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Strategic Planning for Contemporary Urban Regions

City of Cities: A Project for Milan

**ALESSANDRO BALDUCCI
VALERIA FEDELI
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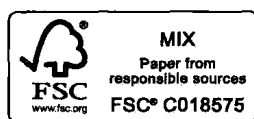
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Contents

<i>List of Charts and Graphs</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>List of Contributors</i>	<i>xiii</i>
0 The Context and the Demand for Strategic Planning <i>Alessandro Balducci, Valeria Fedeli, Gabriele Pasqui</i>	1
0.1 The process of planning: the <i>City of Cities Strategic Project</i> <i>Ida Castelnuevo, Marianna Giraudi</i>	13
1.1 Planning the Changing City <i>Alessandro Balducci</i>	27
1.2 Data and images <i>Paolo Bozzuto, Fabio Manfredini</i>	37
2.1 The Changing Urban Agenda <i>Gabriele Pasqui</i>	55
2.2 Keywords: Habitability <i>Gabriele Pasqui, Paolo Bozzuto</i>	67
3.1 About “Governance” in Urban Regions: When Territory, Sovereignty and Citizenship do not match <i>Valeria Fedeli</i>	75
3.2 Keywords: City of Cities / [City of] Populations <i>Gabriele Pasqui, Paolo Bozzuto</i>	89
4.1 New Planning Approaches/ Challenges for Urban and Territorial Planning in Contemporary Cities <i>Alessandro Balducci, Valeria Fedeli</i>	99
4.2 The <i>City of Cities</i> Competitions and the <i>Strategic Project</i> <i>Carolina Pacchi, Claudio Calvaresi</i>	113

4.3	Drawing and Dialogue: Meaning and Form of the Instruments Used to Communicate the <i>City of Cities Strategic Project</i> <i>Antonio Longo, Anna Moro</i>	121
5.1	Planning, Institutions, Knowledge: Lessons from an Experimental Practice <i>Alessandro Balducci, Valeria Fedeli, Gabriele Pasqui</i>	137
	<i>Bibliography</i>	149
	<i>Index</i>	159

List of Charts and Graphs

Charts

1.1	Employees and local units in the industrial sector	46
1.2	Employees and local units in the tertiary sector	46
1.3	Dimension and number of employees in local units in 1991	46
1.4	Dimension and number of employees in local units in the period 2001	46
1.5	Immigrants ratio for age groups in the province	50
1.6	Frequency distribution of population in relation to income groups.	53

Graphs

1.1	Participating actors	129
1.2	Percentage of 'Design ideas' and 'Best practices'	129
1.3	Mapping proposals in the urban region: a geography of actors and ideas (percentages on the total)	129

List of Figures

0.1	The process: a chronological map	24-5
1.1	Milan urban region in Europe: European networks and settlements	44
1.2	Milan urban region and the territory of the province of Milan	45
1.2	Satellite image 1972. Source: DIAP elaboration on the base of Global Land Cover Facility.	47
1.3	Satellite image 2007. Source: DIAP elaboration on the base of Global Land Cover Facility.	47
1.4	Agricultural land and natural land erosion between 1966 and 1998.	48
2.1	The flower of habitability	72
2.2	Continuous urban growth. <i>What if ongoing dynamics of land consumption and urban growth kept follow the actual trends?</i>	73
2.3	Recession of liveability. <i>What if the ongoing dynamics of simplification and trivialization of territories produced just functional platforms rather than liveable spaces?</i>	73
2.4	Growing differences. <i>What if ongoing processes of social, cultural, economic differentiation and polarization got more and more intense?</i>	74
2.5	Fragmentation of decision making. <i>What if the actual complexity and fragmentation of decision making processes grew, lacking a steering knowledge able to avoid the impoverishment of public life and local democracy?</i>	74
3.3	7+3+1 cities	94-5
3.4	The city of music	96-7
4	First competition: A selection of proposals presented	129-31

4.1	Second competition: Logo of the second competition	132
4.2	Second competition: Mapping proposals in the Urban Region: A geography of co-operation between municipalities	132
4.3	First page: products, images and events; Second and third pages: The 'City of 'Cities; Fourth page The exhibition of the project (ViviMi/Triennale di Milano, the theatre of the 'City of Cities', the itinerant exhibition.	133-6

