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New environmental scenarios for changing territories

Edoardo Zanchini

There are plenty of reasons for wanting to deal with the phenomena that are affecting the territory, as well as the dynamics that are altering the environment and landscapes so markedly.

The problems and issues are changing within a context where territorial development and management is clearly in crisis, with significant effects on the ecosystem, and growing resource consumption. A new trend has emerged lately, with a reduction in the perception of the distance between global environmental issues and local degradation and pollution problems.

Likewise, public international awareness and environmental advocacy have made it possible to influence several aspects of development, economic globalisation and environmental degradation. However, time has come to focus on territorial policies and processes, with a new way of observing and addressing trends that might be overseen.

There is currently a gap between Europe and the United States, industrialised and developing countries, in terms of the ratification of concrete commitments towards cutting pollution and green-house gas emissions. In ratifying the albeit limited objectives of the Kyoto protocol, European countries have taken on a challenge whereby economic development and competitiveness involve responsibility for environmental issues. This prospect has deeply altered both the way local development is viewed, and the interpretation of the phenomena and problems

pertaining to the contemporary transformation of cities and territories.

A changing territory

Confuting some theorists of the new telecommunications era, development will still have a very strong territorial impact in the years to come. In Italy and Europe alike, the transport demand will grow even faster than the economy, while there will be an increase in ground, energy and natural resource consumption. The repercussions for environmental issues will be ever more obvious and unavoidable. Europe has already become the scene of dramatic events that cannot be blamed entirely on climate change. The causes for floods, but also droughts and desertification, must be sought for in the landscape management and alterations that occurred, especially in the course of the XX century. We must extend our reflection on ways of addressing environmental issues, because they are currently unsuitable for such wide-scale problems.

Nevertheless, one can no longer reason without taking into account the historically unprecedented occupation process of areas for activities and settlements, in terms of dimension, with irreversible changes.

The dispersion phenomenon characterising Europe is the rich facet of globalisation. A geography is vanishing, the images we used to refer to are changing. Changes are affecting the territory and networks, as well as the very perception of distance, with the positive example of the TGV between Lille, Lyon and Marseilles, or the secondary airports system. There are irreversible transformations occurring in most level and periurban areas in Italy, as well as on vast coastal extensions,

with wild repetitions and accumulations of lots and isolated buildings, clearways, junctions and productive areas, with no apparent differences between buildings erected legally or without a licence. The peri-urban areas are characterised by an ever more industrialised form of agriculture that has cancelled the web of ditches and vegetation. In the past twenty years, changes have affected territories that are no longer definable; in the most famous cases, the barely recognizable reference points are the vicinity of the Adriatic coast (from Abruzzo to Veneto), the via Emilia (a continuum nowadays), the extensive plain between Caserta and Naples, the network of secondary roads throughout the constellation of diffuse buildings along the coasts of the Salento, Calabria and Tyrrhenian Sicily.

In such a context, Italy appears to be a spectator waiting to see how the new changes will affect the economy and territory. Parallel debates arise periodically on the loss of competitiveness and capacity of innovation, as well as conferences on the environmental upheaval or lack of infrastructures. However, the territory must be the starting point for understanding the modifications that occurred during the organisational, production and localisation processes, studying practices made possible by the innumerable legal and illegal procedures that allow for portions of space to be modified, regardless of the wide-scale consequences. Such trends express the interest of local economies that need to be supported by infrastructures and policies so as not to suffer a crisis.

