



Urbanistica n. 131

September-December 2006

Distribution by www.planum.net

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The reform we want

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Problems, policies, and research

City-ports. Plans and projects
 Guidelines for port planning regulations
 The maritime transport situation
 Urban planning for waterfront redevelopment
 The port-city interface as filtering line
 The port as a park
 Maritime traffic in the Mediterranean and Mediterranean issues
 Port planning in the minor ports of Emilia-Romagna region
 Emilia-Romagna ports
 Tourist ports and urban development

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Pietro Cozzani, Daniele Iselle
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Paolo Boninsegna

Projects and implementation

Verona sud. The "Cardo massimo"
 To imagine south Verona
 South Verona and the 'style of the city'
 The interpretation of a context for the construction of an urban plan
 The street as a settlement rule. The project as a new identity image
 The outline director for mobility and for public transport
 The matrix of the landscape: the 'Cardo massimo', the sequence of the open spaces
 The environmental strategic assessment
 Land uses asset: a description along the axis
 The guide criteria for the street plan and the seven drafts of the Cardo
 Project deepening: two 'threshold' spaces along the 'Cardo massimo'
 The normative structure
 The perequative model
 The quantities for the Variante

edited by Anna Campeol
Antonio Malaguzzi, Andrea Bondonio
Andrea Bondonio
Stefano Mancuso, Alberto Giuntoli
Benta Wiley

Reggio Emilia: project, perequation and implementation
 An international design competition for a Masterplan by private developers
 Urban plan for parco Ottavi: from the competition to the definitive plan
 Parco Ottavi: the design of the green areas
 Communicating parco Ottavi

edited by Franca Balletti
Kim Leslie
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Profiles and practices

Tools for shared representation of sites. From "Parish maps" to "identity maps"
 The project Parish Maps in West Sussex
 Identity representation and participation: a Genoese periphery district experience
 Children and identity representation: two maps for Savona town

Sofia Morgado

Lisbon: five metropolitan states from unoccupied space

Adele Semeraro, Simona Rappuoli

Methods and tools

The management of the changes in the agrarian landscape, challenges and innovations of Siena Ptc

Silvia Viviani
Mariella Zoppi
Romano Viviani
Massimo Morisi
Leonardo Rignanese

Towards the territory orientation plan of the Tuscany Region
 Town planning and upland areas
 Good town planning: a question of culture
 Effectiveness as a quality in public planning
 Interview with Riccardo Conti

An international design competition for a Masterplan by private developers

Antonio Malaguzzi, Andrea Bondonio

In front of the increasing necessity for confrontation regarding themes related to the transformation of complex areas within our cities, the decision to implement design competitions to choose solutions to urban questions has often provided deluding results. Difficulties arise in particular within the connate separation between the management of the design process itself and the management of the realisation process and subsequently the outcome results in scarce definitions of the initial objectives of the competition.

The exemplary experience however of the urban project for the areas Ti2-7 e Ti2-8 of the Reggio Emilia town plan derives not only from those favourable conditions particular to the site and the different participants involved but above all from the participated work method characteristic of each phase of the design process: the choice, quite unusual in Italy for a private promoter to organize an international design competition for an urban areas development, as too a design competition applied as an instrument of research ensuring the high quality of all the architectural and urban solutions employed with the support of the public administration from the initial phase of drafting of the competition outlines itself is most certainly a particular and interesting circumstance. The reasons behind the choice to hold a competition, certainly more onerous and complicated for a private developer than the direct nomination of an architectural office for the intervention in such a large