List of Tables

0.1	Stages and phases of the process	23
1.1	Percentage change of the existing population	46
1.2	Inhabitants and immigrants in Milan Urban Region (10 provinces), in the Milan province and in the city of Milan	49
1.3	Typology of parents and new born in the urban region	50
1.4	Number of family members 2004-2008	51
1.5	Average number of family members 2008 in the province and in the city of Milan	51
1.6	Active Enterprises and share of National Total	52
1.7	Pro-capita incomes in the first ten and last ten Italian provinces	52

Chapter 0

The Context and the Demand for Strategic Planning

Alessandro Balducci, Valeria Fedeli, Gabriele Pasqui

For many years institutions, political parties, the world of urban planning and ordinary citizens have been asking the question of how to govern the urban development of Milan, a metropolis which has continued to extend its boundaries, transform within them and to thrive economically, but which pays the price of a basic absence of control over urban development. Traffic congestion, pollution, extremely high land consumption, a shortage of affordable housing and too much construction, out-of-date and insufficient infrastructures difficult to remedy because many of the potentially free corridors are blocked, competition between regional airports and difficulty in locating sewage and waste treatment plants: these are the features of the new “urban question” (Brenner, 2000), which government authorities seem unable to address.

Many interpretations and views of this condition, this issue, are possible today, just as there have been many attempts over the years to examine the processes as they occur in search of solutions. This book illustrates one of these attempts, that of the formulation of the *City of Cities Strategic Project*¹, organised by the Province of Milan and co-ordinated by the Department of Architecture and Planning of the Polytechnic of Milan. The authors, who are members of that Department, worked on the unsolved problems of the Milan context from 2005 to 2009, employing an open and experimental approach. It was a demanding and complex experience, working in close co-operation with a public administration that was interested in exploring new courses of action.

1 This “Strategic Project”, organised by the Province of Milan, was a process designed to lead to the formulation of a new strategic plan for the province. The project was approved in the Spring of 2007. As the reader will notice, we have decided to title this experience *Strategic Project*, rather than *Strategic Plan*; this in order to emphasise the difference between this and other strategic planning processes. This was a controversial choice, very much discussed in our group. The strategic project is promoted by the Province but belongs to many different actors; it consists of many different actions that could eventually give rise to a strategic plan in dynamic form, i.e. as a progress report rather than as a final document. The term “project” gives the initiative the more modest but at the same time proactive character that we wanted to ensure (see Balducci, 2008)

While they had each followed different paths and interests, the researchers who worked on the *Strategic Project* shared a common set of considerations which it is perhaps useful to mention in this introductory chapter. Now that the strategic planning process has come to an end, it would in fact seem impossible to introduce a description of that process without them, not only because the project originated from a specific interpretation of the local situation, but also because the justification for the approach adopted and the operations performed, the working hypothesis and the activities set in motion are based on that interpretation.

In other words, if an interpretation of the strategic planning process as a context specific, experimental process strongly rooted in precise spatial, social and political conditions (see also chapters 4.1 and 5.1) is assumed, then its developments and effects must be described on the basis of the interpretation of the context and of the demand for planning.

The hypotheses that we propose concern: (i) planning issues in metropolitan contexts; (ii) an interpretation of changes in the nature of urbanisation processes; (iii) the circumstances and political events which made it possible to develop and set in motion an experimental process; (iv) thinking on the limitations and possibilities of strategic planning performed in the university over what is now more than a decade of research and action.

0.1. The limitations and potentials of supra-local planning experiences

There is a rich history of planning on a supra-local scale in the Milan area, just as there is in other European metropolitan contexts. Many proposals have been put forward and there have been many attempts to address the problem at its roots. Initially voluntary planning agreements were tried, the most well-known and significant of which was the first inter-municipal plan (Piano Intercomunale Milanese-PIM) in the 1950s and 1960s. A second stage developed in the 1970s and 1980s with an attempt to establish new intermediate institutions, by creating “*comprensori*” (districts, inter-municipal scale functional areas). Following the enactment of a law on administrative decentralisation (Law No. 142/1990) the issue was addressed in the 1990s by conferring significant urban planning powers on provinces which, after the failure of many previous experiences of supra-municipal co-ordination, were assigned the role of co-ordinating municipal decisions. In the meantime, the regions assumed an increasingly more significant role, which was partly the result of a process of decentralisation and “incomplete federalism”, that is still in progress in Italy. Consequently they were given responsibility for legislation in regional and urban planning and in the end it was they who were to lead processes of planning, infrastructure and environmental change.

On the other hand, the complexity of the governance processes and the decision-making networks in the Milan area has led to various unofficial attempts over the last twenty years at co-ordination and co-operation between different protagonists, in a perspective fairly close to that of strategic planning (see chapters 1.1 and 3.1).

