



Urbanistica n. 138

January-April 2009

Distribution by www.planum.net

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Reform of territorial governance and the new urban order

Michele Talia

After having been through a very lengthy crisis, research in the sector in our country has chalked up some important successes above all in relation to vast area policies, urban renewal and, more in general, the rationalizing of relations between long-term forecasts and choices of implementation, to the extent that the objective of renewing the planning system, which had been defined more than 65 years ago by town-planning legislation, finally seems within reach. In this perspective the approval of a reform of territorial governance has now become an objective that cannot be set aside; even so, the risk exists that the laborious process of drawing up a new law may obscure our perception of a number of particularly urgent questions, as registered by territorial formations and by the environment. It seems in fact that the rift between our awareness of the problems it is necessary to address, and the recipes that technical culture is able to elaborate, has further worsened, also because attention to the form of the plans has had the effect of concealing the radical changes that have meanwhile become manifest in housing structures and in urban communities. The sweeping and complex transformations that have been a feature of the last two decades have indeed made a deep impression on the organization of the territory. The link that had been established between population increase, economic growth and urbanization processes has deteriorated, inaugurating a prolonged phase of

disorderly settlement in which the strategies guiding land occupancy seem bound to take on the role of independent variables. In the course of this period a very extensive area (estimated by Eurostat to be equal to 2,800,000 hectares only in the last decade of last century) has been taken away from agriculture and earmarked for urban uses, giving rise to a settlement geography in which the existing city is in many cases merely one reference among the many to the choices made by the operators in the building sector (public administrations, contractors, property developers, families). The apparent lack of rationality in the recent settlement pattern is the joint result of the eclipse of large-scale industry and of the continuation of the process that caused employment in agriculture to drop from 8.6 million persons in 1950 to a little over one million in 2003, and the ensuing slackening of the constraints of proximity between accommodation functions and places of work has induced a more and more accentuated dispersion of the resident population. Through the effect of these dynamics, the companies that manage public transport are going through a crisis that seems irreversible, and which consequently accentuates having recourse to individual solutions to the problem of mobility. Changes at this scale cannot however be confined to just one sector, as they are the reflection and at the same time the cause of the change that is taking place in the social and economic structure of the country. In an age dominated by uncertainty and individualism, social and working relations become 'atomized', with the consequence of causing an immediate short-circuit between the affirmation of

new urban forms and the organization of productive activities and leisure functions. As opposed to the rigidity of old forms, in the relationship between working time and free time, in the modulation of movements, in family structure and in settlement habits, and in lifestyles, contemporary society tends to be structured under the banner of instability (or liquidity, as Zygmunt Bauman would say). Through the effect of urban sprawl and of the attenuation of the location factors determined by post-modern society, significant changes appear in the configuration of settlement systems. Suffice it to think of the presence of mobile boundaries in the functioning of local systems of work, borne out by the very considerable increase recorded by commuting between 1991 and 2001 (+10.9%), and then between 2001 and 2007 (+35.8%), with an overall population of students and workers who make systematic journeys outside of the municipality of residence of more than 13 million, 70% of whom use private cars. But think also of the little importance attached to municipal boundaries in the functioning of the housing market (considering both purchases and rentals), which translates into a progressive increase in the number of families prepared to move away from their provincial capital in order to satisfy their housing requirements. That the geography of the country is changing at a very fast rate is demonstrated by the very dimension of the local work systems, whose average size went up from 315.5 sq.km in 1981 to 384.3 sq.km in 1991, and then to 439.2 sq.km in 2001. Behind this expansion of the areas within which day-by-day mobility takes place is concealed a complex modification of the systems of relation which is

occurring with an accentuated fragmentation. Furthermore, the circumstance that many of these systems cross the administrative limits of provinces and regions (167 and 49, respectively) shows that the impetus towards territorial hyperextension and the prevalence of forms of hypermobility are distinctive features not only of metropolitan contexts, but in a large part of contemporary territorial formations. Moreover, opposed to this long-term trend certain anomalies are not lacking, and are punctually registered by the heterogeneous ways of behaving manifested by the various contexts. Both in the territories of scattered settlement such as Veneto or Marche, and in the concentrated settlements of northern Puglia, the most recent urban transformations shed light on a trend towards suburbanization which by now it seems might threaten even the urban fabrics hitherto only marginally affected by the transformation of the cities. This is a 'behaviour' of economic operators not motivated by variations in cost of construction, which is instead substantially homogeneous throughout national territory, but which depends on the different incidence of urbanization costs and the cost of building areas, and which therefore assigns a preminent role to the collectors of land revenues. In the face of this exceptional source of income, town-planning rules visibly find it difficult to impose a rational use of resources which urban sprawl tends instead to dissipate, and the attempt to direct property investments towards a building product that is more accessible to low-income demand and to better quality often turns out to be ineffective. It is likewise evident that the

limits that have emerged in addressing the effective dimension of the country's major emergencies (urban congestion, pollution, energy dependence, the housing problem, safeguarding the landscape) cannot be put down only to the still incomplete nature of the reform plan. Even more than the accrued delay in approving a new law on territorial governance, a negative influence seems to stem not only from the prolonged (and so far useless) wait for the latter, but also the failure to reflect on the contents of the reform plan which appeared too weak, or even lacking.

Among the latter the following ought to be mentioned:

- a well-nigh exclusive attention to the themes of local planning;
- the incapacity to achieve an effective regulation of the land regime;
- the extremely feeble nature of the references to vast area problems;
- the absence of any significant references to the role of the metropolitan city;
- the continuing and worrying conflict between the contents to be assigned, respectively, to the structural dimension and to the strategic vision of the plan;
- the tendency to underestimate the role of urban policies in territorial governance.

Until such time as a restricted pool of experts, academics and, obviously, Mps, makes up its mind to give a fresh boost to the innovation of the discipline, it is very probable that the subjects and the actors of planning will go on with that urban-planning bricolage that has been a feature of the last decade, in which the by now very large array of instruments forming part of the planner's tool kit will have been contaminated in sometimes definitely creative forms, but which at other times have appeared all too uninhibited and

incoherent. In view of the well-known complexity of the subject, the risk again looming up is that this way will be interpreted as a 'short-cut' able to favour decision-making processes that are quicker and less subject to procedural constraints not only in drawing up certain basic choices, but in all the most significant 'passages' of the planning process. In Italy with its 8,100 municipalities the limit constituted by the municipal boundary to the carrying out of coordinated policies of territorial governance still appears insuperable, contrary to what is happening in the rest of Europe, where already in the mid-Nineties the administrative geography showed 32.7% fewer municipal administrations than before the reform which, starting in 1956, had favoured operations of institutional centralization. Proceeding by stages in tackling the effects of this 'crumbling away' of the settlement and governance systems that we have already analyzed, the most important problem to be resolved is the congenital weakness of vast-area policies, towards which it seems best to direct specific measures of a financial, legislative and procedural character able to foster the consolidation of the Municipal Unions. Clearly these trends presuppose important technical-administrative innovations, above all in relation to the reference to the strategic dimension of territorial governance. An evolution of this type should not lead to the introduction of a new specialist level of intervention, but should be limited to constituting a sort of value added of planning. If we continue along this road it will be possible to assign to a more up-to-date concept of our discipline the task of establishing a closer dialogue between government and governance, succeeding at

least in part in offsetting the negative consequences that have been produced in recent years by the absence of a law on territorial governance.