Urbanistica n. 136
May-August 2008

Distribution by www.planum.net

What plan for what town planning?
Paolo Avarello

It is a commonly held opinion that 'town planning' refers to building and houses. This perception however distorts the basic task of town planning, which from the nineteenth century until the Thirties of last century was 'arranging the orderly expansion of settlements', namely making the infrastructures, and especially the roads, which epitomize the ensemble of the 'primary' urbanization works, of which they are the most visible elements, and which have always been the main regulative elements of urban spaces, conditioning the arrangement and the main characteristics of buildings.

In Italy the town plan first appeared in a law on public works (1865); then the law of 1942 foresaw as a planning document the urbanization cost estimate, and the assessment of the relevant costs. A constraint for municipal balance sheets, but also for the 'dimensioning' of the plan, which made 'forecasts' then covering a span of twenty or thirty years. Subsequently this document was reduced to a mere list of costs, without any check of the economic capacities to carry out the works, and then it disappeared altogether, even before the obligation to have a plan became general practice.

That same law, and the decree on standards, established also the minimum quotas of the areas to be (expropriated and) earmarked for schools and other public amenities, modelled on the earlier experiences of the 'districts' of social building, then regarded as the most significant elements of the future 'design' of the town. The 'dimensioning' (or sizing) of the plan and, above all, the 'respecting' of the standards, were for long

the principal criteria of technical administrative evaluation of Masterplans. Many studies have been carried out on the construction of this dimensioning (the standards, in fact, follow mechanically); but they fail to explain why, in actual fact, plans were always over-dimensioned, in terms of inhabitants, and therefore of 'houses', and hence of standards.

The attitude of town-planners today seems different in the formulation of their plans; and at times that of the administrations, too, is different, both the ones and the others supported by the 'new', 'politically correct' vocabularies of the environmentalists, of participation, and, more and more commonly, of strategies and of policies, in search of consensus and visibility. Today plans are far more spoken about than drawn, at least in the traditional zoning sense. New forms of representation are sought to illustrate the choices made, to provide suggestions, 'views' and indications (which are 'not prescriptive') on the final physical layouts foreseen and/or desired, but striving to avoid excesses of detail, from which stem greater rigidity, strong physical impacts and the relative risks of claims.

And precisely to avoid such risks plans have today a maximum span of ten years: too short for programming significant transformations of an entire city, of transport networks, of its economy and so forth. Without reckoning the times of 'political' and of administrative decision, often very long ones. The ideas and objectives on which a plan is based therefore risk being invalidated already at the very date of their adoption. Not to mention the change-rounds in the political formations of local governments which, in the

best of cases, produce at least a 'pause for reflection'. The ''slowness' of town planning has for long been criticized by one and all, although, it seems, in a climate of general resignation: each time presented as an inevitable fatality, with which perhaps to 'justify' the original weaknesses or errors of the plan. Instead there are but few concrete efforts to reduce the technical and administrative times of decision, perhaps modifying the characteristics of the plans, reducing ambitions with regard to the time and the economic resources available. And maybe inventing other instruments, of a different nature, which provide an overall, large-scale, long-term framework, necessarily agreed upon by all the bodies concerned, and perhaps even with the builders/managers of the main infrastructural networks, almost always, though, neglected in the plans.

While they go on speaking about cubic metres, about houses, the redistribution and/or collection of the 'revenue', and even about standards, the composition of families, the typologies of activity and the ways of having access to work, and above all life-styles continue to change, however. One often hears it said that everything is changing so quickly, but one has the impression that town-planning basically goes on speaking about cubic metres, of houses to be built and of 'districts', thought of as 'villages'' or perhaps as 'communities', of 'services' and of 'public spaces', duly paved and decorated, for having a stroll and 'being' there; in short, for imaginary social pursuits, for which probably no-one would have the time or the desire.

Through the changes in this new century, town-planning therefore seems to remain pretty static, and even a bit boring: perched up on

traditional themes, it churns out solutions and configurations that belong to different eras (the Middle Ages, the Nineteenth Century, the Thirties, etc.) but all belonging to the past.