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What plan for what town planning?

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**Problems, policies, and research**

Ecological network and planning  
 The project of ecological network in Ptcp of Mantova  
 The system of the provincial green. The ecological network of the Province of Novara  
 Strategies of riqualfication: planning ecological network. The case of Province of Bologna  
 Ecological network in the urban design

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**Projects and implementation**

Beyond the Company town. Plans and projects for San Donato Milanese  
 A plan for Mattei's city  
 Shared neighbourhood planning. The structure of the 'Laboratorio Quartieri' and its activities  
 Planning with the inhabitants: open issues of a shared experience  
 Starting from the neighbourhood to reach the neighbourhood  
 Form and contents of the 'Strategy and framework document'  
 San Donato. Four images of change  
 Closing the gap and maintaining tension  
 The Services plan project  
 The Area management plan for San Donato Milanese: legislative architecture  
 Plans for deciding: speed, goals and forms  
 Work on the plan. Interview with Achille Taverniti  
 Coming closer to the town, experiencing life in the town. Interview with Mario Dompè  
 Politics and policies  
 San Donato Milanese a workshop on innovation  
 In search of a working dimension

*Harald Bodenschatz*

**Profiles and practices**

Town planning in the new Berlin

*Giovanna Bianchi*

Practices and instruments for the quality of the 'Space of day-to-day life'

*Davide Ponzini*

Public real estate appreciation as a local development opportunity

*Yodan Rofé*

The white city of Tel Aviv

*Giovanni Laino*

**Methods and tools**

The crisis in Campania waste. A short reconstruction of the story

*Gian Paolo Corda*

The real challenge for Expo 2015

## Closing the gap and maintaining tension

Gabriele Rabaiotti

Closing the gap and maintaining tension in the decision making process are two problematic areas in a participatory process, and this also applies to San Donato. They are necessary, but not on their own enough to guarantee the success of a project that aims to use more explicit, inclusive forms of interaction as ways to feed choices, that interprets land planning also as a social issue, belonging to society, and that sees a town plan as a complex, multilayered operation in which local democracy becomes an element that plays a substantial role in building quality into the material and functional transformation of the 'inhabited area'. Unlike the shared planning of a school garden, a sheltered community for the elderly, or one of the ubiquitous 'multi-purpose' centres, in the construction of directions along which to guide the transformation of an entire city, distance (between the object to be defined and local society) and time (understood as the duration of the process, which tends to expand and move concrete, visible results forwards until they disappear) are important aspects which cannot be neglected.

The route for constructing the Framework document and its strategic content tried to provide a positive response to the two difficulties mentioned above: - closing the gap by bringing the various players closer to the topic of discussion, finding their place, providing space and opportunities for discussion, and looking for simple, direct languages in which to communicate. The four scenarios became important synthetic, instrumental representations on which to build a discussion about the future

which was less vague, because it was based on what already existed, on characteristics cited with varying levels of emphasis by the council groups and representatives of the leading organisations in San Donato, and represented a chance to sort out the materials present on the decision making table. The task of investigating and preparing the 'four visions of the future' was an extensive one, which involved collecting a wide variety of information on a daily basis, stimulating interpretations, and crossing over into different areas of knowledge production, assigning the job of making the complex whole comprehensible and transferable to the technical know-how. The four images were provocative and extreme, created to open out the debate rather than to enclose it, to establish the main reference points of the debate, and to mark a further movement forward in the continuous process of adjusting positions, interests and objectives. *Green city, flagship city, walled city and residential city* introduced a language of change, beyond mere expression and communication (perhaps concerning a decision already taken around which it was necessary to build consent), but also a language of debate and persuasion. A tool and technique of negotiation and interaction, and an opportunity to identify convictions, prejudices, contradictions, resistance and value judgements, which gives 'images of the world' complete with ambiguities, hypocrisy, and positions coloured by interest:

- maintaining tension in a process which immediately appeared long and extensive. I am not clear whether the San Donato experience is more a 'project process' or a 'process project'. From the beginning our efforts were

directed at constructing a schedule of works, at debating the various combinations and the levels of autonomy that could be given to the three different working levels (Framework document, Services plan and Quartieri laboratories). We organised our time by defining the pace rather than creating an actual timetable. The city space project consisted of time management, phases of varying intensity, and exchanges and crossovers made possible by the number of operations and large number of semi-finished and subproducts which each of these operations produced along the way. The research and development involved exhibitions, group interviews, public meetings, workshops on specific topics and guided tours. Initially, this variety generated a vibrant process, but towards the end there was a definite sensation of having lost something along the way, and having failed to retain the technical content of the materials. The time element (and the process resulting from it) is what threatens the physical project. An area with a multitude of functions and possibilities for transformation of the space, but at the same time one that is unstable and changeable over time. Interpreting the process forces us to consider the strategic dimension, which appears at a distance from the actual processes, an additional ulterior method for returning to the city, for reinterpreting it today through a future perspective, and for taking on the challenge it presents. Discussion, comparisons and exchange are often used as distractions, to keep a distance, and our most sophisticated techniques are not immune from such distorted use.