province in area-planning coordination, though in fact the Province would seem to be the best place, though not formally deputized, for the allocation of higher functions in the higher municipal context. However, the provincial capital cannot avoid taking on the role of *primus inter pares* between the municipalities of the Province to which they belong, pursuing forms of territorial redress of balance though the choices and non-choices it makes for its territory. The outcomes of competition between a large municipality and the variety of small adjacent centres whose finances, political weight, capacity to attract human resources and to have its own managers, politicians, administrators and specialists, are insufficient, would inevitably put these centres in a position of subordination, difficult to overcome without endogenous resources from higher authorities, the regional and provincial authorities. Returning, in conclusion, to the role of new-generation mayors and their relationship to town-planning, which has proved crucial in the

case of Salerno, it is to be said that in the trend towards bitter competition between mayors, it is those mayors with a greater sense of the reality of municipalities who are strongest, especially in the absence of the rules of the game provided by the tools of territorial planning. However, the problem is also one of political personnel who are not always competent becoming mayors, and such mayors find it extremely difficult to deal adequately with the bitter competition between territories which are emerging as long-term scenarios. These persons should be selected by the present bodies of consensus mediation, inheritors of old political parties, as scrupulously as possible, in their own interests as well as those of the people to be administered. Such a conclusion might be repetitive, but it is a good rule of thumb to bear constantly in mind.

Notes

1. Vincenzo De Luca: the Mayor who has been twice elected, in 1993 and 1997, in 1993 with 72% of the vote. Mayor from the early 1990s, in 2001 he was elected Deputy in Parliament, standing for the Democratic Left.

2. Among the improvements to be made, the extension of the period for which the mayor holds office would not be included; this is generally known as the third term of office, since a decade is more than enough to establish a complete political and administrative cycle, a local council lasting for four years, which was initially tried out and quickly increased to five years, its being shown to be inadequate. What should be reintroduced, however, is a

time limit on the assessor's term of office, which was at first and reasonably the duration of the mayor's term of office, but which can now be held on an open-ended basis. What should also be introduced is incompatibility of the office of a town councillor with that of assessor; an elected councillor should not be able to stand down in order to take on the coveted status of assessor, except in the case of his being made vice-mayor for his calibre as a politician; an assessor should not be allowed to stand as councillor in the following election in order to prevent him using the influence he has acquired not out of popularity but because of political cooption. Such modifications are small, but would mean greater transparency of political behaviour and encourage greater administrative stability, respecting as they would the wishes of the electorate. Furthermore, the town council would be made up of specialists from various sectors of interest to the local authority, so overcoming once and for all the technocratic stage, but avoiding repetition of the promiscuity between administrative action and political initiative, which was so fatal during the so-called first republic. The mayor's team should not be a mixture of apolitical specialists and political representatives, but made up of competent politicians. This is, however, a difficult system to handle, and depends entirely on the sensibility and experience of elected mayors.

3. De Luca V. (1999), *Un'altra Italia tra vecchie burocrazie e nuova città*, Leterza, Bari.

4. *Ibidem*, p. 10.

5. *Ibidem*, pp. 12-14.

6. Camagni R. (1992), *Economia urbana*, La Nuova Italia Scientifica, Roma.