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The hard work of constructing the urban project

Paolo Avarello

Notwithstanding today's consolidated European experience, and especially that of the French, in Italy the expression 'urban project' sounds ambiguous. Maybe the vague fascination this exercises over town planners and urban designers arises out of this ambiguity, the journey to define the term and place it somehow in the 'right' pigeonhole somewhere between plan and execution. Even if with some variation, the 'European' (French) meaning of 'urban project' identifies an ensemble of transformations which partially signify city as practised by many organisations, both public and private, but co-ordinated under the auspices of the local authority and/or dedicated structures under local authority control. In this state of affairs 'urban project' is not a 'project' at all, at least in the current meaning (that of architects, for example), or rather is defined entirely *ex ante*, being a tiring search for delicate equilibriums in progress. For example, between building sizes and environmental demands, between those already resident and future residents of affected neighbourhoods, between physical and immaterial operations. Generally speaking, between direct economic (private) interests and collective interests, which are not so easily measured in terms of money. However, secondly, the definition and realisation of 'urban projects' takes many years, and is not born of creative genius, but out of necessity, and must be coupled with a more general project in some way, one which moreover is long-

term, credible and trustworthy. So a plan specification should not be devoid of (or contain the least possible) final results and characteristics for the specific area affected, but above all should provide the elements necessary for the various proposals and alternatives to be evaluated in relation to the territory and also, but not only, in terms of the fall out of environmental problems. And naturally as far as possible a plan should guarantee the conditions for the realisation of such 'projects'. For example, intervening in the great urban mobility networks, providing the possible options, and relevant alternatives, in order to localise large urban structures (capable of characterising a part of the city), but also avoiding the creation of excessive competition between similar initiatives for intensive transformations in the candidate area.

To summarise, the 'urban project' is much more complex and difficult than is usually imagined (especially by architects, and sometimes by town planners), or as simple as 'redesign' of a part of the city ('ready' execution). Naturally town planning is also one of the professional activities required in executing an urban project since the project is implemented in agreement with the procedural character of this intervention typology. Within this the formation of the project must respond to the multiplicity of aims and objectives being pursued by different subjects by using contractual mechanisms to agree the plans and procedure.

Of course, compared to 'urban projects' in other European countries, the Italian experience presents some differences. These are not reducible to the scale of intervention (more limited), nor to the

excessive levelling of the size of the construction, nor the lower level of technical and managerial abilities, or to the support mechanisms of public financing. In contrast, the principal differences are unfortunately actually connected to the minimum of 'political' attention given to the organisation and functioning of the city, elsewhere considered vital organs of the society and economy, which in turn probably derive from the relevant financial commitments being viewed not as investments for economic and social development, fundamental elsewhere to overcoming the shock of de-industrialisation, but simply as public expenditure. Expenditure which while perhaps necessary, is certainly not exciting, additionally so because its effects are only measurable in the long-term: moreover, longer than one or two administrative mandates.