It should be stressed that a solution to this development model is sought in a supply-based energy policy

providing for the construction of at least 15 new power plants in the coming years, for a total of about 10 thousand megawatts, hand in hand with the relaunching of coal and cheaper though more polluting sources. The same purpose is entailed in the more important program for motorway infrastructures, devised decades ago, that will also concern ports and railways. A development concept whereby the competitiveness of Italy as a system could be achieved by ensuring freedom of localisation and an in-depth re-enforcement of infrastructures (Legge Obiettivo, 'single counters' i.e. the streamlining of bureaucratic procedures), as well as company incentives, thus reintegrating areas considered marginal into the development process. The approach, viewed favourably by all political parties, has triggered a dangerous race for projects and the relaunch of proposals (1). However, this solution is only apparently 'powerful' in relation to the signals of decline and the dwindling competitiveness of the 'Italy system'. It implies a flexible and indifferent territorial model, without any consideration for the changes in local economies, with new demands and unprecedented leading roles of the Local Economies, or the change in the 'public' role of large network policies (for private groups are nowadays responsible for process controlling and interventions, in any sector ranging from energy to motorways). Supporting such a development concept means renouncing any involvement in an ever more environmentally-oriented process, considered de facto 'natural' and ungovernable, expecting the market to come up with

solutions to the unbalance among Italian areas. In fact, environmental and social issues are eluded, cities and differences in the Italian regions are disregarded, as if economic development and current competition capacities could ignore innovation, or environmental and urban quality. Instead, important changes and significant discontinuity signals have arisen lately among contradictions. With new attention to quality, the recovery of cities, tourism, agriculture; with the destruction, unprecedented in terms of number and importance, of buildings erected without planning authorisations (ranging from the Fuenti to the Villaggio Coppola, from Agrigento to Naples) with signals of reversing trends in awareness of environmental issues. The campaigns and initiatives conducted by Legambiente to support this development concept, concerned the monitoring of rivers, cities, the sea, the fight against illegal building, and the recovery of small municipalities and degraded urban areas. The challenge is to prioritise environmental issues, suggesting a different development prospect for such a complex and articulate country as Italy. To encourage ideas and people in order to fight trends of territorial standardisation, the idea that the Mezzogiorno (South of Italy) is necessarily lacking in water and destined to desertification, that congested and polluted cities are inevitable. One of the most perilous effects of the debate in Italy is the tendency to minimize, simplify and separate problems. Instead, we must, on the one hand, find a way of conciliating issues of economic development and the territory, and on the other, a new approach to environmental issues. Slightly unnormal weather conditions are sufficient to

cause havoc in entire regions. No solution will be found in 'large-scale works', new dams and transregional water ducts, nor in the costly and harmful precautionary measures of raising river banks or 'cleaning-up' riversides. The concept of defence and preservation through protected areas and landscape planning is no longer sufficient if we intend to intersect issues that concern the territory at large. The idea according to which solutions lie in a compatibility assessment of infrastructures and new residential areas, or in the definition project-qualifying criteria, must definitely be discarded. Instead, the approach should be multi-model, or else projects and programs from the supply-side, which at this stage define themselves as sustainable, will continue supporting interests, perhaps merely adjusting and limiting the effects of traditional intervention forms. Just consider the progress made in the past decade in the environmental field by the Italian cities. The progress was significant in several contexts in terms of protection and the creation of infrastructures, though environmental indicators are following a downward trend almost everywhere due to a lack of innovative policies for the regeneration of degraded ecosystems, energy and water management, structural interventions on mobility and accessibility. There is no widespread awareness of the need to change the agenda of national and local policies in order to meet the commitments taken in the ratification of the Kyoto protocol, and the objectives reaffirmed at the Johannesburg conference. Urban and infrastructural policies must be altered so as to contribute to the trend

reversal by means of clear and 'quantifiable' environmental sustainability objectives that must be the cornerstone of every intervention. Or else motorways and plants will go on being built as debates on the ozone hole are organised; schemes and projects on sustainable development will be approved, but without explaining how they can be successful thanks to the proposed interventions. The gap that appears so clearly in any analysis on infrastructures and innovative policies will therefore increase compared to the other European countries, while Italy will remain the negative record-holder in terms of environmental illegality and the lack of water purification, illegal building and energy consumption, the number of cars per inhabitant. It is nevertheless true that many of the environmental-friendly structures and tools setup with much effort in the past years are today no longer suitable. The institutional stronghold made up of ministries and councillors' offices, agencies and institutions, each with their own programs and schemes, underline all the limits (2) related to the issues above (unless they have already been dismantled or made innocuous).