urban area, can be identified within the convergence of different factors related to the area; both virtuoso and necessary. The fortunate coincidence that the areas owner was also the promoter of the competition and would then subsequently be the developer of the urban works for the site as outlined in the town plan led to the decision by the owner, in agreement with the public administration to connect, by way of a single unified project, two areas of urban transformation quite distinct in the existing town plan. The important dimensions of the area and the complex problems related to the management of the process also helped orient the developer towards a process quite experimental in its methods. The public administration was incredibly interested in the future of this area as it is considered a strategic area of urban transformation in the new Prg, both for the relevant dimensions (almost 55 hectares) greater than other areas outlined in the town plan by about (5/6 hectares). Interest was also high because it was the first of these strategic areas to be presented for implementation. The public administration believed too that an international design competition would be the most transparent method for guaranteeing the quality of the development of the area and it suggested this to developer. Following the choice to hold of a design competition it became necessary to individuate a project manager to ensure a unified and efficient coordination of the entire development and design processes: this figure would then control the drafting and communication regarding the competition outline, the choice of architects to invite and later assist in the decision making process relative to

the choice of the winner. The drafting of the competitions outline became an important moment for an in-depth study of the area in question and in particular the occasion to investigate the expectations of the public and private spheres present in the area, together with a study of the technical and economic objectives of sustainability needed to activate the project.

This phase beginning in march 2001, lasting 5 months began with an in depth study of the technical regulations regarding the application of the town plan regulations, and together with the public administration an analysis of the dynamic application and interpretation of these regulations.

At the same time an intense period of planning together with the owner-developer and public and private operators involved in the urban transformation began. Around ninety representatives of the companies that were or could be providers of infrastructures and services in this area were gathered. Dialogue was established and coordinated between the two urban and administrative chapters that would be united by the project and that up to this moment had not openly discussed those urban and infrastructural projects that were concretely to be realised within their territorial boundaries. These interviews and testimonies gathered a series of unexpected aspirations and suggestions and worries regarding the plans for the area and it was an incredibly constructive phase of the development process.

Along with this period of planning a series of historical and environmental investigations and studies were also carried out. This material comprised an important part of the informative package that

would then be sent out to the architects invited to participate in the competition. Such a rich and articulated quantity of material as a base on which to develop the competition outline, anticipated a step that is more often part of a successive phase, beginning after the initial design competition is held, and this was perhaps one of the most important factors characterising this aspect of the projects development. Such an articulated and studied brief accompanying the outline for the design competition allowed the designers an articulated vision of all possible aspects and complexities involved in the development of the area. Also allowing the designer to elaborate projects with concrete feasibility and well defined objectives.

Coherent to this work method the competition was envisaged within a 'participated optic' a type of experimental perspective on which the competition was structured in the eight months of elaboration. The first state characterised by the initial design phase was based on the proposal of the different design schemes by the different architectural offices followed by discussion and confrontation with the developer and the project manager, a second phase saw the modification of these proposals and in the last phase the schemes were presented officially to the city. This occasion was an important moment for dialogue and confrontation with the real expectations of the citizens, and an obvious search for solutions of true quality in all aspects for the area.

4 architects (offices) were invited to participate in the competition, offices all renowned for their design and planning excellence but with true differences in their approach to urban problems: Aimaro Isola (Isolarchitetti), Oriol Bohigas

(Mbm), Mario Cucinella (Mca) e Alvaro Siza. Regardless that the winner was to be announced by the developer (obvious in a private development operation, the decision was matured and consciously shared by all actors involved in the entire process) the project manager, technicians, the city council. The general quality of the design solutions provided and the interest surrounding all three projects presented was great, however the choices and solutions offered by Studio Isola resulted the most convincing. Isola's design resolved, better than others, the question of integration between the two urban zones at the moment divided by infrastructural barriers. Isola's solution was specifically interesting regarding aspects of autonomy of construction of the different areas of the masterplan, and its general flexibility in the case of eventual modifications deriving from the implementation of the actual detailed town plan. It is this last aspect that, together with the desire by the developer to confirm, in a second phase of the work a shared work plan between all the investors and actors involved that was most convincing, a scheme flexible whilst maintaining the quality and efficiency of the design and planning solutions as suggested in the town plan.