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What is the point ...

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Problems, policies, and research

Demolishing and rebuilding to upgrade parts of cities

City regeneration to Berlin: the district Marzahn-Hellersdorf

The agglomeration of Clichy-Montfermeil, a complex site of *politique de la Ville*

Problems relating to the upgrading of public property through measures of demolition and reconstruction

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Simonetta Volpe
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Projects and implementation

The challenges of urban planning in the urban countryside

Added value in the metropolitan agricultural areas of the Campania Region

The countryside's rule in the new master plan of Naples

Rural landscapes and ecological networks in the urban context

The 'Extramet' project and the case study of Campania

Structural works, multifunctional and self-supporting ability of agricultural firms in the urban context

Landscapes and plans: new settlements models and innovative planning approaches

Scenarios of land reconstruction based on neo-agriculture and new lifestyles and consumption patterns

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Paola Pucci
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Preliminary document for a territory to be reconceived

Building consensual scenarios: settlement environments and strategic projects

Towards a definition of a Vas protocol

Mapping projects and policies of the Vicenza Province

An Atlas as a way to approach the territories of Vicentino

The plan as governance of fragmentation: the territory of the Vicenza area

Antonella Manicardi, Luca Martelli

Profiles and practices

Precautionary measures against earthquake: risk representations in the Ptcp (Provincial plan)

Augusto Mercandino, Francesca Cassaro

Cambridge Futures: a referendum on sustainability

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Francesco Gastaldi
Simone Ombuen*

Strategic plans in Italy

Strategic plans: risks and critical issues

Strategic planning and governance/government of the territory

Anna Laura Palazzo

Methods and tools

Sustainability and urban form

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Anna Laura Palazzo

Among the various operational transcriptions of sustainability, those based on 'time' as a conceptual basis of analysis, are increasingly focusing on two main aspects: land use regulations and regeneration of resources, which are supposed to "meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" ; on the other hand, those carrying the integration of the ecological principles into a different organization of spatial settlement patterns seem to overcome the idea of planning as a mere question of an a priori definition of rules. The second line of analysis encompasses several theoretical and empirical experiences coming from the anglosaxon planning tradition, conceived mostly in the direction of a performative correlation between 'sustainability' and 'urban form'.

What seems remarkable, in contrast with the past, is that these institutional policies are being progressively accepted also by the developers. This is what emerges from the well-known Report of the urban task force of the *United Kingdom, towards an urban Renaissance*, and from another document, called *Liveable Neighbourhoods*, which is about the experience of the Western Australia government, that stress the importance of the relation between urban regeneration and social responsible practices, also in the sense of a deeper environmental awareness in collective behaviours. Similar considerations come also from the US. According to smart growth, empirical comparisons between different US metropolitan areas (Msas) show the

increasing (socioeconomical) unsustainability of urban sprawl as the main form of socio-spatial settlement. *Future forms and design for sustainable cities*, a recent book referring cases from the Far east, United States and central Europe, offers a rich analysis of different approaches to 'urban form'. Starting from a great variety of situations and approaches, the book stresses some remarkable issues related on the one hand, to the topics of 'urban intensity' (understood as functional mix and density superior to critical thresholds), and on the other hand, to the topic of 'optimisation' of urban performances.

Uncertainty due to social practices and individual behaviours is now analysed with simulation programmes, that are much less deterministic than cybernetic models in vogue in the last decades. What kind of operational suggestions emerge from such a renovated attention to 'urban form' for the Italian debate, generally concerned with the effectiveness of planning?

According to last Census (2001), more than 80% of italian population live in communities with more than 5.000 inhabitants. This new 'urban countryside' shows little possibilities of converting itself into a kind of denser or more compact settlement space. Starting from these assumptions, a sustainable Agenda for our territories has to deal with the complexity of a more coherent coordination between different urban policies acting at different scales.

Some concerns coming from the already mentioned reports point out the image of the 'city-region', partly intended as a legacy of the systemic approach. At the district and regional scale, since the Greater London plan (1944), the most interesting experiences

suggest significant correlations between 'form' and 'structure'. Current planning experiences use ideograms and drafts to put in evidence the general urban framework, in order to emphasise the 'structure' and make it perceivable and usable.

Nevertheless, form has an explicit relation both with 'feature' and 'size' of urban settlement spaces, such as in the conception of greenbelts attempting to limit the urban growth of metropolitan regions, or of wedges between self-sufficient clustered cells of urbanism as to specific urban equipments.

In Italy, through the increasing application of Master planning and the affirmation of local Agenda 21 governance processes, the notion of 'urban form' is putting in evidence significant environmental issues, such as ecological networks. Urban countryside can be an appropriate fieldwork for subsidizing 'top-down' compulsory policies of implementation of the main ecological networks, with the help of 'bottom-up' practices regarding local connections, related to private action.

In Northern Europe, where 'urban form' is intended as a transcalar concept intersecting the regional as well as the architectural scale, new experiences in energy-saving policies are involving a deep adjustment in architectural and planning languages. At the urban scale, the anglo-saxon tradition of 'neighbourhood planning' remains largely concerned in 'quality' and 'size'.

In conclusion, a 'weak' approach to sustainability, connected with the notion of 'urban form', can improve the performances of spatial settlements by means of policies, practices and actions whose evident effectiveness can give partial but tangible evaluations and audits,

rather than global, intergenerational and abstract objectives.

If the challenge in urban design theory and practice is open, an idea of governance more coherent with these assumptions needs to be open and flexible too.