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Making New Helsinki. A small metro region in northern Europe

Agatino Rizzo

One of the most dynamic cities in the recent years is Helsinki, the capital of Finland. With more than 337 sqkm of surface area and only 5.2 million inhabitants, Finland is the least dense country in the EU. Bordered to east to Russia and in the north with Sweden and Norway, the Fennoscandia peninsula faces, south and west, to the Baltic Sea, a basin of 50 million of people predominantly Christian religion and divided into Lutherans, Catholics and Orthodox.

After the economic crisis in the early '90s, and the rapid and unexpected recovery in the next decade, a relationship between Ict and a strong Welfare State system has helped to make Finland a unique case of development in Europe and the entire western world.

The Helsinki Metropolitan Region is located in the southern Finnish peninsula, opposite Tallinn, an old Hansa city located 75 km across the Gulf of Finland, which was in the past Helsinki's competitor for the trade with Russia. Helsinki is a city of nearly 600,000 inhabitants, which is the economic and cultural centre for 2,000,000 inhabitants of the metropolitan area. Four levels of public governance operate in this metropolitan area: City Planning Departments (each for every municipality), Helsinki Metro Area, Region Helsinki, and Uusimaa. Poor communication between these departments makes planning a difficult task. The visions projected by metropolitan departments individually are useful only to understand the processes going than for drive local transformational processes, especially for those cities that belong to the Helsinki Metropolitan Area Council

(Helsinki, Espoo, and Vantaa). Although, on one hand, these miscommunications between these public forums underlines unexpected gap in Finnish-governance, on the other hand, it is still considered as the best example for planning and renewal. In fact, the metropolitan area shows, also today, a deep understanding of the surrounding landscape: the forests, lakes, rivers, coastal belt, geological formations are in the end elements of departure as well as points of transformation processes in the region.

Several articles, in major magazines, at different times were focused on Helsinki. Among all these publications, the ones of most relevance here are: number 33 of *Urbanistica* published in 1968 and number 530 of *Casabella* published in 1986. Both these articles focus on Helsinki city centre, an area of significance, lies in between Eliel Saarinen's railway station (to the south) and Pasila, the other major railway node (to the north). In this area a plenty of projects have fallen through, such as Alvar Aalto's proposal (presented to the city in 1961), which was followed by numerous controversies, and the architectural competition in 1986, which had a large group of nominees, but had no consequences.

An area that has already engaged the energies of Eliel Saarinen with his plan for the 'Greater Helsinki' (1918). Although Saarinen's plan seems to be seeking urban solutions which were too formal and rigid (especially for the city centre), the Great Helsinki plan exceeded Howard's hypothesis (garden cities against big cities) and instead invents an original strategy of decentralisation based on a net of garden cities radial to the city centre. The plan for the Greater Helsinki would

become the main focus of subsequent urbanization of the metropolitan area although the rapid growth of the urban population has lead to an eroding of the main strategy.