While each of these attempts has achieved some small results, fragile and often temporary, generally speaking all policies to control development have failed. Decision-making powers have remained essentially in the hands of individual municipalities, which, faced with pressure from families and property developers and difficulties in balancing budgets in the absence of revenues from urban transformation projects, have always favoured development rather than the conservation of areas. The problem, however, is that until 2009 there were almost 190 municipalities² in the Province of Milan, which covers only a part of the most densely urbanised area, and the combination of the decisions made by each of them has produced and is producing the negative effects on the city as a whole, which were mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

In the most recent phase, that in which urbanisation processes have led to the expansion of the city even beyond the boundaries of the province, the chronic difficulties of co-ordination between municipalities have worsened. For many years, traditional political parties were able to perform a function of integrating decision-making processes at a central level, by controlling locally elected politicians using their own internal mechanisms. However, with the “tangentopoli”³ maelstrom at the beginning of the 1990s and the severe crisis and disappearance of all the traditional political parties, there was the capacity neither to negotiate between parties over the distribution of the benefits of development – as had occurred for many years in what were ‘lightweight’ institutions such as the Inter-Municipal Milan Plan – nor to impose crucial decisions on local representatives to control growth or create major infrastructures. Municipalities were left to decide by themselves, while the province started to examine its own capacity to act as a controlling authority, which, however, immediately ran into the opposition of municipalities each time it intruded into matters that were perceived as the exclusive responsibility of the municipalities.

Despite these failures, it is possible to re-examine these supra-municipal affairs in the Province of Milan to consider not just the difficulties and problems shared with other Italian and European metropolises, but also to highlight some of the potential paths to be followed and worked on.

2 A new province was formed in 2009, the Province of Monza and Brianza, consisting of 50 municipalities previously belonging to the Province of Milan.

3 The term Tangentopoli, “bribesville”, is the name given to a judicial investigation started in 1991 conducted at national level in Italy during the 1990s. It uncovered corruption, extortion and illicit funding of political parties at the highest level in the Italian world of politics and finance. Moreover, the city in which the scandal exploded was Milan, where the investigation started and where some of the most serious instances of corruption and bribery took place (with numerous interactions with the field of urban development and planning). The consequences of the affair in Milan and also nationally were to throw the political system which had governed the Republic of Italy for half a century into crisis and to redefine regulatory models on a national and local scale (Berselli, 2001).

In this sense those paths which a conventional approach to planning and effectiveness would file away as failures, show us unexpected and important effects on which to reason. For example after the first few years the initiative already mentioned of the Piano Intercomunale Milanese (PIM) struggled on with a stubborn and ineffective attempt to form an intermediate authority capable of officially approving a binding plan. However, if we look at it again, it shows us the importance, looking back over the years, of the following:

- the formulation of complex visions and descriptions of the development trajectories of the entire Milan area as a tool to inform and persuade mayors and also to enable them to adopt a stance that is more knowledgeable of the aggregate effects of their actions. To some degree that experience has therefore remained symbolically and culturally important;
- activities to formulate projects and proposals which in time were implemented not because contained in an approved plan, but because they succeeded in the way they were argued in acquiring the support of those involved: municipalities, rail operators, the Region of Lombardy (this occurred with the urban railway link line, the new parks *Parco Nord* and *Parco Sud*, the Alpine foothill Pedemontana motorway). These are all very important projects conceived of in the 1950s and 1960s, often implemented decades after they were first conceived);
- technical and cultural activity to support municipal development plans, performed by the PIM planning Department and later also by that of the province. This introduced knowledge of the aggregate effects of decisions made by individual municipalities into their plans by inserting the formulation of local plans into a broader context, regardless of whether a higher level overriding plan was approved.

Our interpretation of these facts, presented in various publications (Balducci, 2003; Pasqui, 2002), is that greater results were obtained by informal activities considered secondary. This also implies that the nature of these secondary activities not only contains features common to some internationally well-known planning experiences (as we will argue later), but that they possessed a degree of internal consistency. The importance of these events tells us how important it is to provide interpretative descriptions to influence politicians, to propose projects regardless of the existence of all the necessary mechanisms to implement them and to interact with actors by introducing co-ordination *de facto* in planning practices.

In a phase in which the mechanisms to integrate decision-making systems tend not to function, neither through an official chain of command, nor through political parties, these observations constitute and have constituted an interpretation of the meaning of a particular period that is not obvious, but above all an interpretation of the meaning of planning operations intended to address weak forms of co-ordination in urban planning.