New views on the territory, new sustainability models

Contemporary territory is undergoing a profound crisis owing to the model of dispersion. The approach to environmental policies must necessarily change because natural processes have been upset. By waterproofing residential areas, draining agricultural land, changing crops and deforesting hills, we have transformed the ground surface into a kind of large

sponge; consequently, rainwater is no longer absorbed by the ground, but rapidly fills the rivers, generating floods that cannot be contained in the riverbeds. The water that used to supply the groundwater level that was slowly restored, replenishing rivers in dry periods (3). The television recently showed the pictures of Milan where the Seveso river regained possession of the asphalt avenues that had buried the river, and of the Elba that invaded Dresden. The pressure on natural elements in residential areas is such that the dynamic biological balances that used to characterise ecosystems have been destroyed, thus undermining self-depurative capacities. The outcome is congested cities where the level of air pollution is rising continuously (notwithstanding a few park areas, electrical buses, and pedestrian precincts in the historic town-centres), territories lacking water, or rivers that overflow because the riverbeds that had been rectified in order to accelerate outflow can no longer contain the water. Time has thus come to devise new territorial references to free the natural evolution of ecosystems, with the aim of recovering lost values and functions, giving river basins new life and the possibility to overflow without dramatic consequences into open areas, thus contributing to biodiversity increase. A changing territorial concept, where the choices of infrastructures and environmental and economic policies contribute towards reversing trends and defining innovative solutions. Local issues play a key role in this context in order to understand specificities, widespread demand, and the different 'paces'. Legambiente is about to face a delicate

challenge concerning the future of Italy. Environmentalism will have to oppose outdated projects and mistaken solutions with proposals and initiatives able to setup alliances and bring together the many positive signals from throughout the country. To prove that economic development is nowadays, in a more widespread and balanced way, affecting those very areas outside the traditional pathways and processes which according to many should be process leaders (from Matera to the Cinque Terre, from Salento to Siena). The causes for the hydrogeological degradation also lie in the sectorial and technical approaches to environmental issues; in the conviction that water problems have nothing to do whatsoever with the territory. Instead, drought and desertification in the regions of southern Italy, the damage caused by inundations, landslides and floods in the central-northern areas, are but two of the effects of poor resource management. In a country that is quite wealthy in water, though with huge problems in terms of waste, from agricultural, but also civilian use, distribution and system losses, the progressive pollution increase, and groundwater salinity. Time has come to follow the example of many countries that have implemented active policies and recovery plans for the reforestation of territories concerned by desertification (4) and environmental upheaval, the regeneration of degraded and polluted areas; natural water-purification must be reintroduced in agricultural areas and untended fields, while new cultures for the more fragile zones must be experimented. It is less expensive and more effective to extend river flatlands (by means of

natural damp zones and agricultural activities that are compatible with periodical floods), rather than to raise riverbanks and pay damages for flooded houses and sheds. Water must once again be considered within the lifecycle and management of buildings and public spaces, through integrated and separate system management, by increasing the capacity of water purification and reuse, to replenish the water-bearing stratum and upgrade unoccupied areas. It is now evident that no effective results in accordance with the Kyoto agreements will be reached without a sharp reversal in energy policies. Instead of boosting the construction of plants using the non-existing risk of a national black-out, one should address the problem characterising Italy of the chronic dependence on fossil fuels, putting aside a theory whereby energy choices are detached from the territory, pollution, increasing emissions. Such an approach must be overturned in order to actually connect it to the various contexts, explaining the tight correlation between environmental problems and energy consumption in buildings and transport. The objective is to progressively cut-down and rebalance requirements by boosting the efficiency of production plants, focusing on renewable sources and energy saving. This will offer unprecedented opportunities, recovering areas by shutting down old and polluting plants, and prevent the construction of new plants and high-tension lines. The approach should aim at defining the most suitable forms for each territory, at encouraging production from renewable sources, after all, Italy is a country where the solar-energy potentials are very

