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What plan for what town planning?

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Taverniti**

*We asked Achille Taverniti, Mayor of San Donato Milanese from 2002 to 2007, to talk about the town planning issues affecting the city, in regard to three main themes: the choice of direction the administration chose to take during a time of great change for the town of San Donato, the role and importance of the various themes at the time the town planning instruments were being revised, and the relationship between politics and the technical management of the process. (A.B. and A. L.)*

My tenure as mayor coincided with a phase of extraordinary change for the city, principally through Eni's sale of part of its real estate portfolio. This represented a major change for the local population (many of whom became owners of their own homes) and the municipal government. The period also coincided with a review of the regional town planning laws, which replaced laws 9/99 and 1/01 and introduced the current law 12/05. This was the culmination of a period of deregulation and the beginning of a definitive opening up towards public-private cooperation in town development policymaking. In this scenario we asked five groups of professionals, including the Department of architecture and planning (Diap), to submit their idea of the future of the city to the local government majority party. The choice of the Milan Polytechnic meant entrusting ourselves to a body able to draft the most convincing plan of work and one that was also best placed to support the public institution in its interaction with the private owners. We tackled this task with the right level of credibility and authority, acting as a solid public agent able to sustain a valid planning

vision, particularly in our relation to the international entity that owned some of areas (Asio) which wanted to make them profitable and was very distant in terms of interest and knowledge from the area of San Donato, the Metanopoli housing and the Eni group.

With the support of the Polytechnic, we therefore started work before final approval of law 12, but remained in line with the previous laws, staying ahead of events in order not to place obstacles in the way of the real and present possibilities for development represented by Asio's desire for investment, and at the same time to draft an overall plan for San Donato. Although the plan covered the whole town, the discussions and operational translation into Integrated action programmes developed with the operator gradually focussed the interest and debate onto the central areas. In dealing with these a clear picture of the relationship between a general view and local operational choices in an overall framework emerged, not individual projects in single areas, but a sequence of interventions that defined all the central areas. We therefore ended up with a central concept comprising open spaces, developing a new idea of shared space in a town which has an extraordinary amount of green space, but lacks public places for people to gather together. The project's emphasis on the central areas and the specific attention the administration paid to them, along with the comparative lack of attention to the signals and proposals thrown up by the participatory process, is perhaps the weakest point of the whole affair, and the source of a lack of consensus which contributed, against a difficult situation nationwide, to the change in administration. We acted in

the belief that the participatory planning processes in the 'quartieri', or districts, would always work, as if they were the natural result of the amount of work put into the choices concerning the central areas. Today I recognise that the administration gradually became less focused on listening, and on picking up the signals coming from the population in reaction to the choices being implemented. The loss of the ability to listen was proportionate to the increase in focus on the main objective, which was to approve the Strategic framework document. This difficulty may perhaps be linked to an imperfect integration between the specific technical aims of the working party and the political management of the process by myself and the administration. When a qualified institution undertakes a project involving politics at a certain level, the line between technical choices and evaluations on the one hand and political choices and evaluations on the other is very unstable, and the question of role inevitably becomes an issue. In my experience and opinion. I can say that a direct relationship with political choices and strategies is unavoidable. Sometimes, in other words, technicians need to accept that they have to move outside their own terrain and onto the slippery terrain of politics, so they can bring back with them a more technical experience with a greater chance of becoming operational.