

Some reflections on practice

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I do not wish here to discuss my own work which, in any case is not entirely mine since planning culture is in a large part shared between planners and with many others. Instead, I will chronologically tell of the attempts to make planning work in practice, in a variety of different situations.

In an early phase, up until 1965, we actually had a technical background which was not very large: we were producing drawn planning schemes, which we were taught at university, and which we have since moved away from; this approach had left us the concept and idea of having always to compare one planned layout with another.

In the early 1960s, left wing parties advocated that major cities should prepare a new general plan. In Rome, Florence and Venice discussions were centred upon the differences between various planning sketches and schemes. No one

then cared about implementation tools, and only history and experience have pointed out this enormous mistake. The 1962 general plan for Rome remained entirely unimplemented. In its place the “great season” of illegal building and land use changes started, which nowadays strongly characterises this city as one of the major examples of the results of illegal building activity in major European cities. The plan for Florence, adopted in the same period, did not succeed in avoiding things from getting worse between the planning scheme and its implementation. In Venice the plan never came to approval because of the endless and heated discussions and the alderman for planning, Dorigo, gave up and moved from politics to history studies.

It is reflecting on these and other disappointments that we have found out the limits of our planning education and background. I have written the “*Storia dell’architettura moderna*” in 1960. In a subsequent book of 1963, “*Le origini del’urbanistica moderna*”, I conducted deeper studies on the first half of the 19th century when a new planning practice was not promoted by architects but by public health specialists and their requirements: the English planning legislation of 1849 and the French one of 1850; the latter was used by Haussman for the “*grands travaux*” of Paris between 1853 and 1869.

I have discovered illuminating comparisons between planning and medicine concerning the re-scaling of objectives (remedies normally only come after harmful effects) and the importance of public tools for implementation.

Following the experiences of the major cities, it is logical that in Italy subsequent progress in the planning discipline derives from administrators of some of Italy’s medium-sized cities – such as Bologna, Brescia, Modena, Como, Ferrara, Mantua and Trento – which have applied in Italy some of the usual methods and ways used in Europe. Just to report four of them: Antonio Spallino, mayor of Como in the 1960s; Luigi Bazoli alderman for planning in Brescia from 1965 to 1980; Germano Bulgarelli, mayor of Modena until 1980, and Bruno Kessler, president of the Trento Region in the 1980s. I have worked for a long time together with all of them. In such a way I have had the opportunity to experience what really happened in practice.

Brescia was a town of about 200,000 people with a master plan approved in 1961 which was over-dimensioned for a population of about 500,000. We scrapped all of these provisions so bringing back to agricultural uses a large part of those areas and we have designed and developed a new neighbourhood of 6000 housing units on a green field area; this allows us to calculate exactly the real cost of this public development (cost of the area, roads, sewers, infrastructures, gardens, schools, sport and cultural facilities and other general expenses): this was about one fifth of the cost of the construction of the housing. Areas given up to developers were to cover these expenses, a lot lower than the cost of private areas on the free market, so reducing for decades the land values in the city. The new master plan contained this quota of public areas and an equal quota of private areas. After twenty years the public share had completely run out, whilst for the private part only 30% had been used. Without any cost, over 50 million Euros of public works had been realized, so allowing developers to build about 250 million euros of residential units, 90% of which were detached houses with private gardens. The confrontation between the comune and private developers was therefore won by the comune under free market rules and this situation was maintained until the 1990s, when the political support came to an end.

These experiences implied and produced social cohesion, based on the advantage for both developers and the community; for example, when the provision of public areas seemed to decrease, both categories asked the Comune to increase it.

Since I had the opportunity to work in several other cities at the same time, I was struck by the similarity of behaviour, despite the differences in traditional habits. For example, in Modena the driver spoke informally with the mayor, whilst this did not happen in Brescia; but Ermanno Gorrieri and the Christian Democrat party supported urban planning decisions made by the Communist administration. A big change occurred in 1980 when “national solidarity” broke down. Ten years later, an even greater change shocked the structure of international relations so interrupting – together with many good and bad things – the experiences that I have just described. (The relevance of this paragraph is too obscure for a non-Italian to

understand in its present form!)

What has happened from 1980 up to today? In our field the main consequence is the worsening of the links between economic rent and profits. When I moved to Brescia, this was a typical industrial city; today Brescia is one of the major financial cities of Italy. Behaviour and the actions of real estate agents, which we can read about every day in the papers, urge us to reflect on two completely different ways to earn money: profit and rent. Profit is an essential part of the economic combination upon which was based the adventure of our urban experiences which produced, and produces still now, harmony and well being. Economic rent is something else. It takes advantage of inequalities and it does not aim to solve collective difficulties, but to increase them. Our job, which operates in the long term, offers long-lasting scenarios to our human adventures to make their alternation easier, but at the same time it faces the challenges posed by those who are able to take advantage in making planning activity harder. At present, rent wins over profit. The requirement to limit economic rent through legal measures and actions, an old obsession of the immature Italian planning culture, has produced over the last decades an always greater legal protection of private property, pushing higher and higher the cost of land.

A long time ago a friend of mine, assessing the situation of economic rent and betterment value for speculation purposes (the battle against it yesterday was perhaps still open, whilst today is almost lost), called it “*the battle of tight shoes*”. What would happen in making shoes if there were a ten-times higher profit on laces? In that case, it would not matter if the shoes are properly made or not. A pair of shoes would be made just to sell laces. Likewise, when buying and selling an area, if a developer can earn much more than when selling a building, it is useless for the architecture to improve. Buildings, therefore, cannot become a product which compete in terms of quality and prices but remain merely a sub-product.

There remains one element which is worth discussing in conclusion. Economic rent not only uses but it also determines disorder. Why in the post-war period was the landscape in Italy damaged much more than it was

in Germany? Not because of the amount of changes, but because of the disorder produced in a short period of time. Italian landscape had an enormous value because it has been for centuries the proof of the Italian culture, adopted in the rest of Europe and worldwide. At present it is no longer like this and there is a warning in this: the agony of *Italia Nostra*, that up until now has its actions supported by public opinion, and at the same time the success of FAI (Fondo Ambientale Italiano)¹ that buys the items worthy of protection: monuments, collections, whole pieces of landscape and territory (for example in the Gulf of Naples). If we are forced to buy single pieces of this heritage, it is because the whole situation is getting out of hand.

1 Italian Environmental Fund.