different from the ones in Northern Europe, yet with only one tenth of the photovoltaic plants existing in Germany, and the yearly creation of one twentieth of the solar plants. Mobility policies must turn their attention to energy implications and consequences on overall resource consumption. Nowadays, policies, plans and programs are defined sustainable if their main target is to minimize the imbalance between public/collective transport and road haulage, thereby reducing pollution and energy consumption, congestion and accidents, and to define territorial accessibility plans for activities and functions, by means of assessable objective and criteria. In this context, issues can be addressed that were left to academic debates, such as the consensus and quality of infrastructures, territorial demand and the localisation of activities and residential areas, with the purpose namely of reducing land occupation and consumption. Sustainability is therefore an innovative challenge addressing the problems and new requests of contemporary cities. Supporting this idea means deeply modifying the approach of policies and plans vis à vis the processes that must be both operational and incremental, able to guide interventions and supply a coherent framework in order to assess and modify projects, to deeply alter relations between policies and territories where management must become the central issue. This involves changing plans and the approach to processes which must be both operational and incremental to support interventions and offer a definition of coherence in the assessment and

modification of projects; to integrate networks with activities and resources. An original approach to the problems and new requirements of contemporary cities, starting from ecological balances, in order to define new transformation scenarios, which means focusing on transformation processes within realities are not changing in terms of the number of inhabitants, but in their social setup. The challenge is to reconsider cities, to work on the existing using shared processes, otherwise, interests and power will prevail, while priorities and real problems of social exclusion and degradation are disregarded. The challenge is to work on the indepth requalification of cities, by demolishing unsafe and unliveable buildings, recovering assets with clearly-defined objectives and concrete environmental budgets for the use and consumption of resources, considering the most suitable solutions, such as the planning of buildings and open areas, and system and technological solutions.

Plans for new landscapes

Let us now dwell upon landscape issues. There is an exponential growth in the gap between the images we are used to associating with the different Italian landscapes, and the mobile and changing reality. It is the very extent of the process that requires us to modify an outdated and ineffective approach associated to concept of the defence of a few 'outstanding' areas. If we shift our attention from the historical centres and protected areas to the territory at large, it is clear that current dynamics go unnoticed, and are therefore never confronted. To outline the different problems of agricultural land, areas

dedicated to tourism, or in a state of abandon, the landscape should be viewed as a project with ideas in terms of territorial issues and intervention prospects. The purpose is not to rekindle a useless, not to say harmful, debate on competences, but to focus on management issues, in accordance with the indications of the European Landscape Convention, in attempt to bring together the different powers and actively reinforce policies. The competitions promoted in the past years by Legambiente on landscape interpretation and planning landscape were inspired by these reflections, in other words by the idea that confrontation must be extended, different ideas and opportunities must be found to explore new themes and issues that can no longer simply go unattended. For especially in the most transformation-prone areas, landscape interpretation is indispensable in order to understand how to intervene against new and complex dynamics. The objective of addressing a new and inescapable theme such as the planning of wind plants (5) gave rise to the idea of a competition on Wind Landscapes. Wind energy is in fact the most rapidly growing sector, and the most successful among the renewable resources. Innovative structures that clearly represent an opportunity environmentally-speaking, but also a delicate issue in terms of the impact on the landscape. Bear in mind that in Italy, around two-thirds of the 700 megawatts used were setup in the past three years, almost exclusively in the hills of Apulia, Campania and Basilicata, without any planning or introductory rules at all, thus giving rise to contestation and conflicts. Therefore, a challenge linked mainly to planning in

order to understand the role that a clean and unlimited renewable source of energy (6) can have for the territory. The competition has made it possible to understand that original and effective solutions can be found, underlining the many different interpretations of contexts, landscape issues and values, the use of areas, relations with innovative structures. The approach defined in the competition notice allowed for quite a free collection of contributions and ideas pertaining to landscape and plant planning solutions (displacement, number and size of structures), always linked to energy targets and to the 'wind map' supplied by the two areas covered by the competition. The implementation of the winning projects, whose technical details are currently under study, for the areas of Pescopagano (Potenza) and Cinisi (Palermo), will be useful in finding a solution to contestations and the chronic absence of rules. Instead, the idea of a competition on Coastal Landscapes (7) was born during the revival of the interest for landscapes (with the first national conference) and the issue of Italian coasts. After having coined the expression 'ecomonsters' in order to depict and simplify the definition of degradation caused by unauthorised building and speculation along the Italian coasts, Legambiente's target was to help in setting-up a debate on how to intervene on such a delicate and complex issue. The competition provided for both photographic and planning themes in order to experiment new ways of interpreting the dynamics of ever-more articulate situations. The photographs illustrated a sample of varied situations in Italy, a kind of overview of

economic and industrial development in Italy, and the evolution of tradition and cultures. Landscape projects seem to be the most suitable for connecting different issues (from public areas to coastlines, from tourist exploitation to the balance of ecosystems) within realities with widespread single values and degradation. The selection of so widely differing experimentation places (the area between the Lanterna and the ancient port of Genoa, the Punta Perotti seafront in Bari, the Ardea dunes) was born from the idea that the approach to coastal issues cannot be reduced to models and schemes. Instead, an original solution is required to outline reconfiguration actions and innovative policies. A new interpretation of landscapes is ever more urgent for territories undergoing transformation. Areas where power and personal interests upset rules, alter characters, but where it is even more important to address the dynamics pervading society and the issues that do not come under any urban or landscape schemes. Where special approaches can be useful for finding prospects for the river systems in the Po valley, nowadays reduced to unrecognisable shapes among residential areas and infrastructures; for enhancing the internal landscapes of the Apennines; for interpreting the changes affecting the coastal areas of the Mediterranean, characterised by the growing pressure of tourism and residential areas, as well as problems of diffused degradation and sea pollution. Let us experiment, like in many European countries, an approach to infrastructural plans (8) starting from landscapes, so as to offer a picture of the territory with its ecological

scenarios, cultural values and new perceptions. Greater attention towards landscapes and the interaction between territory and development forms is currently a must. A challenge for Europe, and for Italy in particular, that entails finding an original and recognizable role within a scenario where diversity risks being cancelled, despite being a real motive of attraction and liveability.

Notes

1. From the Ravenna-Venice motorway (the commercial Romea) to the new link motorway north of Bologna, to the new Highspeed Railway stretches.
2. Just consider the persons appointed in the scientific committees of former ANPA, today APAT, and the curriculum of the people selected for the new VIA commissions.
3. See the CIRF (www.cirf.org) studies.
4. See the works of Shlomo Aronson, in Israel, concerning the reforestation of the Judea region and landscape planning.
5. See *Wind Landscapes*, by E. Zanchini, edited by Meltemi, Rome, 2002. The competition promoted by Legambiente and by Enel Green Power concerned the project of two wind system plants in Pescopagano, Potenza, and Cinisi, Palermo.
6. The benefits must be assessed in the fact of renouncing the use of fossil fuels, thus preventing the emission of noxious substances and greenhouse gases. Denmark, which currently covers 18% of its energy requirements using the wind-system, has been able to cut CO2 emissions by 11% at a time when the economy grew by 23%.
7. Promoted by Legambiente and the Ministry for Cultural Assets,

2000-2001.

8. See the recent achievements within the TEN program (Trans European Network), namely the rail and road connection system on the Oresund, the TGV Méditerranée railwayline, the Amsterdam-Bruxelles railway project.

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